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PROFILE

Taking Charge

Steps that turn ordinary living into an extraordinary life

There's no question that stories about gold medal winners, famous scientists and humanitarians inspire us to go out and rethink our own limits. But sometimes it's the tale of a normal person overcoming life's common, albeit devastating, setbacks that really resonates—after all these are predicaments in which we may one day find ourselves immersed, so it's heartening to hear that others have gotten through them. Jan Calder is one of these stories. She's never run a marathon. She hasn't overcome a life-threatening illness, made a historic scientific discovery or founded her own non-profit foundation. But her achievements are just as heroic. She should give hope to anyone who's reached middle age and realized that life hasn't turned out exactly the way it was supposed to.

Jan was 46, in fact, when she found herself divorced, downsized, estranged from some family members, overweight, out of shape, unhealthy and desperately unhappy. "It was the same old story," she says. "I had this Cinderella outlook where I thought I'd be married for my whole life and then divorce comes and it's a huge shock. I had gotten used to a certain kind of lifestyle where I depended on someone to take care of me—first it was my dad, then it was my husband."

Her work at the time, as an executive secretary for a large life insurance company in Kansas City, at least provided some stability, that is until the company went under and she was let go. As the stress mounted, Jan took comfort in a steady diet of cakes, cookies and other sweets. She now blames the combination of stress and atrocious eating habits for the fact that she developed non-malignant tumors in both her spine and her stomach within a three-year period. She also endured regular bouts of debilitating headaches. And, she had little energy. "I believe that people get sick because of their lifestyle and a poor mental attitude," says Jan, who turned 60 in November. "I was stuck like that for a long time."

What finally got Jan moving out of her doldrums was the example of an older woman, who happens to live a very active and fulfilling life at 5,000 feet in the Prescott Mountains outside Phoenix. That woman is Jan's mother, Mary, who not only eats wisely and exercises regularly, but also maintains an independent and positive lifestyle. "My mom is more progressive than almost anyone else I know. I just thank God for the opportunity to get to know the woman she is—not just the mother—and for her to get to know the woman that I am," Jan says. "She told me to come out to Arizona and I did, and then she told me that I had to take control of my life, and I did... "

Taking control didn't happen overnight. Jan remembers waking up during those first few scorching months in Arizona and thinking that she had moved to hell. Her first new job was another disastrous attempt at life in the corporate world—she lasted only a few weeks before walking out, vowing never again to wear panty hose. But gradually the nearby North Mountains surrounding Phoenix beckoned and the stark beauty of the desert sunsets began to heal her soul. She started exploring the trails and found she liked the freedom of hiking and the joy of finding things along the way, like old birds' nests and cactus boots, that she could take back to her apartment. She now hikes every day for at least an hour, sometimes two, preferring the challenging uphill climb to the easier downhill walk. She even took up downhill skiing at age 50, turning it into another passion and bought a weight system and abdominal roller that she installed in her garage. Now Jan works out every day, for about 30 minutes, toning muscles that she never before knew existed.

Along the way, Jan found a new job, this time as a secretary in a small real-estate management firm, run by 76-year-old Irv Shuman who happens to be very serious about health. Irv encourages his employees to share his philosophy, so he takes them to lunch at local organic restaurants, keeps the office fridge stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables, and keeps the vitamins and supplements handy. Under Irv's influence, Jan has banished nearly all sweets and soda pop from her diet in favor of low or no-fat foods (she sticks to a 20-gram fat intake a day), herbal teas, fruit juices and plenty of water. She has also given up red meat in



favor of tofu, which she mixes with broccoli and rice. “It’s one of the best meals you could eat,” she says. “And I could eat it every day.” Her one indulgence is a daily nibble of chocolate. “It’s so nice to work in a place where everyone is on the same wave length,” she says. “We all work on our mental attitude around here too, so it’s very positive and supportive.” Wiser eating, combined with daily exercise, has shaved 40 pounds off her 5’ 1” frame.

Daily vitamin popping is also part of the routine for Jan and her colleagues. The list consists of vitamins C, E, D and A, along with magnesium and folic acid, which Jan notes is particularly important for women, who tend to have low levels of iron. Zinc and echinacea are standard cold and flu banishers around the office.

Now that Jan feels so much better about her own life, she finds there’s lots to learn from the lives of others. These days she volunteers her time to work with deaf children and shares her home with a 19-year-old woman who—like Jan’s niece—is deaf. Though Jan already knows how to sign, she’s learning plenty of slang and shorthand signing techniques from her young roommate and has begun teaching her very intelligent 12-pound papillon puppy, Buddy, to obey signed commands to sit and roll over. (Buddy and two cats form Jan’s pet contingent, which makes “a big difference in my life.”) “There’s a misconception about the deaf—that they are emotionally or intellectually challenged, but they aren’t—they’re just deaf,” she says. “They have a really amazing network of support and they are open and fun and I’m learning to apply a lot of those qualities to my life.”

Though Jan doesn’t smoke or drink alcohol, she does enjoy occasionally going to a bar—at least the one that’s owned and operated by her friends at the protection services firm across from her office. The draw for Jan is the newly installed karaoke machine, where she gets to indulge her passion for singing, especially country songs by legends like Patsy Cline. She has plenty of friends to come hear her belt out a tune or two. “I hang out with women my age. Women are so much more fun these days,” she says. “We have a lot more freedom. I love the saying ‘When I get old, I’m going to wear a purple hat and learn to spit.’ I think that says it all.”

That’s certainly Jan’s 83-year-old mother’s credo as well. Mary continues to be an important role model to her daughter. “My mother doesn’t spend her time buying a lot of things and surrounding herself with stuff,” she says. “We can spend our lives collecting things and then we die, so what’s the point? I think the most important thing now is to have control of your life—and I do—and I give my mom credit for that. I plan to move forward with gusto and keep having fun. I’ve earned it.”

She sure has. —Twig Mowatt



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