

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever given up on a goal because the people in your life said you couldn't do it, or woken up in the morning and not wanted to move because you felt completely overwhelmed—felt that you didn't have the tools (physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional) to succeed? We all face detours and obstacles in our lives that oftentimes feel insurmountable—whether it's the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, the fear of the unknown, or a major health battle.

In 2000, at the age of twenty-five, I was diagnosed with heart disease. In 2003, due to additional cardiac abnormalities, I underwent my first cardiac surgery to install a pacemaker/defibrillator to assist with my ailing heart. From there, my physical health and emotional well-being continued to deteriorate, and there was a great deal of uncertainty as to how my growing health issues would impact my future.

As I battled my demons and fought back from additional heart disease and surgeries, including five cardiac procedures in 2011, the mental anguish nearly drove me to a state of depression. Many physicians and friends began questioning whether I would survive and doubting my

resilience. Upon my recovery, other patients and clinicians asked me how I was able to stay so positive and keep going.

But what other option did I have?

As I see it, we only have two options when things don't go our way: we can either dwell on the negative until it consumes us, or—though it is extremely difficult to do when it feels like the world is plotting against us—we can focus on the positive and find ways to overcome and adapt to the situation. Simply put, we can give up and quit, or we can move forward and make the best of a less-than-ideal circumstance, take control of our own fate, and not leave our future to chance.

For me, giving up was never an acceptable outcome. Instead, I stood up against the critics who felt I couldn't push forward and turned my attention to the supporters who fueled my energy to proceed. Through many different ups and downs, various trials and tribulations, and some good ole common sense, I found a path that worked for me. It's a path I have also seen work for others, and it operates on a common-sense principle: we must put our energy into something productive rather than spinning our wheels on the alternative.

In 2012, I began my tedious recovery and set my sights on a lofty goal that none of my physicians thought I could achieve. I sought to put an exclamation point on my recovery; and what better way to renew my independence than by trekking to the tallest mountain in the world? In spite of all the challenges I endured, it was the most difficult thing I ever tried to do—on purpose—and it took every ounce of strength and courage I had.

What does “being strong” mean? We each have our own definition. I used to think it was strictly a physical description referring to a power or supremacy over an object or individual, and that sensitivity equated to weakness. Through the years, I've learned that “being strong” can also include the ability to focus through and withstand a heavy burden, that being emotionally honest and vulnerable builds character. Strength isn't about comparing our situation to others or manipulating something out of our control. It is taking the opportunity to manage our lives, to not be complacent in despair but to pursue goals and dreams. The simple fact that I reached for that mountain—that I tried and gave it my best effort—meant that I had become “Everest Strong.” Whether I ultimately overcame the mountain or not was irrelevant.

We are all unique, and we each have different wants and desires to shoot for. Whatever your aspirations may be and whatever challenges you are facing, I hope this book inspires you to rise above those obstacles and not be afraid of trying, and to come out on the other side a stronger, better version of yourself. By never giving up and always working toward your goals and dreams, you too can become “strong.”