



## **Deborah Mellen - Finding the Path Forward to Healing**

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

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## Deborah Mellen - Finding the Path Forward to Healing

- Tom Masters: Hello everybody and welcome back to another episode of **Back In Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom. I'm your host, Tom Masters, and we have our special guest Deborah Mellen from *The Impossible Dream Project* returning to share her story of recovery after a really tragic accident.
- David Hanscom: Thank you, Tom. And Deborah, thank you again for coming back on our show. Deborah Mellen is a good friend of ours. She's known my wife for over 30 years. They met in Italy. And just to review our last podcast, she was involved in a tragic car accident and she was paralyzed. Her husband resuscitated her. She went through rehab. Then about two or three years later, her husband passed away from a heart attack. She ended up back in the States by herself without a husband, but she did have her family support. And what she shared in the last podcast, which I encourage you to listen to, is her story of coming out of what we call the abyss, a really dark hole. The essence of her recovery was being distracted, staying busy, and actually *moving forward*.
- And so Deborah, I would like to welcome you back to the show. I want to hear more about your journey out of the "hole." We stopped the last podcast with a story about a certain thing that your father said I thought it was remarkably wise. We appreciate you sharing your story. It's a tough one.
- Deborah Mellen: It's a pleasure to be back.
- David Hanscom: You told us last time that your parents were Holocaust survivors, which is for most of us an incomprehensible tragedy. You stated you never understood how they could actually survive and thrive after going through an ordeal like that. *Your father said one thing was number one which was to just keep moving forward*. But he also said something else which I think is remarkable.
- Deborah Mellen: *He also told me not to ask why, that if I'm looking for an answer why this happened to me, I'll never find it and you'll just be searching, and I would not move forward.*
- David Hanscom: Did he give that advice to you relatively quickly or is it something you sort of figured it out.
- Deborah Mellen: Immediately.
- David Hanscom: And what effect did that have on you.
- Deborah Mellen: The first thing, when I asked him why, and that's immediately what he told me.
- David Hanscom: Wow. The reason why I want to highlight that, because there's research that shows that 90% of people who are in chronic pain or who had an accident or were injured by their employer, et cetera, 90% of people actually hold on to the situation or person that injured them. In other words, they are hanging onto it. They're angry, they're frustrated, and as you and I have talked about—**when**

**you're angry and frustrated, it changes your body's chemistry, it decreases your sense of wellbeing.** We all know intellectually that if you remain angry, the only person that actually suffers is you. And so I think it is a pretty big deal to advise "Don't ask why."

And even in my own journey, I was in chronic pain for 15 years. There's lots of my life that disappeared because of my chronic pain. And your statement last week was really important to me because I'm going, "**Well, why didn't I go through this? I didn't have to go through this.**" But I wouldn't be able to help other people the way I can help them without having gone through the same journey myself. And the question that actually drives me crazy is, why? And so that statement you mentioned last week really, really hit me hard. And I thought it was remarkable.

So at that point, you had gone down to Florida, and the group was called **Shake a Leg**. Is that correct?

Deborah Mellen: **Shake a Leg Miami.**

David Hanscom: And they introduced you to water sports. And about how many years ago was that?

Deborah Mellen: That was about I'd say maybe 12, 15 years ago. I started sailing there. But I would only be there for a few months during the winter. I originally was down in Miami for a surgeon, Dr. Barth Green in a place called the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis. And I would go down to Florida, and slowly I became more and more involved with Shake a Leg Miami and my life started to change.

David Hanscom: You mentioned earlier that staying busy and distracted was helpful, but you mentioned that you also had quite a bit of pain before you started getting involved in these projects. So I'm just curious about some of the ways your life started to change as you became involved with this project.

Deborah Mellen: **I stopped numbing myself with medications, because I had something more interesting to be involved in. And I think that was a big part of it.** And I had something that I loved and besides loving sailing. At **Shake a Leg** I was able to volunteer, and I worked with different groups of people and children, taking them sailing. And that was very, it became something silly in a way for me. And it took me... **When tragedy happens and then pain on top of it, you become very self-centered. And it's all about you. And so the biggest thing was to come out of thinking only about myself in a way, and thinking that there's more out there. And slowly, I somehow thought I could be helpful to others.**

David Hanscom: Were you able to start decreasing medications?

