



Dr. David Hanscom

A Healing Journey from Darkness to the Impossible Dream

An interview with Deborah Mellen
on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

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Deborah Mellen – A Healing Journey From Darkness to the Impossible Dream

- Tom Masters: Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of **Back in Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. I'm your host, Tom Masters. And today we have with us a very special guest, Deborah Mellen, with an incredibly inspiring story.
- David Hanscom: Thank you, Tom. I'd like to welcome Deborah to the show. She's become a good friend of mine. She's been a very good friend of my wife's for probably over 30 years. They met in Italy many years ago. We just saw Deborah last week, and she reminded me of a story that I had forgotten about. She is doing some work, which is remarkable, where she's paraplegic. We're going to go into that story in a second. That happened in Italy many years ago. But she currently is working on a project that I'm going to let her tell you about called the Impossible Dream. And Deborah, welcome to the show.
- Deborah Mellen: Thank you. Glad to be here.
- David Hanscom: Could you tell us a bit about your current project and we'll work back to it towards the end of the show?
- Deborah Mellen: Sure. Impossible Dream is based on a sailboat. She's a 60-foot catamaran that was built from the ground up to be wheelchair accessible. She was built by a Paralympic sailor named Mike Browne who had a skiing accident and then decided to start sailing. He was a Paralympic sailor in 2.4s, and then he commissioned the architect, Nick Baily, to build the Impossible Dream. The premise was it should be a boat that a person in a wheelchair could sail across the ocean single-handedly. Mike had the boat for 10 years in England, and about five, six years ago, I found out it was for sale.
- I went across to England, saw the boat, purchased her, brought her back to the United States, and I formed a nonprofit called the Impossible Dream. And what the Impossible Dream does, the main part of our program is we go five months every year, and we just completed our fifth summer tour. Our summer tour goes from Miami to the north of Maine. One year we went to Quebec and Nova Scotia with the tall ships. On that trip, we stopped in approximately 15 ports of call, and we take people with disabilities sailing.
- David Hanscom: Fantastic.
- Deborah Mellen: The other facet of what we do is on those trips and bringing the boat from port to port, we invite sailors with disabilities like myself as crew. So when we get to each port, we have crew with disabilities and then many times we can work with rehab hospitals, and many times we take out newly injured patients. We take those patients out and they meet our seasoned crew people with disabilities. It gives them a little bit of light and hope. I don't want to say inspiration because we're not there to inspire. We think it's our right to be able to be on a boat and go sailing. And that ties us into universal design, right? The Impossible Dream is the only boat of its kind built with that idea. It's not an afterthought. We didn't add ramps on. We didn't add anything on. She was built

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from the ground up to be wheelchair accessible, and she's the most beautiful catamaran on the water. It made her better to be accessible, like universal design can do everywhere.

David Hanscom: If you look on the podcast announcement, you'll see the link to her boat. You also see the picture of the boat, which is fantastic. Then you also see a picture of Deborah. She looks great. And the boat's actually been a major part of your own personal healing process, right?

Deborah Mellen: Yes.

David Hanscom: Okay. So the first part of this podcast, I'd like to talk about your accident, what that was like. Then when you return for the second podcast, we'll go into your story of healing and how this boat has helped you so much. I'd like to make one comment. I've never asked you this question, but I do know that people who are disabled actually really don't, most of them if not all of them, actually don't consider themselves disabled. They don't like being considered disabled. Correct?

Deborah Mellen: Right. Well, you know, it's about the word. So there's a movement out there to change the language about disability. Sometimes we say other abled. Because as in with design, it can make us better, not worse. It can add to our abilities, not take away. I feel like my paraplegia and the struggle that I went through has added to me. It hasn't taken away. There's a lot of politics around the language of disability, such as wheelchair bound. We're not wheelchair bound. We're not bound to anything. So that's a whole "nother" subject.

David Hanscom: Well, I think artists will quickly realize why I have Deborah on the show. So I know you don't want to be inspiring, but you are like it or not. But anyway, she's great. So if you don't mind going back to the original part of the story. Babs is my wife, knew you before you had the accident. Could you tell us briefly what happened?

