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# Winter 2012



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JUNIOR LEAGUE OF THE PALM BEACHES



# UNDERCURRENTS

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## Junior Legacy

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# Lessons Learned

By Emily Sawyer

The oak trees lining Robbyn Ackner's winding driveway are decorated with a multitude of blooming orchids, marking the entrance into the Florida paradise she shares with her husband, Richard. Miles away from the hustle of downtown West Palm Beach, their nearly three acre property is an oasis for plants, animals, and humans alike. Enter the Ackner's quiet home and be greeted by the collection of antique finds displayed on walls, shelves and tables. The house's spacious patio is the venue for many parties and events, including the Arthur R. Marshall Foundation's January 2012 Thank You Reception, with over 100 guests celebrating in the backyard. Yet, Robbyn's life was not always lived in such beautiful surroundings, encircled by the love of family and friends. In fact, the Active Member of the Junior League of the Palm Beaches and Data Administrator / Web Chair describes most of her previous life as "living in a dark tunnel."

Robbyn was born in Staten Island, New York and grew up an obese child. Unlike today, when 17% of children between the ages of 2 and 19 are obese, Robbyn was one of only a few heavy children in her school. Bullied, teased, and tormented, she was an outcast because of her weight. Her parents divorced when she was 16 and her mother remarried. The man who became Robbyn's step-father was verbally and emotionally abusive, not

only to his new family but to everyone around him. He tried to molest Robbyn, and when she worked up the courage to tell her family, no one believed her.

At only 17 years of age and full of despair, Robbyn tried to take her own life. Robbyn's mother chose her relationship with her new husband over Robbyn, her mother and step-father gave her up to the state of New Jersey for custody. She spent the rest of her childhood in the foster care system living at a group home in East Orange, New Jersey. Despite Robbyn's lack of self-esteem and faith in her abilities, those around her saw potential. Her supervisors at the group home encouraged her to take the General Educational Development (G.E.D.) Test and Robbyn earned such a high score that it qualified her to attend Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio; a school that Robbyn knew absolutely nothing about.

At 18, having aged out of foster care and with little guidance, she blindly enrolled at the oldest private African-American university in the United States. "When I arrived, I was the only white girl on an all African-American campus," said Robbyn. "This presented me with another set of challenges."

While at school, Robbyn was raped by a handyman who

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worked on campus. She became pregnant. Deciding against abortion and having nowhere else to turn, Robbyn moved to a home for unwed mothers. After a hard pregnancy, she gave the baby up for adoption through Catholic Social Services and returned to New Jersey

Trapped once again in an unstable situation, she would work at the family limousine business with her step-father for the next 18 years.

Unfortunately, Robbyn's step-father would not be the only abusive man in her life. Since she was a teenager, Robbyn bounced from one damaging relationship to another. At 16, she lived with a physically abusive man twice her age who made himself out to be Robbyn's hero, saving her from living at home.

At 25, she married a man she later realized she didn't love – "Because I didn't think anyone else would want me," said Robbyn. Her last abusive relationship was with a man she was convinced would kill her if she did not escape. After

choices. She began intense workouts at her local gym. She made herself a priority instead of focusing on the parts of her life that she didn't have the power to change – her family, her past, her abusers.

"I changed the way I thought about myself and those negative, self-defeating words rolling around in my head," writes Robbyn on her website, [www.RobbynAckner.com](http://www.RobbynAckner.com). "I changed the way that I thought about the food that I put in my body. I changed the way that I thought about physical activity and exercise. I changed the way that I thought about the other people in my life. I realized that all of those negative thoughts and negative people had to go. So, I cleaned house. And I replaced it all with positive thoughts and positive people and it resulted in positive actions."

Today, Robbyn has lost over 250 lbs. from her all time high of 389 lbs. and has managed to keep her weight down without the assistance of gastric bypass surgery and other new-fangled weight-loss methods. She designed her own



returning from a business trip to Florida, Robbyn decided she'd had enough. With the help of a friend, she made a plan to leave her abuser and within a month had packed up her belongings and her cats and moved to central Florida, determined to change her life.

"When I left my first husband, I met a therapist who helped me figure out why I made the choices that I did in my past," said Robbyn. "I learned a lot about myself."

Little did she know, years later, the words of that therapist would help her escape the abusive relationship. "There are two ways you can look at life," Robbyn said. "You can be bitter about the past or you can take the lessons that you learned to help other people."

First, Robbyn had to help herself. Always a lifetime dieter, she resolved to get healthy. She signed up for a weight-loss program – the last such program of her life – and began to whittle away the pounds. Starting with a hefty load of 354 lbs., Robbyn harnessed the power of positive energy and found strength inside her to drop the weight. She scrutinized the food she put into her body, making healthful

intense workout for the gym, a routine that has garnered a group of women admirers who Robbyn calls her "fans."

