

THE *worst thing* THAT EVER HAPPENED TO ME... WAS ALSO THE **BEST**

Challenging times find us all, as many of us discovered in 2020. Although we would never choose to go through them, they can, paradoxically, lead us to a better, brighter life and a renewed sense of purpose. If you're going through a difficult time, draw strength from the inspiring stories of these five women whose darkest hours led to radiant rebirth.

BY ROBYN MCLARTY

NIKKI JACKMAN

Joy catalyst and performing heartist



PHOTOGRAPH: BARBRA COWLEY

I became a familiar face on South African television screens from 1998 to 2001 when I took on the role of Elise Buller in *Isidingo*. It was a real boost to my career, but after a while I began to feel stifled, playing the same character day in, day out. I believed I was on track to achieve all my career dreams, so I took a risk and decided to start my own production company, with the goal of launching my own international travel TV series. I resigned from my job with a sense of purpose and put everything in place.

I was psyched. I prepared the pilot and proposals so thoroughly that when I headed to New York to sell my idea, I thought it was a sure thing. But it wasn't. It didn't get picked up, and I found myself returning home without a job, without confidence, R180 000 in debt and with no idea how to move forward. I was terrified and I fell into a deep, dark well of despair. It felt like my future had been cancelled.

What a blessing!

One day, after months of depression, my father said to me, 'Stop being such a charity headcase.' And I replied, 'You know what? That's exactly what I am going to be, a charity headcase!'

I had an epiphany: the only way I was going to pull myself back into the light was to focus on the needs of others. So I shaved my head in support of the Sunflower Fund (literally becoming a 'head case'), and I began to donate one hour of my time to entertaining the young patients at the Red Cross Children's War Memorial Hospital. Not only did these small actions pull me out of despondency, but they also showed me that joy is available to anyone at any time, no matter your circumstances.

I felt so inspired that I founded the Upliftment Programme, which is still going strong after 17 years and has trained more than 500 people to bring joy, enthusiasm and meaning to children and caregivers throughout the country. I became a joy catalyst and performing heartist – it is my life's mission to make the world a more joyful, compassionate, uplifted place.

‘Debt and a stalled career showed me my true calling’



CARINE VISAGIE
Content marketing specialist



KGOMOTSO MOEKETSI
SAfm radio host (and South Africa's first commercial radio breakfast show host)

IT'S always been incredibly important to me to be able to support myself, to be financially independent. I've always had a nine-to-five job, and I've always gone the extra mile to make sure I add real value to whatever I am working on. Over the years I rose through the ranks in my career and felt I was succeeding, that I was in a good position in life – in other words, secure. But then something completely unexpected happened: I was retrenched. The company I worked for lost a client, and with that client went my job.

I was devastated. And terrified. My whole world was thrown into turmoil. I had to fight through the fear to think clearly, which wasn't easy. I sprang into action and took a job that, as it turned out, wasn't at all what was promised, and was unsuited to my skill set. After an incredibly stressful six months, with the support of my husband I took the decision to resign and give freelancing a go.

Well, that was one of the best decisions I have ever made! I found clients almost immediately, and in a few short months I was working more or less full time on various projects. The difference was that now my time was my own, and I could structure my day however I liked.

“My retrenchment led to better job security and more money.”

I now earn significantly more on average per month than I did when I was a full-time employee, and I have better job security because even if I lose one client (which seldom happens), I am still supported by others. My livelihood is no longer in the hands of just one company.

Being retrenched, even though it felt like the end of the world at the time, was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

MY mom passed away in 2014 after a four-year battle with colon cancer. I was devastated, of course, but what made it so much harder was that she had hidden her illness from my sister and me. The day we found out about her diagnosis, our family sprang into action, researching different healing modalities, determined to help her beat it. But the very next day she passed away.

The shock was immense, and I fell into a deep depression. I'd come home from work, draw the curtains (working in radio means I usually get home during the day), and cry and cry. To my son and daughter I was sunny and fine, but inside I was lost. I just couldn't get past the fact that she had hidden her illness from me. Had she not trusted me? Why hadn't she given me a chance to say all the things I wanted to say to her?

The months passed, and a year later I realised that I was officially in the worst depression I'd ever been in – and there were no signs of improvement. That scared me. I knew something needed to change.