Deborah Mellen: Well, yes. I met Babs in Italy. I was living in Italy. I was married. My husband was from Italy and one in the afternoon we were on the Autostrada and a truck driver fell asleep on the road and careened into us. At that time I had a lap seatbelt on and I went through the windshield. The seatbelt kept me from flying out of the car, but it also broke my back, and I had many other injuries. So my husband saved my life, gave me mouth to mouth. He didn't have his seatbelt on. Italians are like that. They don't like those constraints. He was able to jump over to a place that was where he could survive, which was close to me because I did survive. If he had stayed in his spot, he would not have survived. And from there, I was in a coma for a few weeks. I woke up, I was on a respirator, and I was told that I would never walk again.

David Hanscom: Now this is in Genoa, Italy?

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- Deborah Mellen: In Italy, yeah. We were living outside of Florence. We had actually been with his mother. We had dropped her off home, and we were going... At that time I was, well I still am, a jewelry designer. I was going to a jewelry show, and my husband wanted to drive me because at that time in Italy a lot of funny things were going on the train. People were getting robbed and they were, whatever. And so he drove. He was driving me and we had our accident.
- David Hanscom: What was that like when you were first told that you are going to be paraplegic and this was permanent?
- Deborah Mellen: You know, that's a very interesting question. I think I knew before anybody told me anything. Somehow I don't have a memory of waking up and having a shock. Somehow, whether when I was in my coma, I absorbed everything that was going around, I'm not sure. At the time they didn't know if I had any serious brain injuries because my head hit so hard, and most of my face was broken. So the first thing when I woke up, my father was there and I couldn't talk cause I was on a respirator. And he asked me my Social Security number, I know it sounds crazy. I could write and I wrote it down. That was the first thing that happened. From everybody that was waiting for me to wake up, there was happiness on that part. So I had my head.
- David Hanscom: Then you were flown back to the states for rehab, is that correct?
- Deborah Mellen: Yes. I was probably in the hospital in Genoa for six weeks. I was never moved out of reanimation. I was always in reanimation. When they could move me, they flew me to New York, and I went at the time to the Rusk Institute. I was there for six to seven months. I had surgery at that time in Italy, and then when I was in the Rusk Institute, I also had surgery on my face, reconstructing my face. Then later on, that's further in the story, I made it to Miami and I had a few surgeries there on my back.
- David Hanscom: Okay. So you went through a lot. Babs is always really clear about this story. But just before the accident, life was looking pretty good, right? Had you just bought a piece of property.
- Deborah Mellen: We had just bought a piece of property that we had been looking for for years. My husband was a photographer, and we were looking for an old farmhouse with a barn that we could make into a studio. We had already been living in Italy for quite a few years in rental properties. We were able to sell our loft in New York, and we finally were able to purchase our own house. That day was about three days after we had shook hands and made a deal to buy a house.
- David Hanscom: Wow. In orthopedics, it's a little disconcerting in medicine in general, but particular orthopedics because accidents are never planned. Otherwise they wouldn't be accidents. I always was impressed many, many decades ago that life changes in a second. One day, you're healthy, the next day you have cancer. One day you're healthy, the next day you have a car accident. In your situation

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to go from that much excitement and promise and hope, the future looked fantastic, to all of a sudden becoming paraplegic a few days later. It's a big deal anyway, but it seems like that would make it even a bigger deal?

Deborah Mellen: It was tough. The person that we purchased the house from, my husband got in touch with him and obviously told him what happened and said, "I don't know what we're going to do." Money has not changed hands yet. And he actually held the house for us for nine months until we were able to see a little bit what we're going to do. We decided to come back to Italy, and we decided to go forward with the house, and make it accessible. You know, we were dreaming a little bit, but that's what we did. We came back to Italy, and a year later we purchased the house. Then we started working on it a bit piece by piece. Then unfortunately my husband had a heart attack and passed away.

David Hanscom: How long after that?

