

Unshattered

OVERCOMING TRAGEDY AND
CHOOSING A BEAUTIFUL LIFE



Carol J. Decker
with Stacey L. Nash

On June 10, 2008, Carol Decker walked through the hospital doors a healthy woman with flu-like symptoms and early labor contractions. Three months later, she returned home a blind triple-amputee struggling to bond with a daughter she would never see.

Unshattered: Overcoming Tragedy and Choosing a Beautiful Life recounts Carol's fight for survival against sepsis and its life-shattering complications. From excruciating skin grafts to learning how to function in daily life without lower legs, a left hand, or her sight, Carol takes us on a personal and raw yet inspiring journey. She travels through the darkness of trauma, anxiety, and depression to arrive, literally, at the peak of a mountain with a heart full of gratitude and love.

Lessons learned:

- There is always hope, even if it sometimes feels small and hard to find.
- Even if you are the most capable person, you can't do this life alone. We all need a support system. It is okay to ask for help.
- Happiness takes work. It doesn't just happen.
- The human spirit is able to endure and withstand great adversity.
- Even the smallest broken pieces of a life can be put back together.



PHOTO BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT



CAROL J. DECKER lives in Enumclaw, Washington, with her husband, Scott, and two daughters, Chloe and Safiya. She travels across the nation as a motivational speaker, sharing her story with a depth of perspective that touches the hearts of her listeners. She hopes to share by example that anyone can choose a beautiful life and that with an optimistic attitude and determination, anything is possible.

STACEY L. NASH is a happily married mother of four who sleeps too little, sings too loud, and keeps a stash of dark chocolate Hershey's Kisses in her purse. She works as a freelance writer and specializes in family and parenting issues. She and her family live in the middle of forty heavily wooded acres where they split lots of firewood and avoid the occasional bear. You can find her at www.staceylnashwrites.com and www.lovelearningforlife.com.



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FOR REVIEW ONLY

*TO MY TALENTED BIG BROTHER SHAWN,
who I miss every day.*

*Thank you for teaching me to be fearless,
for always making me laugh,
and for showing me what true compassion
and friendship look like.*

*I love you so much, and I know you're
always with me in my heart.*

—CJD

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Introduction

by Scott C. Decker, DMD

Carol and I met at what was then Ricks College in 1995, during our sophomore year. After dating for three years, we married in March of 1998. We moved to Seattle so I could manage a warehouse full time while going to school at the University of Washington. While living in Seattle, Carol worked as a medical assistant at multiple cardiology offices. She became well known for being a hard worker, a good friend, and a kind person. Carol has always had a knack for making friends. People are just attracted to her.

After I finished my studies at the University of Washington, we moved to Boston so I could go to dental school full time. Carol worked more than full time to support us while I was in school. She again made many friends and gained the trust of her colleagues at the endocrinologist's office where she worked.

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Scott and me, growing stronger as we manage trials together.

Leaving Boston was harder for her than for me because of all the friends she'd made.

After I graduated in 2005, we moved back to Seattle. We lived close to Carol's new job in Seattle at another cardiology office, and I commuted for two years as an associate dentist in Tacoma. In 2006, we decided to start a family, and on New Year's Eve, our first daughter, Chloe, was born. In late 2007, we found out Carol was pregnant with our second child, Safiya.

This book is about Safiya's birth, how it changed our family forever, and how the strongest woman you could ever know fought to be part of our lives.

In June 2008, Carol was put into early labor with an infection that developed into sepsis. It almost killed her. That infection led to some physical disabilities that she—that *we*—have had to learn to live with and eventually try to thrive with.

Early in Carol's illness, I was at the hospital all the time

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and balancing a new dental practice and two kids. We had an amazing support system from both of our families. We could not have gotten to this point without them. During the second hospitalization, I found it much harder to be with Carol during all of the plastic surgeries due to my work and family obligations. I am forever grateful to my brother-in-law, Heath, who has given our family more service and care than anyone. I might not have gotten through those months if he hadn't been at Carol's bedside when I couldn't be.

Throughout the hospitalizations, Carol's return home, and even now, to a lesser degree, I have tried to search for what would make her life easier. I have constantly worked to make sure we have the proper insurance coverage to afford the technology she needs to thrive.