Robbyn has a T-shirt she wears to the gym and her speaking engagements at a nearby weight-loss clinic. The front of the shirt says "AFTER." On the back, is the word "BEFORE," with a picture of Robbyn sitting on her mom's porch when she was at her heaviest.

"I can tell people until I'm blue in the face how much weight I've lost and how far I've come, but until they actually see it, until they see the pictures, it's hard to believe. I want my life to inspire others," states Robbyn.

Robbyn has been inspiring the children and young adults served by the Junior League of the Palm Beaches since she joined in 2010. She was encouraged to become a member by current Fundraising Vice President, Laura Wissa, whom Robbyn met at the Palm Beach County Historical Society's Evening on Antique Row. Laura felt that Robbyn's account of navigating the foster care system would be perfect for the residents of Vita Nova, a transitional living facility and program for homeless youth or those who have aged-out

of foster care. Robbyn spoke to a group of the residents last year and the feedback she received from the Vita Nova staff was overwhelming.

"I especially wanted to show the Vita Nova kids that being in foster care doesn't have to define the rest of their lives. I shared my story and the young adults really connected to me," said Robbyn. "One young man asked me how I get rid of the anger. He explained that he would lie in bed at night, thinking of the people who hurt him and he was so angry. I responded 'Where does it get you to be angry? Do you think the person you are angry at stays up at night worrying about you?' His answer was no. So, I asked him 'Why give them power over you?' After my session at Vita Nova, the director contacted me a few days later and said that the kids had not stopped talking about me."

Robbyn enjoys reaching out to young people, because if she had someone like herself growing up, maybe she would have changed sooner or spoke up more. Robbyn also volunteers at GEMS (Girls Empowerment Mentor Sessions), a Junior League program that provides positive adult interaction with girls, ages 9 – 17, who have been placed in the juvenile detention system.

"I want to make people realize that they don't have to be a victim," said Robbyn. "I tell the girls at GEMS that where you are today does not define who you are going to be. You can make your own life. There are two ways to look at every day: positively or negatively. It's a conscious choice. You must find something positive every day."

In addition to the Junior League, Robbyn has been involved with other non-profit organizations in Palm Beach County that improve the lives of women and children. She is currently on the Board of the Executive Women of the Palm Beaches. She served on the inaugural board of the local Dress for Success and still receives calls from friends who are interested in donating women's business attire to the program's headquarters in Lake Worth.

"It was a very much needed organization," said Robbyn. Women are referred to Dress for Success by outside agencies, such as homeless shelters, immigration services, job training programs, educational institutions, or domestic violence shelters. Dress for Success schedules individual appointments for these disadvantaged women to be fitted and provided a suit for an upcoming interview.

"It's a very personal experience," said Robbyn. "Dress for Success teaches women how to properly dress themselves in the business world, a skill a lot of these women have not had the opportunity to learn."

If the woman lands the job, she receives a week's worth of business clothing. Robbyn also served on the Board of the Domestic Violence Advisory Council of Palm Beach County, giving other board members a perspective that they don't usually have – the point of view of the victim.

"Lawyers and social workers have read the books but they don't have my experience," said Robbyn. "I would love to serve on the Board again. These battered women and their abused children need to know that there is something else out there, that you don't need to stay with your abuser. My passion is empowering women and children who need someone to be a positive example for them."

For Robbyn, there was indeed something else out there. One day, after moving to Palm Beach County, she was standing at her mailbox when she met Richard Ackner, the man who would become her husband.

"He said that he had seen me at the gym and asked if I would like to go out some time," said Robbyn. She turned Richard down, telling him that she wasn't looking to date. "But the next afternoon, there he was again... and again the following day."

Robbyn finally gave in, thinking that the encounter would go the way of every other relationship in her life. This man would not like her, and he would eventually go away.

"Richard wouldn't go away," laughs Robbyn. "And, I suppose it was meant to be."

The couple married on the beach in Nassau, Bahamas on December 5, 2008. Today, they live out their storybook romance antiquing together, volunteering with the Arthur R. Marshall Foundation, and exploring the flora and fauna in their backyard.

Robbyn feels the most important piece of advice that women can take away from her story is that each and every one of us has an infinite amount of strength.

"We all have it," said Robbyn. "You have to find your own strength for yourself. Find and believe in your strength. Make yourself a priority. It's like magic."

When sharing her experiences with an audience, Robbyn always imparts the power of positive thinking.

"I tell my audiences, when people ask how you are, say 'I'm fabulous' and mean it. You become it." For Robbyn, that mantra is true – by changing her thoughts, she changed her life. "I got my fairy tale," chimes Robbyn. "I got my wish and then some."