

THE DREAM-DOER

How One Woman Overcame Adversity to Achieve Multiple Dreams

By Rick Bowers

Talk about
a dreamer.

A doer.

A builder.

And a star.

Donna R. Walton
certainly
fits all of those
descriptions
—and many more.



Yet, for many years, her dreams were set aside for a variety of reasons—most of which originated with the dreaded C-word: cancer.

The Beginning of the Loss

The loss of Donna's left leg—and nearly her life—to bone cancer when she was just 18 led to a struggle for many years to deal with a multitude of issues. These included low self-esteem, a negative body image, being made fun of, being rejected by men, self-doubt, and low expectations, pity and negative thinking from others and from herself.

For people Donna's age at the time of her limb loss, physical appearance is often of utmost importance, and it was no different for Donna, maybe even more so since she had long dreamed of being in the spotlight as a dancer, singer and actress before her amputation.

"In the hospital, I couldn't get certain negative thoughts and words out of my mind, no matter how hard I tried," she says. "Handicapped. Disabled. Crippled. Flawed. One-Legged Donna. I thought this was how others would see me now that I'd lost my leg, but it was, in fact, also how I saw myself. And I did not have much empirical evidence to refute my beliefs."

Getting such thoughts out of her head and coming to terms with her so-called disability and new life situation would prove a difficult process.

A Life-Changing Moment

At some point, Donna came to a pivotal moment in her struggle, however. During an argument with a rival for a man's attention, the rival told Donna that she was less than a woman because she had only one leg. Donna was immediately devastated. However, the remark also made her ask herself and her rival an important question: "What's a leg got to do with it?"



Photo by Mark M. Harris

Then, as she thought more and more about it, the question ultimately became a statement and a personal motto: "What's a leg got to do with it!"

That question and the resulting statement changed her life. "Once I got my focus off that leg, it was as if I had once been blind and then gained 20/20 vision," Donna noted in her memoir, *Shattered Dreams, Broken Pieces*. "I could now see my many other positive qualities, skills and talents."

Struggles With Triple Jeopardy

In addition to her own feelings, however, she also had to deal with how others saw her.

When she didn't get accepted into a broadcasting program at Syracuse University or a TV broadcasting internship she applied for, she had to wonder why. She realized that she was facing obstacles on three fronts—as a black person, as a woman, and as a person with a disability. It's a condition sometimes referred to as triple jeopardy—and she had it.

“Being black, female and disabled was certainly not a recipe for success in 1984,” she says. “Each of these three things alone could hinder a person’s efforts toward success, but all three combined, it seemed, would make it nearly impossible.”

Realizing that she had triple jeopardy and that it could make achieving success more difficult, she made an important decision. “I knew that, for the rest of my life, I would have to strive to become impervious to and rise above the limitations imposed on me by others. ... I was not going to take no for an answer. It was not in my nature.”

These experiences made her realize that she needed to become so qualified that no one could turn her down in the future. She would have to somehow make herself that valuable.

Reinventing Herself and Excelling

To succeed with all the obstacles she faced over the years, she realized that she wouldn't just need to make minor changes to her life but would instead have to reinvent herself—to become a new person. She would need to throw out everything that wasn't working and then use the parts that were working, mix them with new parts, and put herself back together.

She began striving to improve her situation, even in the midst of physical and emotional difficulties that tried to keep her down.

“Unfortunately, many of us believe ... that once something is broken, putting it back together is impossible,” she says. “When our lives are shattered by some kind of trauma, we believe that there is no hope to rebuild them, and we simply give up. Some of us become incapacitated and depressed. Others become suicidal. The reality, however, is that broken lives can be renewed, remade, rebuilt, recycled, reinvented, rebranded. And, in many cases, our new lives can be even better than our old ones—if we know how to deal with the trauma. It's true. Millions of people have proven it. They have done so even when the obstacles blocking their way were like giants and seemed way too large to overcome.”

Discovering Her Purpose

In 1996, Donna got a major boost when she discovered her life's mission and began to work tirelessly to fulfill her new dreams and then some of her older ones.