When Carol got home from the hospital, I thought there had to be a book out there that explained how to deal with everything before us. I soon had to learn that every step Carol took would be at her pace and would require tools specific to her. At first, we relied on what was easiest. Sometimes we tried things that didn't work. When she first came home, I would carry her around a lot. I did that off and on for the first couple of years as she went through additional surgeries. But over time that wasn't necessary. For a few years, she could only wear her prosthetic legs so long before she got exhausted and had to take them off. Slowly, that went away, and she could wear them all day. We used to take her wheelchair along if we went somewhere so she could get off of her legs, but that need has gone away as well.

Slowly, Carol began to pick a goal and master it if she could (a habit she's continued to this day). In that sense, she

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was no different than she was before sepsis. For a couple of years I did her makeup for her, but eventually she made a goal to do it herself. Before long, I didn't need to do that anymore. I used to email and text for her, but she can do that for herself now. We grocery shop in a way that allows Carol to eat at the house by herself. I guess the moral is that she, and we, her family, have tried to work hard and have had to learn that even though there isn't a book on how we should do this, we can slowly figure it out simply by living.

Our daughters and I have to do a bit more than the average family. I am the cook now, something I never was before Carol's infection. Our daughters are very responsible and help out in every way they can. We used to all go into public bathrooms together, but now the girls help their mother if needed. Carol can do it herself, but it is easier if someone can direct her. We used to help Carol pick out clothes, but she does that herself now, too. We just give her the yea or nay on some outfits, usually when she has to dress up. We still haven't mastered how she can safely use the oven and stove by herself. We have tried, with some small success, but there's still a long way to go.

As I've gone to some of Carol's speaking engagements, more and more people have asked how we have done this for the last decade. The first thing that always comes to mind is our extended family and a strong support system. Everyone in our town knows and accepts us.

I struggled a lot on a personal level with what happened to us, especially in the first couple years. It was like being married to a totally new person, and it was hard. During the early years, I went through the day-to-day motions. There wasn't a lot of time to think about much else besides working and taking

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care of Carol and the girls. I eventually got to a point where I didn't want as much outside help to make our family run. I had to decide to make some positive changes in my own life so I could do what it took to make my family run smoothly with just Carol and me.

Around that time, I remember someone asking me why I stayed with Carol. My immediate thought was because it was the right thing to do. But then I realized, I hadn't thought and couldn't think of living my life with anyone else. When you find your soul mate, you find your soul mate. Carol and I have had many ups and downs over these last nine years, but our marriage is in a great place. Like the rest of our goals, it has taken love, hard work, and help as it continues to evolve.

I am so proud of Carol and all that she accomplishes. I'm proud to be part of her successes, but even prouder of the success she has found that has had nothing to do with me.

CHAPTER 1



Resilient

“There will be key moments for you that may change the course of your life in an instant.”

—Gérald Caussé

Chalk dust floated through the air as the smell of plastic mats and sweat filled the gymnasium. I tightened every muscle in my eleven-year-old body, fixing my eyes on the gritty beam beneath my feet.

Balance.

Confidence.

Courage.

The beat of my heart pounded the words into my head like an echoing drum.

I heard my dad’s voice in the crowd. Concentration kept his cheers from sinking in, but my heart grew stronger knowing he was there.

Eyes fixed on the beam, solid and steady, I jumped, tucking legs to chest. I landed without a sound, the beam still

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Me (center) in seventh grade with two friends, Amy (left) and Lisa (right), from my gymnastics team.

firmly beneath me. With feet perfectly placed and my core pulled taut, a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. Had I been on the playground with friends, I would have burst into laughter that would have drawn everyone near me into fits of uncontrollable giggles. I resisted the urge. This wasn't the time for a lapse in focus—not in the midst of a competition. My love of the challenge was too great.

All that mattered in that moment was my next move, a complex series of turns. I'd spent weeks perfecting it and knew I was nailing the routine. With my arms overhead, I took a steadying breath before I hardened my core muscles, brought my arms around, and started the turn that would take me through to my dismount. I hadn't gotten to the tuck before I knew something was wrong.

Somewhere between the beam and the mat, the gym churned through my vision as I felt the rough, sandpaper-like surface of the beam tear down the inside of my knee and thigh.

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I didn't have time to consider that up was down before my foot hit the mat, quickly followed by the rest of me.

Stunned by the fall and confused by the burning in my leg, I stared at my feet. How could this have happened? It wasn't as though I had never fallen in competition before, but not at this point in my beam routine. I knew it too well, had practiced too hard.

I could have stood up, put my arms over my head, and signaled to the judges that I was done, losing a significant portion of my points. I could have walked away, forfeiting all of my points and letting down my team. I could have quit gymnastics altogether, tired of scraping my legs, landing on my neck, and trying to push through the fear of trying a new element. Essentially, I had to give up or pick up.