Deborah Mellen: That was less than two years after the accident. Then I was left in a position. The antiquity of Italy, you know, it's the edge. It's the good and the bad. There was no way that I could live alone in Italy and live in with any kind of independence whatsoever. So that's when I made the decision to come back to New York City.

David Hanscom: So, just to back track, you're back in Italy getting the house ready to go. So again, hopes were increasing.

Deborah Mellen: Yeah, trying to push it forward.

David Hanscom: At that point before your husband passed away, how were you adapting to the paralysis? How were things going at that point?

Deborah Mellen: I was hopeful I think. I was happy to be back in Italy. It was difficult. You know, I had always been a very independent person. And even with my husband in Italy, there wasn't much independence to have. But I was hopeful. I had him. We were both alive, and we made it through. So it was the very beginning, because after being in the hospital for so many months, it was the very beginning of a new life and things hadn't gotten all that complicated yet. So I was hopeful.

David Hanscom: When I heard that story about your husband passing away a couple of years later, I just was blown away. I mean, obviously life is tough, but that seems to be well up there as far as the range of tough situations occurring. What was it like the next few years after your husband passed away? What was that part of your life like?

Deborah Mellen: I had no idea where I belonged. I came back to New York City after living in Italy on and off for about 10 years, and I never expected to come back to New York. And what I went away from was what saved me. It was my family. It was working. It was a very tough time. It was a very difficult time. And I didn't really know where I belonged. That's basically it.

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- David Hanscom: One of the biggest factors in the chronic pain project is being in the victim role. And of course you obviously were very clearly in a legitimate victim role and obviously pretty frustrated. How did you deal with the frustration factor around all these losses that you had?
- Deborah Mellen: I kept busy. I kept busy, really.
- David Hanscom: Did you get depressed or were you able to sort of stay past that?
- Deborah Mellen: No, it was dark. I mean, it was dark. I was taking a lot of medication for pain. It was very difficult.
- David Hanscom: So as far as pain, I do want to point that out. I'm a spinal cord surgeon. So a lot of people with spinal cord injuries do have a lot of muscle spasms afterwards. As far as the pain, was it related to the spinal cord injury or was there some other type of chronic pain?
- Deborah Mellen: No. So I had no spasms because I'm a lower motor neuron injury. But the pain, it's a neurogenic pain, which is basically from what I understand, it's your cord. Everything is all mixed up and it's getting signals of pain. At a certain time when I was first injured, they believed like 20 to 30% of the population had it. Now they believe it's more, and it's really a pain that can't be treated. You can numb yourself with drugs and pass out, but it doesn't really numb that pain. You know, now I'm going back to it, pain ruled my life at that time. Everything was about the pain. Everything was about the pain.
- David Hanscom: And what were some of your efforts to try to stop it besides the medications?
- Deborah Mellen: Well, I realized that if I was busy and distracted. What I really found was distractions. To be distracted from it. It took a while. And I just want to say one thing. You know, I am a child of Holocaust survivors and in my whole life, I could never understand how my parents were able to go on in life after everything they went through. And that's something that really pushed me on also.
- David Hanscom: In what way?
- Deborah Mellen: You know, I always had this question of how it's possible to push on after tragedy. Then I looked at them and I understood how. My father told me, you just need to go forward. And that was it. So that's part of it, just moving forward. Just keep moving. That was the way to survive and to distract myself from pain. Keep going forward.
- David Hanscom: That a major aspect of the whole healing process with chronic pain and to the dark project. I call it moving forward with your pain. The problem is if you're focused on fixing your pain, your attention's on the pain, and from a neuroplasticity standpoint, you actually reinforce those pain circuits. It makes it worse.