She wanted more education to become a teacher and to enhance her credibility for building a nonprofit organization to help others.



Teaching Days

“In the end, I made the decision to pursue my doctorate,” she says. “My mother had always encouraged me and my sister to get as much education as we could, and by now I was coming to grips with the reality that I would not be living out my dreams in Hollywood. People were also beginning to ask me to share my experiences with others, and I did not want to do so based on my life experiences alone. I wanted to provide greater value to those I spoke to, and I thought that my talks and presentations would have more credibility if I had higher academic credentials.”

When she received her EdD in rehabilitation counseling in 2005, she says she realized that her preamputation dreams had not been lost, only changed.

“It took me nearly 10 years and a lot of hard work to achieve this great accomplishment, and I am proud to have not given up,” she says. “Of course, there were times when I felt like it, but my determination carried me through.”

With her doctorate in hand, she felt that even though she was black, female and disabled, she had what she needed to successfully navigate the often-challenging job-seeking terrain.

“I was now a much more valuable candidate for potential employers, and I had far less competition for positions because usually only a few candidates possessed the required qualifications,” she explains. “As planned, my doctorate also gives me more credibility when I speak to others and interact with them on behalf of my organizations. ‘Dr. Walton’ has proved to be a much more impactful title than ‘Ms. Walton.’”



Photo by Rene Alston

With her doctorate, she was able to have a long professional career before retiring from her position with the United States Department of Defense in August 2020.

At around the same time she received her doctorate, in 2005, she changed the name of a fledgling company she had started from Dream Reach Win to LEGGTalk, Inc. In this business, she uses her professional training, work experience and life experience to offer “Lessons of Empowerment for Achieving Goals and Greatness.”

The company’s services currently include public speaking, life coaching/counseling, workshops, and disability awareness and training. With her new life as a greater testament that individuals can achieve abundance with a positive spirit and attitude and the determination to soar, she educates and motivates others to change their thinking, attitudes and behavior.

“Through these services, I teach people to use their inner power to become champions—people who strive to win, no matter what their circumstances,” she says.

With a desire to help others even more, she also started an international movement called The Divas With Disabilities Project (DWD) in December 2012.

She originally launched it as Facebook group page because she wanted to create a space where black and brown women could share their lived experiences. She chose the word diva because she wanted to show that if a woman wants to be a diva and lives with a disability, she can because diva and disability can co-exist in a single person. Because the word divas conjures up a certain meaning, a new meaning was assigned to the word - Dynamic, Illuminating, Victorious, Achieving Sisters.

"With Divas, I wanted to reach out especially to black and brown girls and women because of my own experiences as an African American woman," she says. "I'd started the page simply as a way to connect and network with others and maybe make a few new friends. I had no idea or expectation that it would grow into anything else. But when I opened the page that day, I found a lot of activity and realized that perhaps the page was filling a need. ... Many visitors to the page said that they found refuge and inspiration in realizing they were not alone."

Over time, she began to think of the project as something much greater than she'd originally envisioned. She started posting to the page more often and then decided to expand and build a website for it as well. Today, it continues to evolve into a major movement for black and brown girls and women with all types of disabilities.

"For purposes of the divas with disabilities movement, a diva is defined as an empowered woman, and the project promotes and empowers women of color who have disabilities, chronic medical conditions, and congenital anomalies," she explains. "Our goal now is to thrust more women of color with disabilities into the spotlight through media exposure—to shape the perspective of 'what disability looks like.' ... As we move forward on exciting new initiatives, our mission is to serve as a platform for women to learn, share, and grow and to empower them to live fulfilling lives."

DWD[™]
The Divas With
Disabilities Project

RESHAPING WHAT VISIBLE
DISABILITY LOOKS LIKE



Now the dream for the project has grown further. Perhaps, she says, there'll be a podcast, a television show, a mentorship program, an awards ceremony, a conference, and a related foundation. "Our work has just begun."

The Return of Earlier Dreams

Even though Donna was achieving many dreams around this time, her dream of being a performer—of being in the spotlight—was still there.

