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I lost another friend to cancer today. 39 years young. As I reflect on her life, remembering how she loved life, not only the good times, but how she never met a challenge she didn't take on with her larger than life smile and her gracious and caring heart, I can't help but feel guilt and sadness. I am a survivor. Survivors know what I am talking about. Happy to be alive – feeling a sense of guilt because another friend has taken their last breath while you sit looking at your email and Instagram feed.

Why am I still here? What did I ever do to deserve another chance? Not only one chance at rebuilding and living a better life but multiple chances to cry, “Uncle”, and start again. I'm not sure how many times you can be at the bottom and still get back up, and sometimes it seems like I have made a career at finding out this very thing. I know I am not alone when I say that I have had my fair share of heartbreaks and disappointments. Hasn't everybody? Who hasn't cried over that boy, or a mean girl? Who hasn't been disappointed when someone else was picked for the job or promotion?

You see, growing up my sisters and I were given everything we could ever want. I was very blessed to have both parents who loved me under one roof who encouraged my strengths and challenged me to be a better student, employee, sibling, and an all-around better human being. Unfortunately, I still had the uncanny ability to make decisions and choices to screw everything up. I was given all the tools to succeed except one. Experience. The experience to know how my choices would not only affect me, but how they would affect those around me. It wasn't like animated films when the main character ends up at the fork in the road and looks to the left and sees darkness and then looks to the right and sees rainbows and sunshine. The reality is that both paths are dark and scary. Believe me, in my immature, self-righteous, selfish young mind I only looked for the rainbows and sunshine in any given moment. Rainbows and sunshine don't prepare you for anything! The rainbows only show up after the darkness and storms. It has taken me so long to appreciate the storms.

I graduated from Nazareth College of Rochester in 1996 with a Bachelor's of Science in Art Education in 4 years. No more and no less. I was never a great student, and I did what I needed to do to get by. I have no regrets about that, however, I do regret not taking any chances, or exploring the world around me before I graduated. I didn't start to thrive and be my own person until I could get out into the world and “do” life! Fear dictated my direction. Fear of rejection, fear of not being good enough. Fear of not knowing what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. At 22 years-old, what did I know about what I wanted to do forever? A serious relationship had ended in heartbreak,

I had 2 part-time jobs, and a whole summer ahead of me to figure it out. The end of that summer, I met a man who was the complete opposite of me. A little introverted, happy to be a homebody with simple interests and expectations. He called me “city girl” - I lived in Webster at the time. He smiled with his eyes, and had a huge heart. In the fall, I took a long-term substitute Art teacher position, and thought ok, this is me being an adult. (not even close)

I liked teaching, sort of. I loved kids, and loved teaching a subject I was passionate about. Unfortunately, I didn't like guardians who didn't have interest in their children and I found it difficult to leave their hardships and struggles in the classroom. I hated being restricted to 4 walls along with a strict schedule that was the same day in and day out, and I certainly didn't like the tight strings held by the administration. Oh, and the income as a substitute was NOT making it easy for me to indulge in my love of shoes! My solution?? Corporate America! Or so I thought! Never fitting into the mold, and frustrated to learn the newest technology that could open doors to a new path quickly turned into restlessness again.

From the restlessness, the craziest of ideas had emerged, and the opportunity was there for the taking!! In 2003, I left a management position at a not for profit establishment to follow my dream of being my own boss. I believed I had the creativity, and the will and the support to open a flower shop. Little did I know, that I needed more than a creative eye to be successful. I taught myself how to create flower arrangements and really grew a steady wedding flower business. I used to pride myself on pushing the envelope, trying new things while creating the unexpected amongst the sea of ordinary. I loved entering design contests against veteran designers and winning! Either you loved me (and my work), or you didn't. That first year in business and 7 years after we met, I got married. The following year I got pregnant with my first child. I look back now, and can't believe how we managed all of it in such a short time. There was no time to think about it, just do it! And you damn well better strive for perfection while doing it! I felt like I was on top of the world! I can be creative, own my own business, be a new wife, buy a house, be a mother all while being



**Rebuilding
Myself-
One Heartbreak
and One
Better Choice
At A Time**



My decision to close the doors hurt so many people. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about that. Whoever said to keep the past in the past is an idiot. Every choice, decision and path you go down writes and rewrites your own story. It cannot be deleted.

surrounded by my family and a few friends to help me when I needed it! (Which was all the time!) I never counted on being physically sick during my entire pregnancy, financial hardship while the business started to change. I also never expected my son to arrive by C-section 4 days before the biggest holiday of the year! Without my family and friends, who helped tremendously, this control freak would have never made it through!!!

