



Courage is a Decision

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Marion Luna Brem was 30 when she was told she was dying. Within a space of three months she had been diagnosed with cervical and breast cancer and doctors told her she had two to five years to live. That was more than 20 years ago. A stay-at-home mom, Brem underwent surgery and started chemotherapy. Then, her husband lost his medical insurance. The stress proved too much for the marriage and the couple divorced.

Left with two small boys and no means to support them, Brem looked within. "My courage to go on came from a decision. My mantra has always been that anyone can be courageous who decides to be. Courage is not a gift. It cannot be inherited. It comes from looking in the mirror and saying, 'Today I am going to be courageous,'" she says.

One day her sons, then 7 and 12, were cooking their own lunch, while Brem lay on the bathroom floor, sick and weak from the effects of the chemotherapy. At one point, she smelled something burning but did not have the energy to get up and check. Her elder son then came in, holding a smoking pan of macaroni and cheese. He said, "Don't worry mom. Only the bottom is burned. The top part is still good."

"I got up from the floor and knew that dying was not an option," she says. "In fact, that macaroni and cheese became a metaphor for my life. When something in your life gets destroyed, there is still a top part that is still good. I try to always focus on that part."

Though Brem was pursuing an engineering degree at the time, she had to drop out of college and look for a job. She later graduated from the Executive Education program at the Harvard Business School in Boston, Massachusetts.

At that time, she had little in the way of hard skills and at the urging of a friend, decided to try sales. She had lost her hair during chemotherapy, so Brem threw on a wig and set out to find a job. She had once worked as a part-time telephone switchboard operator at an auto dealership and that seemed like a good place to start. After a chain of rejections, the 17th dealer she visited agreed to give her a chance. In October 1984, she sold her first car at age 32 and two months later was "salesman of the month." Twelve months later she was "salesman of the year."

The cancer returned in 1985 and Brem had to undergo another mastectomy. Her cancer was eventually declared in remission in 1995.

While fighting the disease, she took the help of a silent investor and in 1989

opened her own car dealership, Love Chrysler, in Corpus Christi, Texas.

"I would lay awake at night thinking up names for my dealership-to-be, much like a pregnant woman dreams up names for her expected child," she says. "I knew I didn't care to have my name on a sign so I began to think of nouns that promoted positive images. Heritage, integrity, etc. Then it hit me! What more positive word is there than love? It's a noun and a verb. I knew that's the way I would feel for my customers and my employees. It projected my passion for my work." She bought out her partner within two years and became CEO of her own company.

Now in her 50s, Brem is the owner of two auto dealerships in Texas, an ad agency, and a real estate holding company. She is also the author of two books, *Women Make the Best Salesmen* and *The 7 Greatest Truths About Successful Women*. "I suppose having been told I had two to five years to live, accelerated my journey toward success. I never apologized for my ambitions. The peek I had at my own mortality taught me that my someday was NOW."

"I started out with seven employees, including my oldest son (then 19). I quickly grew to 50 employees before I learned that many businesses go broke but more *grow* broke. In any event, I purchased a second dealership on the fifth anniversary of my first. I now have 65 employees and have navigated my way through a number of challenges..." she says.

Brem's parents had divorced when she was 5. She, her three brothers and her

mother were taken in by her grandparents. She recalls how her grandfather, a retired school teacher, taught her a couple of stratagems that stuck with her. "Number 1, always do more than what is expected. (When asked by my first grade teacher to come up with 10 synonyms, my grandfather had me turn in 100.) And number 2, he emphasized the importance of language. 'A person who can speak more than one language is at least as important as two people,' he would say."

Her mother remarried when Brem was 8 and they moved to Arizona and many places after that. She attended numerous schools in four different states before graduating from high school. "It was difficult always being the 'new girl.' But, it taught me to embrace change and convert obstacles into opportunities."

She acknowledges that many people have contributed to her success, including loyal employees who have been with her for most of her corporate journey. But she keeps going back to her grandfather's teaching: Always do more than what is expected. "That advice is timeless."

Marion Luna Brem

CEO, Love Chrysler, Texas

FAVORITE HOBBY: Reading histories of U.S. presidents.

LOVES TO: Travel and watch classic movies.

FAVORITE INDULGENCE: Spas, five-star hotels, fine dining.



Courtesy: Marion Luna Brem