Deborah Mellen: **I completely stopped decreasing medication. I decreased medication. Yes. And I stopped taking sleeping pills.**

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- David Hanscom: Okay, so you experienced some pretty big changes.
- Deborah Mellen: Yes, very big.
- David Hanscom: How soon after you started working with these kids and different disabled people did you start feeling better? Was it relatively quickly?
- Deborah Mellen: I can't really, that's a hard thing to say. It was a process. One year I started, and then I started again. Then I would come back to New York, and then I'd go back to Florida. And it's hard to quantify how long it took.
- David Hanscom: So you went down to Florida for the Shake a Leg but you went back and forth, you weren't down there full time. I'm guessing when you *were* down there you felt better, probably not as good when you were not in Miami. Is that a fair assumption?
- Deborah Mellen: Well, I found a real freedom being on the water. I'd always been someone who loved water. I loved swimming, but I had never sailed. I grew up in New York City and there wasn't much opportunity to sail. So sailing was something that I felt such an affinity for, and it gave me such a feeling of freedom. And it was an equalizer. I would be on the boat, I would be out of my wheelchair and for three or four hours on that boat, I could command the vessel. They were small, 16 foot boats and everything else fell away. And I would just be with the wind and the other people who I was with, whether they had disabilities or not. It was all equal on the boat. And I found joy on the water.
- David Hanscom: Fantastic.
- Deborah Mellen: *And joy was hard to find at that time in my life.* I never expected it to come back to me, not only because of my accident and my pain, but also from the loss of my loved ones, of my husband.
- David Hanscom: In the last five years, you came across **The Impossible Dream**. Tell us how that story began, and what the last few years have been like offering this service to other people.
- Deborah Mellen: I had a friend from Italy who is a paraplegic, and he had built a boat, a catamaran, and he invited me onboard. He invited me to go on a trip with him on this boat. And I went on the trip, and I was amazed at what it felt like to live on the water and to be part of a crew. So I came back from there and I got together with Harry Horgan, who is the founder of **Shake a Leg Miami**. And I said, "I want to do something. **Shake a Leg** needs a boat. We need a bigger boat. We need a boat."
- We started talking about it and we met with some boat builders who didn't take us very seriously, or didn't take *me* very seriously. ***Being a woman had something to do with it, besides having a disability.*** And then I found out about

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a boat for sale in the UK. Her name was **The Impossible Dream**. *She's the only boat on record ever to be built from the ground up to be wheelchair accessible.* I decided to go over there. I asked Harry to come with me, and I asked my Italian friend to meet me there, because I knew nothing about boats. I had no idea what I was doing, but we went to England and I found The Impossible Dream. I saw her, and I fell in love and purchased her.

David Hanscom: Perfect.

Deborah Mellen: And we brought her to Miami. Her permanent home is at **Shake a Leg Miami**. I founded a nonprofit, and I have been completely dedicating myself to it. There are so many segments to what I do. There are so many factors. I love design and I'm always looking for ways to make design for people that need more accessibility in their homes and in their cities to make design, not just more functional, but more palatable. I love beauty. I don't like to see things that are made less beautiful because it has to be accessible. That's not necessary. And The Impossible Dream is the perfect example of universal design. And that was the first thing that I fell in love with.

David Hanscom: When I look at the pictures of your boat, it looks just like a regular sailboat.

Deborah Mellen: No, she's more beautiful than a regular sailing catamaran. Her lines, she's gorgeous. The funny story is when I came back from England having bought her and not knowing what I was doing, basically. And so I got back to New York and the first thing I did was go on Amazon and get the biggest, best book on catamarans I could find. And I get the book and I start going through it. *And of course she's in the book. So she's a very important vessel for her lines and she's beautiful. So that's the part of accessible design and universal design that I really move forward with when I meet people and talk about this boat.*

But the other thing was being able to take people with disabilities in wheelchairs out on the boat, having them experience getting salty, getting wind in their face, not being humiliated, being able to be their selves and be equal with everybody else when on this boat. And it's incredible what it does. We do short voyages, three hours with groups of people with disabilities—and besides everything else, they find community on the boat. They find some community while they're enjoying the sun. We allow them to drive the boat and it changes lives. ***It sounds trite and silly in a way, to say that I change lives, but we do change lives. We do. We bring people out of some kind of darkness whenever we can.***

David Hanscom: Well, no, it makes total sense. I mean, we've been doing this workshop at the Omega Institute, as you know, for many years. In three days, the entire group goes to pain-free. Now they go back to their pain when they go home, but they've tasted it. And once they've tasted it, somehow their brain gets back to being able to get into that pain-free state. But what I think it does, it wakes up those circuits in the brain that have been dormant for a while. They're there,

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they get crushed by life in general, but connecting to those circuits that bring joy in life is a huge part of the healing process.