"My dream of being an entertainer—of singing, dancing and acting—was not merely the passing fantasy of a teenager," she says. "It was something deeply rooted in my being. I had loved singing and dancing as far back as I could remember. ... In junior high school, I was a cheerleader and a member of the drill team. When we performed our routines during our schoolwide events, I felt as if everyone was watching me! Then, when I got a starring role in the school play *Purlie*, my dream was sealed. I knew from the moment I stepped onto that auditorium stage at Carter G. Woodson Junior High School that I was bound for stardom. The applause, the stage lights, and the ovations were intoxicating."

It was, therefore, especially gratifying in April 2014 when she received an e-mail from the groundbreaking Raw Beauty NYC photography exhibit (www.rawbeautyproject.com), which showcased photographs of 20 women with various disabilities who represented beauty, sensuality and empowerment. The project invited Donna to be a model for the exhibit.

"It was like coming back to my original dreams in a way," she says. "When I first lost my leg, I believed that my dream of being in the spotlight was over. And really, at that time it was true. Fortunately, many people and organizations are now working to change that. Raw Beauty NYC, mobileWOMEN.org, Models of Diversity (www.modelsofdiversity.org), The Bold Beauty Project (www.boldbeautyproject.com), and my own organization, The Divas With Disabilities Project (www.divaswithdisabilities.org), are helping society realize that there is no single standard of beauty."



Photographer - Paul Morse

The following year, more huge things happened. She was also a model for The Bold Beauty Project, and *O, The Oprah Magazine* published an article about the Raw Beauty NYC Project. These wins for people with disabilities provided opportunities, Donna says, “to show others that life does not have to end because you lose a piece of you, you have a disability, or you look different from others. It also gave me another chance to see myself as not only beautiful but as the celebrity I always dreamed of becoming.”

Then, in 2021, she got her first professional acting role in *The Retreat*, a series produced by Nuance Entertainment. Since then, she’s also modeled for ads, done numerous local and national commercials, and will guest star in an upcoming TV series, *The Other Black Girl*, set to air on Hulu in September 2023.

Having overcome everything that disability has thrown at her and not allowed it to end her dreams, she is now working to grow LEGGTalk and DWD to the next level.

Her goal is to get more funding for DWD and take it from a mostly volunteer-run organization to a professional organization with paid staff and consultants to increase its reach and help more women with disabilities around the world connect, help each other, and benefit from those who have gone before. This nearly lifelong dream is going forth, and Donna is making a difference as she has long hoped.

To fully achieve this goal, however, she’ll need to acquire more donors and sponsors and win larger grants. That’s on the list.

“I believe in my heart that DWD can help, and I feel that if I don’t take it as far as I can, many women with disabilities will fall through the cracks of a world that wasn’t made for them,” she says. “I want to make sure that they have all the tools they need to navigate that world and overcome all the obstacles it puts in their way.”

What Fuels the Passion?

Now that Donna is retired, she could simply rest on her laurels and take it easy for the rest of her life, but the dreams won’t let go, even though she knows there’s more work to be done.

“One way I’ve been able to keep my passion alive all of these years is simply by understanding that succeeding—fulfilling our dreams—takes work and time,” she explains. “I know what to expect, so I can deal with the process and be patient. When I realized that I wanted to make my new life about helping others reinvent their lives and fulfill their dreams, I soon realized that it wasn’t just going to happen overnight. I was going to have to strive to make it happen.”

Her life—and continuing dream—is about helping others overcome the hardships she’s had to deal with.

“If you ever see the smiles on women’s faces when they learn what they can accomplish—regardless of so-called disabilities that they might have—you can understand why I do what I do and struggle to achieve more. It is a wonderful feeling that can’t be duplicated.”

“If what you want isn’t behind Door Number 1, Door Number 2, or Door Number 3, don’t settle for less. Knock a hole in the wall, and make a new door.”

—Donna R. Walton



Photo by
Tim Coburn
Photography

www.DivasWithDisabilities.org