I didn't want to be this person any more, but I also didn't want to see a counsellor. So I sat down at my computer and asked Google: 'What's the best way to beat depression?'

One of the answers that came up was 'running'. So next I asked Google: 'How do I become a runner?' And up came an eight-week programme. The programme said that if I followed the instructions without fail, by the end of the eight weeks I would be a runner.

I'd lead a sedentary life until then. I was overweight; food had become my friend over the previous year. So I knew I had to do this, not just to lift myself out of depression but also to improve my health. I was afraid of the 'Big C' diagnosis as well.

I followed that programme to the letter, and I noticed, after every run, I felt a bit better for a while. One day I noticed how dark the house was and I opened the curtains. By the end of the eight weeks I realised that I was an athlete!

PHOTOGRAPHS: ??????

‘My whole life changed after my mom’s sudden death.’

A friend suggested I run a race, so I trained and ran my first 10 km. Then my first 21 km. And then a 33 km! I also quit alcohol and smoking. My health, my life and my mood were transformed. I discovered this iron-clad willpower I hadn’t had before.

I knew I was finally out of the woods when, one day, I was able to talk to my children about the depression, to own it.

I also came to accept that there are things in this world you cannot change; you can only change yourself. I forgave my mother and realised she had given me a massive gift, and also that, actually, we had said everything we needed to say to each other. On the last day I saw her, she found a way to communicate that she was proud of me, and her last words to me when I left the hospital were, ‘You look so pretty. I love you. Bye.’

LYNETTE HUNDERMARK
Cofounder of mobile solutions company Useful & Beautiful

IN 2014 I was at the pinnacle of my career as a mobile industry expert when, out of the blue, the company closed and I was retrenched. I felt confusion, shock and despair; I had no clue what to do next. I’d carved out a unique role for myself in the company, and nothing like that existed elsewhere.

To make matters worse, my husband and I had just purchased a new home and we were in the process of moving; it couldn’t have come at a worse time. We decided to move in with my parents to save money and create some stability for our two sons.

I began talking to my peers in the industry, and it dawned on me that if I couldn’t find another position in the same field I would have to create something of my own. I was filled with self-doubt, but my mentor reminded me that I had all the necessary skills and resources, and that I would be doing more or

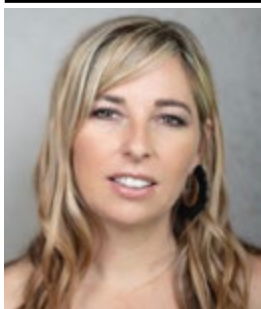
less the same thing, only this time it would be for myself. So I decided to go for it. I started my business on the floor of my parents’ lounge.

Six years later I have a thriving mobile solutions consultancy and I have been recognised as one of the top-30 most influential women in South African digital marketing. I also lecture and mentor young women in tech, which I find hugely rewarding.

I won’t pretend it’s been easy.

But I am proud of what

I’ve created, and my challenges have made me a far more authentic and compassionate person. Life is like a card game: all we can do is play the hand we’re dealt to the best of our ability and make the most of it.



SANDY HUGHES
Functional medicine health coach

Three years ago, my husband Brendan succumbed to colon cancer after a 10-month battle with the disease. It was a tremendous blow, but it also led me to rediscover and pursue my passion for functional medicine.

At the time of his diagnosis the doctors recommended chemotherapy

but said the chances of remission via that route were only 10%. To go through the hell of chemo with only a slim chance of success seemed crazy to both of us, so we decided to look at alternative therapies and began to totally overhaul our diet and lifestyle. I dived into research, learning all I could about the root causes of disease. It was obvious to my husband that I was in my element; my brain was firing away!

Unfortunately, our efforts were in vain as the cancer had not been caught soon enough, and I didn’t yet have enough experience or education to help him. But before he passed, he gave me an incredible gift. He said, ‘Sandy, there is some money

coming to you when I go. I want you to pursue this passion after I’ve gone; make the most of it.’

And that’s what I did. I used some of the money to take a course in functional medicine coaching. Functional medicine is a system of identifying and addressing the root causes of disease. It help me through the grief, and I found my calling.

I am now a qualified functional medicine coach, and I am deeply passionate about the work I do because I know the impact it can have on people’s quality of life. I am honouring Brendan’s memory by helping others to feel healthier and to prevent, or heal, non-communicable diseases. ❖

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