

I Dare Me

Chapter One

Before I started my year of firsts, I was stuck.

From the outside, my life at age 53 looked fine. I had a good job. I had plenty of accomplishments as a journalist. My marriage of 25 plus years was stable. Physically, there was nothing wrong. And yet in 2009 everything was wrong. I felt lost, angry and frustrated.

The economy was tanking. My job as an investigative reporter at NBC 10 News in Philadelphia was changing. Friends I loved were moving. Long time co-workers were leaving. Reporting resources were shrinking. Budgets were being cut. I resented the new technology and social media I was being asked to embrace at work. "I don't text!" I would snarl. "Facebook is for morons."

I stubbornly tried to do things the way I'd always done them, but I felt like I was beating my head against a wall. It was exhausting. For the first time in my life I felt old and out of touch.

Worst of all, I didn't like this version of myself. I had survived having my entire large intestine removed when I was 33. I had survived breast cancer at 35. I survived kidney cancer at age 45. I should have been dancing every day like Gene Kelly in *Singing in the Rain* just to be breathing, right? But I wasn't.

Perhaps it was because I had survived all of that that I was even more distressed. Days, weeks and months were going by and I wasn't appreciating and enjoying them. I didn't want to get out of bed. I also knew being stressed and unhappy for that long wasn't good for my head or my health. And I didn't have time to move to Italy to go find myself, or meditate on my navel in Bali. Still, something had to give: I had to figure out how to get unstuck.

My smart tech-savvy 23-year old daughter was worried about me. She hadn't really seen me like this before. She pushed me.

"Maybe you need a new creative outlet," Alexa suggested.

"Maybe." I said.

"Maybe you should start a blog." Now, she was bugging me.

"What the hell is a blog?"

"An online journal. You can write about anything."

It just sounded like more work to me. And I had no idea what I'd write about. I couldn't think of just one thing that would keep my interest. Still, for some reason I mulled it over. Maybe my daughter was right, I thought. Maybe I could blog. Maybe I could write about doing a lot of new things.

"What if I try something new every week? I'll write about that."

My daughter was having none of it. "No, something new every day! Now there was a crazy idea.

"Start making a list of things you've never done," she said. "They don't have to be big things like skydiving. Instead, don't swear for a day. Eat vegetarian for a day. Stuff like that."

There it was. The idea scared and excited me at the same time. I knew that was a good sign. Just like that, my Year of Firsts was born.

And that's how I found myself running into the freezing ocean at full speed on New Years Day 2010. Surprise—it turns out that there's a perfectly good reason that sane people do something as insane as the Polar Bear Plunge: It's exhilarating! It's a full-on slap-in-the-face wake up call. I ran out of the water soaked, shaken and proud. It was the first of 365 Firsts.

For every day that year, I did something that I had never done before and blogged about it at www.oneyearoffirsts.com. When I could, I captured each First on video in all its goofy, seat-of-my-pants glory. I also established a few ground rules:

- A First could be something I hadn't tried in 10 years. If you did your last cartwheel at nine, doing one at 53 counts as a first, believe me.
- No risking my life bungee jumping. I jumped out of a plane when I was 21. I felt no need to sign forms that stated no one would be responsible in the "event of my death."
- My schedule was absolutely nuts, so I gave myself permission to embrace whatever small firsts came my way in the course of a 24x7 life.
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- No cheating. I couldn't skip a day. I had to do a First and document it.

My daughter was wrong; it wasn't easy to find a First every day. But she was also right. I needed this. I'd forgotten how much fun it is to try something new. It didn't take much time before I was excited to get up every morning. I knew that I was going to do something that day for the very first time.

What did I learn? Firsts are the antidote for being stuck.

My Firsts ranged from riding a mechanical bull to repelling into an underground cave. I spoke to a complete stranger on the street. I smoked my first cigar. I shoveled horse manure. I learned to surf. I took a drum lesson from a famous 80's rocker. I spent time in a wheelchair. I attempted to experience blindness. I ate dessert for an entire day (I do not recommend this). Some Firsts were pivotal moments, like going back to school. Many Firsts were just what I could find on the fly, like walking my dog Angel backwards one day. Some were painful parts of real life, like the day I had to put Angel to sleep. And still others were whatever I could work into my crazy-busy schedule as a journalist, TV personality, speaker, wife, and mom.

No, I didn't join the Peace Corps or run with the bulls in Pamplona. But as I discovered during the year, it's the smallest changes that eventually change everything: They got me "unstuck." They brought the life back into my life. And they also made me realize something incredibly important: Firsts don't have to be big, dramatic, and risky to recharge and reinvent your life. By just trying small things, you begin to see the world around you with fresh, child's eyes. Doing Firsts retrains us, takes what might seem predictable and smothering, and transforms it into something filled with learning, fun, and possibility.

Word of my Year of Firsts experience quickly grew online. More than eighty thousand people watched my videos on Youtube and I was able to share with thousands of others through NBC10 (where I worked), Facebook, and Twitter. Dozens of viewers and fans offered ideas, lessons, suggestions and support to "Keep going!", and some even invited me to come share a First experience with them!

But one of the most exciting things that happened was that people didn't just watch me do Firsts—they started doing them too. And this is why I wrote I Dare Me.

My hope is I Dare Me dares you! I want you to look at your world with new eyes, to make your own list of Firsts, to stop waiting for someone to rescue you from whatever you can't control and to rescue yourself with something new every day. That's how your life starts to change, one First at a time.

I've divided the book into ten chapters to tell you stories about the different kind of Firsts I tried and to give you ideas on how to launch your own Year of Firsts. You can start anywhere in the book, whether it's the beginning, or flipping through and finding something that jumps out at you.

Because I'm a journalist and a sometimes-skeptic when I hear about books that will "change your life", I've included scientific information and studies in each chapter that show how First experiences can be positive and even life altering. Though my own experience is anecdotal, you'll read about how new experiences can change your fears, brain, and heart, and put you on a better path in your life.

If you'd like to see what some of these Firsts actually look like, visit my blog www.oneyearoffirsts.com. You'll also find other stories of people's Firsts and you can share your First adventures too.

I know what it's like to be stuck. I know what it's like to feel sad and think you have lost the ability to change whatever situation you are in. But I promise you, change starts with doing something new, something different from what you did yesterday.

I grew. I changed. My world opened up and is still evolving today as a result of my Year of Firsts. It's my greatest hope that you find a similar spark somewhere in these pages; something that lights a fire under you to make this not just a life, but your best life. I dare you. I double dare you.