Though a small part of me wanted to quit, the better, stronger part refused to stay sitting on the mat. I don't remember standing up, but suddenly I was back on two feet with my hands on the beam, taking a deep breath.

Fear coiled itself around my fluttering stomach. What if I fell again?

This time my dad's "You can do it!" came through loud and clear. My sidelong glance revealed my parents' faces, concerned and encouraging. My two brothers sat silently next to them, their bodies leaning forward as though they were trying to will me back onto the beam.

I couldn't let them down—they or my coach or my teammates. And last of all, I couldn't disappoint myself.

With hands firmly set, I hoisted myself back on the beam, ignoring the pricks of pain as I slid past the burning scrapes on my leg. Hesitation marked the first bend of my knee to hit

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the pose that should have followed the tuck. The slight shake of my leg enlarged the bubble of fear that was trying to swell its way into life. I quickly popped it by focusing on moving my body with the precision my coach expected every time I entered the gym.

Each step, bend, leap, and turn brought more confidence until I was ready for the dismount. I took a brief check of my body position.

With as much power and force as my small body could create, I jumped and twisted in a blur until my feet hit the mat—knees bent, muscles stretched, leg burning. I refused to take a step to check my balance. After my fall, I wouldn't let the landing get away from me. When I was sure I had it, I raised my arms overhead with a forced grin covering my face.

My parents' whistles and claps somehow reached my ears over the shouts of my teammates and coach.

There was no excited bouncing off the mat into the open arms of my coach like usual. But there wasn't a lecture, either. I didn't need it. I was harder on myself than my coach could ever be, and he knew it. My confidence and young pride had taken a hit. We'd be lucky to finish in the top three with that performance.

I couldn't look my teammates in the eyes, but I felt one sit next to me as I got ready to move to the next event. Her name escapes me now. I remember not wanting to see the disappointment or pity on her face. Without a word and with nothing more than a light touch on my arm, she expressed her sympathy before moving on. I appreciated her quiet support.

Then it hit me—vault was next!

It wasn't my favorite, but I'd learned to take the good (floor

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routine) with the bad (vault). Laying my bag under the bench, I looked back at the beam. A girl even smaller than I was moved quickly through her routine. She was solid until a slight balance check revealed a problem. Just like me, she was on the beam one second and picking herself up off the mat the next.

I found my mom on the bleachers and waved. She sat tall, beautiful, and full of confidence. Her smile told me she already knew what I would do next. I waited until the girl sat down before I made my move.

Glancing around to see if anyone was watching, I walked to where the girl who'd fallen now sat in a chair staring straight ahead. She tried, like I had, to hold in her disappointment so no one could see. I didn't recognize her from any other competitions, but that didn't stop me.

"Hi," I said, a small grin on my face. "I'm Carol."

Looking up at me, her eyes were glassy with unfallen tears.

I sat down next to her. "I saw you on beam."

She ducked her head.

"Don't worry about it."

She looked away.

"I fell too." My hands fidgeted on my knees. That got her attention. Her big, round eyes were glued to mine.

"But you got back on and finished," I continued. "Good job." I gave her a smile. "Just . . . show 'em what you've got on the next one. It's vault, right? That's what I'm doing right now." I stood up, brushing my hands on my legs, and smiled, "Good luck."

I heard her quiet "thanks" as I walked back to the vault. I glanced at my family on the bleachers. My mom gave me an approving nod. My dad was already cheering for me, even

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though I wasn't up yet. My brothers pretended to be indifferent, but I knew they were proud of me.

I don't remember anything else about that meet. I don't know how I did on the vault or what silly jokes my brothers told on the way home. That day, my weakness became my strength. I changed, grew, and learned to get up after a fall. That moment became part of who I was—who I would always be. Moments like that are pit stops, towns, and cities dotting the map of a life's journey that connect long stretches of barren highway. I didn't realize that the events that dotted my map would prepare me for what lay ahead. This one moment of choice—to stand up after a fall—would become a defining characteristic of who I am.

That meet was more than thirty years ago. Since then, my personal journey has taken unexpected turns and tumbles that have brought me to destinations I had never imagined possible. Some moments of impact stand out like beacons of light, while others left me unsure of my ability to keep moving forward. My travels would take me to unbelievable depths of darkness. The journey—my life—has not been defined by the tragedy that struck me and my family but by the joy and beauty we've found in unexpected places. Despite all that has happened, I choose to stand. I choose to be whole—for mine is a life unshattered.