



of trials
and **tr**iumph

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A STORY OF HOPE

It was a long road to happiness for Linda Armstrong Kelly, a journey through shame, loneliness and hard work. But, in the end, she raised a champion and found her own success in a balanced and loving life. »

She is best known as the biggest cheerleader for one of the world's greatest athletes. But for Linda Armstrong Kelly, mother to seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, finding something to cheer about didn't always come easy.

Raised almost single-handedly by her mother, Linda—the oldest of three children—had only intermittent contact with her father as she grew up. Her early memories include huddling in the closet with her younger siblings while he physically abused their mother. With a child's eyes, she watched alcohol destroy her father, along with any hopes of a well-adjusted childhood.

"We would go for long periods of time without seeing him," she says. "To my mom's credit, it was difficult to have three children and be a battered woman and try to keep all of that together. She worked hard, and when she came home at the end of the day, we didn't spend much time with her. She was exhausted. She didn't have much left to give us."

That traumatic start to life provided Linda with few resources—emotional or otherwise—for the world that she would soon be forced to explore on

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her own. Today, her home in an affluent suburb north of Dallas is only 30 minutes from the shabby neighborhood where she was raised. But economically, spiritually and philosophically, it's a million miles away.

"I have been blessed," says the petite blonde as her constant companion, a 9-year-old Shih Tzu named Sammy, sits on her lap. "I have always felt like there was a prize waiting for me at the end of the line. I just couldn't quit."

growing up young

Her early life was filled with just one constant: change. Frequent moves taught Linda not to get comfortable in one place for too long, but those recurring upheavals also equipped her with an amazing ability to adapt to her surroundings. By the time she was in high school, she had become an attractive, outgoing girl who made the drill team and turned the boys'

heads. And it wasn't hard to get the attention of a handsome, somewhat wild, neighbor boy just one year older than she was. That attention was exactly what she thought had been missing in her life.

"He had this great car and would take me places, and it was all very exciting to me," she recalls. But the excitement was soon replaced by overwhelming responsibility when, at the age of 16, Linda found herself pregnant.

"Having a baby didn't scare me," she says. "What scared me was the thought of having to tell my mom. We didn't communicate well with each other. I knew my choices were limited, but I had already made up my mind."

Just as she had all of her life, Linda decided to do what needed to be done to make her circumstances bearable. She would get married and have the baby, but she also worked hard to keep her condition a secret. "In those days, they didn't let girls who were pregnant go to [public] high school; they had a special school where they had to go.

It was a real source of shame back then," she says. "As soon as word got out, everything changed for me. People talked behind my back

and there was this terrible feeling of shame every time I walked into a room. I could see the way they looked at me and knew they were talking about me."

Although isolating at the time, it became just one more trial-by-fire that ultimately forged a stronger will within her. She and her young husband threw a paper route in the early hours of the morning to support themselves, and she continued going to high school until her baby was born.

"I knew that I was going to have a girl," she says with a smile. "I had it all planned out. I was going to name her Erica, after Erica Kane on *All My Children*." But, as the saying goes, man—or, in this case woman—makes plans and God laughs. When her son was born on September 18, 1971, Linda was speechless.

"I was a big fan of Lance Rentzel," she says, referencing the handsome but legally challenged former wide receiver for the Dallas Cowboys. "He was such an attractive man. Everyone had a crush on him!"





The name seemed fitting for the beautiful baby boy that Linda, still a child herself at just 17, held in her arms. Years later, Rentzel would write her a letter, telling him he was honored to learn that Lance had been named after him—and apologizing for not being the kind of role model that her son had become.

sticking together

The young parents tried to settle into a routine, but neither had much of a family life to base it on. The fights were frequent and the violence escalated, following the same cycle of abuse Linda witnessed growing up. She knew she needed to leave, but wasn't sure where to find salvation. Two years into her marriage, with no skills and not so much as a high school diploma, she walked out.

"It was that last hit that did it," she says. "I was holding my son and [my husband] hit me in the face. I knew then that I was not putting my baby through what I had grown up with. I wanted more for him."