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- Deborah Mellen: There was no one like you to explain that to me.
- David Hanscom: Right, but you instinctively did keep moving forward. What were some of the things-
- Deborah Mellen: Because I had my family history. I finally found the answers to the puzzle of how they did it, and it was very simple. They just moved forward.
- David Hanscom: You just kept moving forward. That's actually one of the basic concepts of healing chronic pain, is actually moving forward. And so you move away from the pain instead of trying to fix it moving toward it. You're actually moving away from it. So how many years did you sort of stay in this dark place?
- Deborah Mellen: It was a good like five or six years I would think, maybe a little more. Then I started going to Miami. I started going to Miami and that's when I first was introduced to Shake a Leg. It's a water sports center for people of all abilities in Coconut Grove, Miami. My surgeon actually took me there, and that's where I learned how to sail.
- David Hanscom: What's it called again?
- Deborah Mellen: Shake a Leg.
- David Hanscom: Shake a Leg.
- Deborah Mellen: Miami.
- David Hanscom: Miami. Okay. Was it focused on sailing, or just on activities in general?
- Deborah Mellen: It was very much focused on sailing. It has grown during the years and there much more, but it's really a sailing center. They also work with the city of Miami and inner city school children taking them out and introducing them to the environment of the water. So I learned how to sail there, and then I started volunteering there and working with Miami city, young students. It gave me a purpose.
- David Hanscom: And what did that do to your pain and mood at the time?
- Deborah Mellen: *When I was on a boat I didn't feel my pain. You know, I was just completely distracted from it.*
- David Hanscom: Right. *That's also a really critical concept, because the bottom line is the brain really focuses on one thing at a time. When you're truly involved with your passion, or giving back, or interacting with other people, it makes a huge difference in your perception of pain. And that is because, again, your brain can take in so many impulses at once. When you're really moving forward, staying out there, it makes a huge difference.*

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One thing that happens to patients in pain is that they become labeled by their doctors. There's nothing wrong. Their family doesn't believe them, and they're suffering from the pain. They become very anxious, very frustrated, very trapped, and they go into a *legitimate* victim role. *I mean, the one difference that you have, which I'm not going to call it an advantage, because it's not, is that obviously you could see what was wrong.*

The one step that my pain patients have the hardest time with is that nobody believes them. They get extremely frustrated with that. I wish I had something that was believable. So they have, it's a different type of suffering. And I guess my question is, I'm sure you went through a phase of feeling sorry for yourself to some degree, but I do know moving forward, it's a huge issue, moving forward.

The other factor that is a major factor in healing chronic pain is social connections. And there's a book out of Chicago called **Loneliness**. The neuroscience of social isolation shows that emotional pain and physical pain are processed in a similar part of the brain. When people are socially isolated, they develop the exact same symptoms as chronic pain. It hurts.

Deborah Mellen: Incredible.

David Hanscom: Because you did have tremendous family support, correct?

Deborah Mellen: I did. Yes.

David Hanscom: And that's a big deal. Deborah, thank you for your story. It's a tough story. To go through it and emerge incredibly optimistic—having an active healthy life to becoming paralyzed and having your husband die. ***What's impressive to me is that you somehow instinctively figured out that moving forward is very critical.*** I knew your parents were Holocaust survivors, but I hadn't heard that part of the story of trying to figure out what kept *them* moving. ***But I think your father's advice to just keep moving forward is remarkable, because that is one of the basic parts of the solution.***

Deborah Mellen: **One thing that he also had said, "Don't ask why."**

David Hanscom: Okay. That's interesting! I do want to talk about... I think we'll start the next podcast with that question. I do remember that conversation we had because that's a huge factor in people not being able to escape their pain. But, Deborah, thank you very much. Just remind the audience one more time about your boat and your project.

Deborah Mellen: Yes. So the boat is **Impossible Dream**. If you want to look us up we're at www.theimpossibledream.org. Get in touch with us if you want to go sailing.

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David Hanscom: It's an exciting project. We're talking about that in some detail in the next podcast. Anyway, Deborah, thank you very much.

Deborah Mellen: You're very welcome. It was a pleasure.

Tom Masters: Thank you, David and Deborah. And Deborah, a very special thanks for sharing your story of how you've made it through this very dark period and came to achieve your "impossible dream." I want to remind our listeners to return next week for another episode of **Back in Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. Be sure to visit the website at www.backincontrol.com.

Note: The original transcript of this episode of Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom has been edited for readability.