My beautiful baby boy was finally here. He made my heart full. The morning the pediatrician came in to check on him, there was a lot of, "Hmm.", "Would you look at that.", "I have only read about this, and have not seen it in person." – "OK!!! What are you talking about??!!!" My son was born with a rare condition called, Poland Syndrome. He had the tiniest webbed fingers on his left hand and no pectoral muscle on the same side. Oh, my God. What did I do? It was the stress, the inexplicable craving for cherry coke and Philly cheese steak sandwiches, the lack of sleep, the chemicals from the business below our shop, the chemicals right inside my shop,

the hundred times I carried heavy buckets of water and flowers. What did I do??? Did I cause this? Will he be ok? He won't be able to play baseball, or football. He will never play the piano or guitar. If I only listened to my mom, and the doctor and took it easy. If only I was one of those crazy awesome fit yoga moms that practiced while pregnant. If I hadn't thrown up from conception. If only I diffused special essential oils or ate more vegetables, or LOVED being pregnant! This is all my fault. I blamed myself.

11 weeks later, my maternal grandmother passed away unexpectedly. She was the glue that held together a broken family" - words I spoke during the eulogy. "Yes, I will do the flowers for the funeral." "What's the big deal?" I had done hundreds before. It was a completely destructive idea. I could feel my heart break more every time I placed another lavender rose in that casket arrangement. The words that filled my head were equally as harmful as was the inconceivable hatred surrounding the situation. To this day, the most painful thing I have ever done.

The extended family was in such turmoil, breaking apart at the seams, as families sometimes do when faced with such a loss. Words flying around like daggers. No one was unscathed. I honestly feel like that was the beginning of the end of my career as a business owner. I couldn't think straight. I didn't want to get out of bed. My lack of organization and terrible decisions with the business finances set me on a path towards total loss. My world was spiraling out of control and I needed professional help. My doctor said I was suffering from postpartum depression. What is that? That makes me weak. No way. I'm fine. The final straw was when after two years of doing all that I could as a business owner and all that I knew how as a working mother, my son called my mom "mommy". It was a word that I loved to hear. A word that I would think about my son saying when I was missing him. A word just for me. The woman who endured 17 hours of labor only to have him cut out of me. I'm the mom, mommy, mama. I realized that I couldn't do both. I couldn't divide my time and give either the full attention needed to grow and thrive.

My decision to close the doors hurt so many people. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about that. Whoever said to keep the past in the past is an idiot. Every choice, decision and path you go down writes and rewrites your own story. It cannot be deleted. It is difficult to not be affected by the past. After closing the shop, we had no choice but to file bankruptcy. I was out of work; my husband was also between jobs. Have you ever heard that what you focus on expands? Well, loss expanded. Fear expanded. Mistrust expanded. Disappointment expanded. Sadness expanded. Darkness expanded. We needed help. No health insurance, no income, a toddler. We sold whatever we could to make it through one more month. We lost almost everything.

We had to reach out to a local foodbank for essentials. Diapers, milk, financial assistance. We hit rock bottom. Never did I think that was where we would be – I certainly wasn't going to stay there. I prayed a lot. I prayed for guidance, I prayed for patience.

Out of that darkness and fear a sweet little girl was born 6.5 weeks early in 2008. A fighter. A positive light. A gift. A little girl that has faced so many challenges and obstacles and has shown so much joy and love for life. I knew things were different with her. She stopped nursing at 5 months. She hated to be held, was very delayed in her speech and gross motor functions. Why wasn't she walking or talking yet? Is it because I went back to work part time? When faced with the unknown, I WAS an expert at worry and blaming myself.

Unfortunately, our focus was about to change as we prepared for the worst. In 2010, while facing our daughter's disabilities head on with appointments and evaluations and early intervention; therapies and diagnosis, we were derailed by the unexpected. I remember feeling a small bump inside my mouth on the upper palate. Thinking nothing of it, I mentioned it to my dentist at my next visit the last week in April. He poked at it, asked if it hurt. It hadn't hurt. I had always been obsessed with my teeth, took pride in my pearly white smile and never had a cavity. At that point, he said that maybe I had burned myself, or was irritated by a seed or spice. He gave me the name of an oral surgeon and told me to call him to make an appointment to see him if the bump hadn't gone away in 3 weeks. Ok. Whatever. Back to life as I knew it. A week later, the dentist called me and told me that he had been doing some research on the bump and urged me to call the surgeon that day.

Oh great. What now? I remember the sweet, short, Indian doctor talking a mile a minute as he ripped part of the bump from my palate

without numbing it first. "What the hell", I thought. "are you new or something?" He looked at it as my eyes watered (I swear, at that moment, I was resisting the urge to punch him in the mouth so he could feel what it felt like.) I will never forget the look in his eyes. I know right then he knew.

Thankfully I had Mother's Day week working at my friend's flower shop, and my other part job as a gymnastics coach to keep me busy. I was so distracted with the thought of what it could possibly be. The negative thoughts, and words filled my head like the plague. I would need a will. I would never see my kids grow up. I would have to tell my husband that I would be ok if he moved on without me. What would my parents do? Why is this happening? Karma. I hurt so many people with my irresponsible choices and decisions. Its Karma for sure!

One night as I lay in bed with one kid wrapped around my leg and the other across my back while my husband slept peacefully snoring his brains out, I closed my eyes and heard a whisper in my ear. The calm voice said to me that it was cancer. The voice also said that it would get worse before it gets better.