She found refuge in the most unlikely of places—with her father, newly sober and eager to make amends. Together, they began putting their lives back in place, building a new reality and finding the father-daughter relationship that Linda had missed while growing up. Both took jobs at the post office, with Linda working days and her dad working nights so that Lance would always have someone there to care for him. She worked hard, saved her money and began climbing out of the rut that many thought would be her future.

One job after another, Linda built a life for herself and Lance. Desperately wanting her son to grow up with a father, Linda remarried, this time to a traveling salesman. Although Terry Armstrong provided Linda and Lance with the name that would last the rest of their lives, the marriage could not sustain her husband's repeated infidelities or his frequent clashes with Lance. The marriage stumbled along for a decade until Linda finally found the strength to show him the door. Still, the tumultuous marriage seemed only to strengthen the bond between mother and son.

"I believe that you overcompensate for what you didn't have," Linda says. "I had the relationship with Lance that I wished I'd had with my mother. I

enjoyed him so much. I loved the structure and the fun of being his mother. And at the same time, I was growing up with him. We had a lot of fun together."

"I was the mom who'd take [Lance and his friends] to Van Halen or take them roller skating," she says. "He was a good kid, and I recognized that. I believed in him. That's what it all comes down to. There's a confidence that comes from knowing that someone believes in you. That's just about the greatest gift you can give a child."

Of course, it didn't take long for Linda—and the rest of the adults around him—to see that Lance was giving them plenty of reasons to believe in him. He showed an innate athletic prowess early on, and Linda encouraged him to pursue it.

"I think, as a parent, if you find [your child has] an interest in something, you need to encourage it," she says. And that is exactly what Linda did, working with Lance to help him achieve his personal goals. She roused him in the mornings, gave him a good breakfast and drove him to his practices. Whether it was Little League, swimming, running or bicycling, Linda allowed him to find his own interests and explore them to his heart's content. It gave something to both of them; for Lance, it was a chance to develop his athletic abilities. For Linda, it was an escape from a troubled marriage and the chance to further deepen the bond she shared with her son.

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he had his sights set on cycling. Linda was, again, a single mother, and she admits that she had never prepared herself for him to leave home. "I got so much pleasure from my time with Lance; we just enjoyed each other so much," she says. "He was the one constant in my life."

But that one constant was abruptly taken away when he moved to Austin to train with a cycling team. Watching his U-Haul pull away from the house, Linda says, was like "having my right arm cut off."

"It was extremely hard," she remembers. "And Lance knew it was hard for me. But it became a turning point in my life. Up until then, I had never done things for myself. I didn't have any hobbies. It was the first time I started finding out who I was."

her biggest battle

Who she was continued to evolve. Linda threw herself into work at Ericsson, and found new opportunities in an up-and-coming business called "telecom." As she became more familiar with her surroundings at work, her confidence grew and she began pursuing opportunities that were, by definition, off-limits to someone without a college degree.

"I realized that I could do those jobs just as well or better than anyone else, so I kept going after them," she says. "It was all about perseverance and staying power. So I just kept learning and kept working hard." Her efforts caught the attention of a supervisor in software engineering, who brought her on as his support person. It was a milestone for Linda, as it finally took her from being an hourly wage earner into the world of salaried employees.

"That was a big deal for me," she says.

Along the way, she said "I do" for the third time, and a disastrous union ensued. But as she muddled along through another bad marriage, this time with a heavy drinker who lost one job after another as a direct result of his drinking, Linda moved ahead in

her career. Work provided the necessary distraction to keep her from feeling the pain of another crumbling marriage.

Lance also was excelling, landing sponsorships from Nike and Oakley, and building his name as the man to beat. Both Armstrongs, it seemed, were on a sure course to victory when a sudden curve threw them off track. In 1996, just a month after his 25th birthday, Lance was diagnosed with testicular cancer. The prognosis was grim, but Linda refused to give up hope.

They battled cancer as they had every other challenge: together. By the end of the year, Lance had



completed chemotherapy treatments and was declared cancer-free. Linda, despite being in the midst of the greatest personal crisis of her life, had also managed to oversee completion of a massive repair center project at Ericsson. Both Armstrongs had discovered a strength that only comes from staring down one's greatest fears and facing up to life's biggest challenges. But in many ways, Linda was still a captive of her past.

