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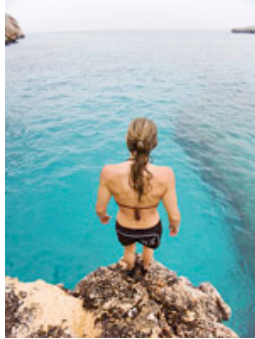
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Be Fearless: Stories That Will Inspire You to LIVE Your Life



By Caroline Hwang

True Women Bravehearts

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"Playing it safe is just playing," reads the fortune-cookie message I keep in my wallet. It's not that I lead such a high-stakes life, full of thrills and spills and dangerous gambles. I am, after all, an editor, who is planted at a desk all day. The opportunities for derring-do aren't exactly coming at me like balls in a batting cage.

But there are leaps I haven't taken. Some are as big as having a baby; some are as small as pulling on Rollerblades again since a gravel-eating fall. I know I'm not the only one with unchased dreams and aims. So what is holding us back? How do we set aside fear? Here's what I learned from true women bravehearts -- including "original Dreamgirl" Mary Wilson, Olympian Misty May, and a U.S. Army officer serving in Iraq.

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Crises and Extreme Circumstances

In extreme circumstances, like in a war, for instance, there's no time to be afraid, says Command Sergeant Major Emma Krouser, from her office in the Green Zone in Baghdad. All she could do was react when a bomb went off for the first time in the Iraqi Parliament Building last April. "It was shocking to hear the explosion and to see people running from the building screaming," Krouser, 49, recalls. She immediately sent over assistance and first-aid supplies, and in the ensuing chaos, she marshaled her soldiers to lead people fleeing the blast to a secure location. "My men and women look to me for leadership, and I wasn't going to let them down," Krouser explains.

No doubt, extraordinary times take extraordinary courage -- even when you aren't the one in harm's way. Lee Woodruff, 47, was at Disney World with her children when she got the call at 7 a.m. that her husband, Bob, on assignment in Iraq as coanchor of *World News Tonight* on ABC News, had taken shrapnel to the head. "I was reeling from the information, but I had to tell the kids and get them out the door and onto a plane," says Woodruff, coauthor with her husband of *In an Instant*. From that morning nearly two years ago, through his coma and many surgeries, she has had to be strong. "I was not always feeling 100 percent optimistic myself, but I knew I had to show a good, positive feeling about Bob for the kids," says Woodruff. "I kept the image of us as a family in my mind when I would start to falter."

Whether known to you personally or not, other people are incredibly powerful motivation for overcoming your fears. Thinking of the constituents in her Florida district is how Ileana Ros-Lehtinen came to be the first Hispanic woman in the U.S. Congress. "When my supporters originally suggested that I run, I thought they were crazy," says Rep. Ros-Lehtinen, 55, in Congress now for 18 years. "But a lot of people in my district are Cuban refugees, like myself, and their voices weren't being heard. They were my inspiration, and that's why I took the plunge, despite the fact that there were 13 people in the race and the perception was that I didn't have a chance."

Similarly, the possibility of helping people by providing them with affordable and well-made housing is what prompted Marianne Cusato, 33, first to design the 308-square-foot Katrina Cottage for disaster relief and then to walk away from her dream job to turn her creation into a reality. "I had this feeling in my heart of hearts that I could actually make a difference," says Cusato, who is part of a pilot program in Louisiana that is replacing FEMA trailers with new housing. "After I quit, I thought, 'What have I done? I have no safety net.' But on the off-chance

I could raise the bar on what affordable housing is, I felt I had to see this idea through."

Pursuing Personal Passions

But what about when the aspiration is less lofty? When it's your personal passion or dream that requires boldness? Faith in yourself is key, says Mary Wilson, 63, for whom disbanding the Supremes and going solo is one of the scariest things she's ever done. "I'd been a Supreme since I was 13, and being in a group was all I knew," she says. But at 31, she forged ahead with a solo career, because deep down, she believed in herself. As a spokeswoman for Speaking of Women's Health, a nonprofit foundation educating women to take charge of their health, Wilson now counsels others about finding inner confidence.

When you're leaping into the great unknown, sometimes all you can do is prepare, says Joanna B. Pinneo, 52, a contributing photographer for *National Geographic*. While on assignment, she has traveled through sandstorms with nomads from Sudan, flown in single-engine planes to the Arctic Circle, and hidden behind trash cans to avoid being hit by stray bullets in the West Bank. Pinneo says her courage comes from knowing that she's done everything she can to protect herself. "I hire the best guide, make sure I've got the proper clothes, check my equipment, and once everything is in order, I say, 'Let's go,'" she explains. "My dad says I do the riskiest things in the safest way."

Fearlessness also requires mental prep work, adds Misty May, 30, an Olympic gold medalist and AVP pro beach volleyball player. "In a big game or when a match is on the line, you don't have room for error or time to think," says May. "So what makes me a fierce competitor is my mental practice. From running through scenarios over and over in my mind, I just know I'm going to put the ball away when it comes to me. If you tell your brain something often enough, your body will just follow."

Another way to keep your nerve up is to take a matter-of-fact approach. As a referee in the NBA, the first woman referee in fact, Violet Palmer, 43, has had to stare down the likes of Shaquille O'Neal and insert herself between players before they start swinging at each other. "Once the ball goes up, I'm at work," says Palmer. "I don't care how tall a player is. He's not getting in my face. I'm not putting up with his crap. I'm just running the game, doing my job."

Or think of the leap or plunge as a way of honoring your commitment to yourself, suggests Susan Piver, 44, a meditation teacher and author of *How Not to Be Afraid of Your Own Life*. That's how she dove into the great unknown of marriage. "I loved the man who's now my husband, but I also loved my life exactly the way it was. I found the courage to leave it for something that was truly terrifying to me because I contextualized it as a risk I needed to take to grow as a human. I decided I owed it to myself to try," explains Piver.

Don't Hold Back

Acknowledging and owning the fear can also give rise to incredible acts of personal bravery. René Syler, former coanchor of CBS's *Early Show* and author of *Good Enough Mother*, started this year with a double prophylactic mastectomy. Both of her parents have had breast cancer, and every time Syler, 44, was due for a mammogram or biopsy, she wondered if this would be the time she was diagnosed with it. Finally, she realized she couldn't continue going the way she was. "My conclusion was that I had to put on my big-girl britches and just do it -- have the surgery and reduce the risk," says Syler.

Having had breast cancer not once but twice, Betty Rollin, a former NBC News correspondent, agrees that fear can be a positive force. "Both times I was really shook up, just a wreck of fear," says Rollin, 71, author of *Here's the Bright Side: Of Failure, Fear, Cancer, Divorce, and Other Bum Raps*. "But now I have this sense that I want to spend time wisely and well. So I don't hold back anymore. I say what I think, and I do what I really feel like doing." When it comes to her life, she's calling the shots. And isn't that the whole point to being fearless?

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