The voice continued to tell me that I would be ok. Every time. I would be ok, and that my strength through this battle would bring my family closer to him. As unnerving as the thought of God or anyone whispering in my ear in the middle of the night, I felt a sense of calm. In that moment, I believed without seeing the facts, or calculating the probability or arguing the what ifs, that I would be ok.

That Friday, 2 days before Mother's Day, I got the call at work. The sweet little Indian Surgeon called to tell me that in fact it was cancer. I'm not sure what else he said, I think he apologized for calling me at work or something. I hung up the phone, excused myself, went to my car, and cried. I remember that numb feeling, and looking around as though I was moving in slow motion as everyone whizzed by me; Stuck in a movie I didn't want to be in. How was I going to explain this to my family? What did this mean?

My husband and I met with the head and neck specialist. Carcinoma. I wasn't scared for me. I wasn't even really scared. I knew I would be ok. The first surgery was a success. Suspect Lymph Nodes were removed, Margins were good, no radiation needed. I had what seemed like a giant hole in my mouth, and could barely talk, but it was over. Or so I thought. Unfortunately, my body rejected the synthetic graft twice. The prosthetic device didn't work either. My only option was a surgery that had been done by

my surgeon only one other time... Seriously?! It was a MAJOR surgery that required grafting from my arm, removing a vein and inserting into my neck to provide a blood supply to the new graft, and reconstruction. I remember the surgeon asking me if I wanted the scar on the inside of my arm or outside. I thought it was a strange question. He explained that the scar would show. Trust me, when your life is at stake, vanity goes out the window.

The morning of surgery, we left the house early. I didn't think to wake the kids, as I would be home soon. Huge mistake. I had been in ICU for 7 days. No visits from the kids, I couldn't talk to them. My daughter to this day still asks me if I'm coming right back when I leave. I was completely helpless.

Laying in a hospital bed on painkillers and antibiotics with gauze shoved in my mouth waiting to see if the surgery was a success or not. Blood soaked hair, disgusting taste in my mouth. Some high tech Doppler radar device sewn into my neck to make sure the vein was pumping blood to the graft tissue.

I never cried. The voice said I would be ok, and although we had been having problems on and off for years, every time I opened my eyes, I saw my husband's face. Every. Single. Time. I knew my kids were being well cared for by our parents. I knew everything was going to be alright. I couldn't talk. I know it was a blessing for some, but it really stopped me from using words of any kind; good or bad!

I laid there with beeps and tubes and nurses in and out every five minutes, and I had not a single word. I believe that in that moment, I started to really think about what I wanted to say about anything and everything. All I had was time to think.

Time to be still. Time to get well. Time to just be. I remember thinking about the choices I had at that moment. I could choose to just be still, be sick, be helpless, or, I could choose to make the conscious effort to fight and get home to my babies. Choose to do things on my own sooner than expected, and choose to win and get better quicker. I wanted to get home. I wanted to live a better life. I wanted to push myself to be better and to be a better person. The rebuilding began again.

Coaching safely was no longer an option. I had no desire to return to the demanding holidays as a florist, so I took comfort in gardening for families in the community. Meeting and talking to the most wonderful people. Working side by side with a woman in her 80s who loved gardening and humming birds as much as I do.

Working near the Lake at some beautiful homes. I have built lifetime friendships, and know that gardening not only provided me with the means to contribute financially again, but helped rebuild my courage, strength, self-esteem and gave me a lot of time to think. Think about the words I speak, think about how to use my words in a more positive and productive way. I truly believe that it takes more effort to hold a grudge, and be nasty than it does to just be nice. I would rather be the person to say hello than the one who does not say hello in return. I find much joy in random acts of kindness. My kids do too! Both thriving in their own ways. Kind, helpful, conscious little humans with hearts of gold.

Just about 3 years ago, I decided to get my NYS real estate license. I know the experiences I have made me a strong Independent real estate salesperson with Keller Williams. I List and sell homes in the Rochester and surrounding areas. During orientation, I was asked to make a dream board to reflect all the things that I wanted to gain from a career in real estate sales. I taped a picture of my kids laughing to the board. My motivation to start a career in real estate is the same today as it was then. As a family, we add to the board whenever a wish or dream comes to mind.

Although I have doubled my business each year, I measure my successes based on 3 things.

- 1. Are my children happy?**
- 2. Am I able to have a profitable business that I designed with my family still the #1 priority?**
- 3. Can I have a successful business based on honesty, integrity, heart?**

If so, it is a success!! I continue to set goals, and I know my positive attitude and never quit mentality helps me achieve my goals. I love building relationships with my clients and my team of affiliates. I use my teaching skills to help clients navigate through the process of buying and selling a house. My competitive nature helps when writing good offers and winning during bidding wars. My ability to observe and think before I speak helps me to listen to my client's needs, and get them closer to their dreams! BEST CAREER EVER! I can still be creative, work hard, and prioritize time with my family.

5 years Cancer Free and Counting! Dream BIG! Fight Hard! Choose Joy! Love always! Your words matter. How you treat people matters!! Kindness matters! These words may be cliché, however so simple and grossly underrated. My words to live by.