By 1998, Lance was training in Europe and, shortly after he married, Linda found the courage to end

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her own troubled marriage. Now feeling completely alone, she threw herself into her work and watched the professional dividends pay off as her personal life spiraled. “My career didn't truly excel until I got divorced,” she says. “But when you're all by yourself, it doesn't feel right. So I worked all the time. I didn't have any balance, but I didn't realize that.”

A concerned colleague pointed out that Linda was losing weight as well as losing touch with her friends. After a great deal of effort, Linda was finally convinced to seek therapy, and she was at last able to unload the burdens she had shuttled around with her all those years.

“That was so freeing to me,” she recalls. “Once you finally find some-

one who you can bare your soul to...I had never had anyone I could talk to like that. It was so healing for me. She was instrumental in helping me love myself. That's when the light bulb went on for me.”

finding her peace

Linda began creating a balance between work and life—something she now speaks about to professional groups. She began playing golf and going on “girls' weekends.” She started exercising and learned to live alone. Her career took off and she soon found

herself making more money than she had imagined possible. Lance made her a grandmother, and just when she thought life couldn't get any better, it did.

“I had a friend whose dear friend had lost his wife to cancer and was ready to get back into dating again,” Linda says. “I wasn't interested in romance at all, but I knew I could be his best friend. We had a lot in common.”

She met Ed Kelly and they talked about their children—he has three grown ones—and they talked at length about cancer. Having spent many sleepless nights wondering about Lance's future and holding his hand as he battled through chemo treatments, Linda fully understood what Ed went through with his wife.

Friendship came easily between Ed and Linda, and love followed quickly on its heels. Within a year of meeting one another, on June 22, 2002, Linda finally had the big church wedding she dreamed of as a girl, complete with the knight in shining armor waiting for her at the end of the aisle.

The marriage changed her life in ways she couldn't have predicted. As the telecom boom went bust, Ericsson began laying off employees and Linda volunteered to be among them, hoping to save anyone who truly needed a job from losing theirs. With

“I thought, if I can help just one person by telling my story, then I have done my job. If I can help them not have that shame, that pain, that fear—if I can give them hope for the journey—it's all worth it. I want to be able to inspire them to find their way

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the additional time on her hands, she could reflect on all she had been through. Finally, with her new husband's encouragement, she decided to share her story with the world.

The first agent Linda visited told her pointedly, “I don't think you have a book here.” Those words only inspired her further, and she became determined to see it through. She met with another literary agent who saw the many messages Linda's story could deliver, and he paired her up with fellow Texan Joni Rodgers to begin unfolding the complicated but triumphant story. The messages she was determined to deliver included the ability to overcome shame and guilt, and to move on from one's mistakes. “It's about not looking back and not carrying those things with you,” she says. “Because if you do, you'll never have the chance to move on.”

Broadway Books published her book, *No Mountain High Enough: Raising Lance, Raising Me*, in 2005, and it immediately raised interest in Linda beyond her simply being Lance Armstrong's mom. She hit the talk show circuit, including appearances on *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil*. Public speaking engagements soon followed and today she devotes her time to sharing different aspects of her story with civic and professional groups. She's been involved with the Lance Armstrong Foundation from its early days, and now dedicates more time to building awareness about cancer.

“The thing about my story that's so great is that it's a story of hope,” she says. “It's all about moving on and getting on with life, no matter what you've been through. You can choose to collapse, or you can turn it into an opportunity.”

When she first decided to tell that story—and dredge up the old feelings that accompanied the shame of a teen pregnancy, the pain of her dysfunctional family and the loneliness brought on by a string of unsuccessful marriages—Linda had one particular goal: To make it not have happened in vain.

out. She truly believes that each person who hears her story has the power to change their lives, just as Linda changed hers.

“When you learn to love yourself, your life will turn around,” she says. “That's what makes it so powerful. That's why I have to do this. Because I want to stand for something that really matters.”



COURTESY LINDA ARMSTRONG KELLY