But the other part, which I think is *a step beyond*, is actually giving back. What happens to you when you're giving back is that your judgment comes off of yourself to the other person. Also social connections are a big deal, because again your brain is going in a different direction and ***you can't fix chronic pain, but you can move away from it. And we have that sense of purpose in moving forward that actually is the ultimate answer to chronic pain.***

*As you know from our discussions, that mental pain is actually a bigger problem than the physical pain.* And if you get people to experience that even for an hour, it's unbelievable the difference that makes. What you're saying is exactly verifying what I've seen for a long time. I think it's fantastic.

I'd like if you could spend a minute or two, just tell people what your life is like now, because this is almost a full time job for you, keeping this project going.

Deborah Mellen: Yes. It's harder than I've ever worked before. So what is my life like? I really enjoy spending as much time as possible on the boat. And I enjoy spending time meeting all the people that come on the boat and greeting people and being there to make people feel more secure. I don't want it to be people come on the boat, not have any connection to myself and the others that volunteer on the boat. ***I want everyone that comes on the boat to have a connection to us, because we are them. We were where they are and I was where they are.*** So I want to be on the boat. I don't know how much longer I can endure it. Because I am 65, and it'll be going on six years now, and we just finished our fifth summer tour. And it's very important to connect to the people that come on the boat for a few hours at the time. *So my life is on the boat for about four or five months.*

I live in the country with my dog. When I had my accident, we were dreaming of this life of living in the country, in a house in Italy. And when my husband passed away, and I came back to New York because I believed that I could never have that life. I believed that I could never live on my own in the country, in the city, yes, in apartment buildings and my family around me. And it's not true. **The Impossible Dream** gave me the courage to find a piece of land and build something in the country. And I live here on my own with my dog, and I'm perfectly capable and happy. And I would never have imagined that I could do something like this.

David Hanscom: **The Impossible Dream** was a big factor in making that happen.

Deborah Mellen: **The Impossible Dream** showed me who I am and what I can do.

Deborah Mellen: Right. Before **The Impossible Dream** and the years after my injury and the tragedy, I would meet people such as my friend from Italy who took me on his boat. And some people with injuries and disabilities would tell me that they

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were happy. They would never go back. They would never trade their lives for what they were before. And I could never really understand that, until this experience that I'm having.

And the other thing that I realized that really changed it for me and what I feel is that people ask me all the time to speak to other people with new injuries. And I never felt like I had a lot to tell them, but I do now. **And what it really *is* is that you can't recreate your old life. You can't recreate who you were.** You can't go back and try to be that person again. You need to take it all with you. **Everything that has happened to you is who you are, and that's what you need to move forward with.** And trying to be and resurrect the life before means you're not moving forward actually, you're moving back. That's the lesson in moving forward. **I'm just putting this together now, sort of—but I can say in moving forward, you can't recreate. I finally realized that—and it freed me in every way.**

David Hanscom: Well Deborah, those things that you said, even just that last five sentences are fantastic. *It really is the essence of the healing process.* And as you know, I could spend hours talking about what you just said. You just encapsulated the entire healing process in about five sentences. I mean, you really just did. You're moving forward. You're who you are, not trying to change the past. You're living one day at a time and you're happy.

Deborah Mellen: I am happy.

David Hanscom: And every time I see you, by the way, every time I see you, you look younger every year that we come back and see you.

Deborah Mellen: Oh, David. I like that.

David Hanscom: Thank you so much for your time. We'll probably try to get you back on the show again. There are so many things you just said that are incredibly valuable. I would like to talk a little bit more about your parents' perspective, but this was fantastic. And could you just tell the audience one more time about how to get a hold of your project? This is a nonprofit. So fundraising is a big part of what you do.

Deborah Mellen: We rely on donations from the public. And we also encourage sponsorship from companies and corporations that would like to sponsor us. And you can find us at [www.theimpossibledream.org](http://www.theimpossibledream.org). You can also go online there and get in touch with us if you would like, on your own, to come onto **The Impossible Dream**. Or if you have a group that you would like to bring on **The Impossible Dream** sailing on **The Impossible Dream** is no cost to anyone. We rely on donor support to help the public who comes on the boat. Get in touch with us. Send me an email. I'll respond.

David Hanscom: Deborah, thank you very, very much.

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Deborah Mellen: Thank you. David, Tom, thank you.

Tom Masters: Well, again, David and Deborah, this has been hugely insightful and enlightening, and it's been great to hear about you leaving one dream behind and discovering a whole new dream through your tragedy and recovery. I want to remind our listeners to return with us next week for another episode of **Back In Control Radio** with Dr. David Hanscom, and be sure to visit the website at [www.backincontrol.com](http://www.backincontrol.com).

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