



The author's daughter Alicia, with new arrival Eider James.

for many personal reasons best summed up by the idea that you really don't know who you are until you look into the eyes of your biological parents. Good or bad, these are your genes; they are your legacy and your reaction is on a visceral level. For me, it led to a personal evaluation of my life up to that point and the regrettable conclusion that much of it had been a train wreck in the midst of what seemed, from the outside, to be an ideal entrepreneurial journey. The success I had as a restaurant owner was tempered by a complicated bankruptcy, because I trusted a business associate, and my domestic happiness was turned on its head by a divorce. My children were young: Alicia was five and Josh was three and I needed the kind of

lifestyle where I could be involved in their lives on a daily basis. As I tell anyone today who mentions ending a marriage, "If you think working on a marriage is tough when there are kids involved, you'll find that divorce is twice as difficult." I'm proud to say that we have worked it out as a win-win for our children. My children's mom Paula spends her holidays with us and Katrin, my life partner of the last eighteen years. It's not a perfect formula, but we are living proof that it can work.

During those years, I would find my way on to the local NBC station in Detroit, preparing short two-to four-minute cooking segments called "Famie's Finds" about the latest cooking trends with in-season ingredients. Any time I could take these segments out of the kitchen to other locales, I'd jump on the opportunity. One of my more memorable excursions was the time I was invited to do a feature on a new restaurant in Las Vegas called DIVE, the up ground full-on submarine eatery. This restaurant was the vision of none other than Steven Spielberg. While in the dining room on opening night, getting ready to start the filming with executive chef Mike, in walks Spielberg himself. I asked Mike if he thought Spielberg would consider joining us and, the next



Steven Spielberg (from left), the author and chef Mike at DIVE in Las Vegas.

thing I know, I'm standing there with the director of all directors — on camera.

The best part of this story is the fact I was also producing this segment. Spielberg said, “Keith, just tell me what you want me to do,” so I found myself not only on camera with this iconic guru — known for some of our greatest films — but I was now also directing him. To say he was kind and humble would be an understatement. The photo of us still hangs in my office today.



One of the authors immunity challenge wins

Back in 2000, I became involved in an international game show phenomenon known as “Survivor.” To me, struggling to pay child support and alimony, a one-in-sixteen chance to win \$1 million was extremely attractive. Even more so, the opportunity to outlast, outwit and outplay fifteen other adventure junkies fighting for the same brass ring was the ultimate pull. As you may realize, the genius of Mark Burnett was in creating a show in which dissimilar contestants, chosen from various walks of life, were forced together in a secluded setting. In my case, the final cast of sixteen was whittled down from 48,000 entries.

We weren't necessarily the best individual players, but the best combination of personalities to keep viewers interested. As a result, it was more about the selection process than the actual game; it became a social experiment, not

dissimilar to laboratory experiments on rats, where every move is monitored and results recorded during various tasks and challenges. At its core, “Survivor” is about forced interactions between incongruent personalities, based almost exclusively on boredom and isolation. I went into “Survivor: The Australian Outback” as a person and left as a cast member. This was made clear at the final wrap dinner in Sydney, when the producers toasted us and explained that the exposure the show would generate would change our future in both the short and long term. Indeed, for a while after the show aired with an average viewership of 30,000 million, there was a steady barrage of fans wherever we



The cast of "Survivor: Australian Outback," ready to get their survival on.

went. It was like being Tom Cruise for a day, only without the cash and security. Like the other contenders, I was dead-set on coming away with \$1 million; making good television for the sponsors was less of a concern, especially as the show progressed. Toward the end, in the excruciating heat of the Australian outback during many pensive moments, I actually stepped away from the so-called game. I began to take long walks by myself and sit and contemplate nature and the grandeur of the Australian continent,

as well as reflect on my own life. It's almost magical when you can sit somewhere for hours and days on end and hear nothing but the rawness of nature around you. It is a mind-cleansing process and a rebooting of the brain. I'm sure that was a disappointment to the producers, who were counting on me to deliver the competitive spirit I had originally brought to the table. No doubt, sleep deprivation and hunger, as well as missing my family, had something to do with my change of heart. In the end, I did not come away with the million dollars, but I did extract something much more valuable — something more substantial than money: An out-of-body vision and a new perspective on life, an inevitable result of spending forty-one days in the wilderness and losing contact with the outside world.



Cooking with Regis and his wife Joy

Still, my appearance on the show led to some remarkable contacts with that world. GMC was one of the premier sponsors of the series and, during the final weeks of its broadcast, company officials asked me to cook for a group of bigwig clients at a luxury resort in Palm Springs. Accompanied by my dear friend Matt Prested, who later became my associate field producer, I prepared appetizers for the group from a custom GMC Denali, which had been custom-designed as an outdoor kitchen for the upcoming Food Network series. The following day, I noticed a big, broad-shouldered guy in the café staring at Matt and I

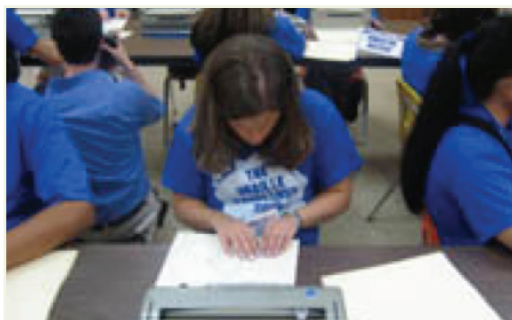
CHAPTER 4

Jordyn Castor

GRIT THROUGH DARKNESS

You may have heard of Jordyn Castor -- she's been written about on numerous websites, including Apple News, which headlines its piece "Blind Apple engineer is transforming the tech world at only 22."

Now age 24, living in San Francisco and still working for Apple, she is the embodiment of the word "grit." Hard-working, disciplined and dedicated, she graduated from Michigan State University at the top of her class, always unwilling to fit the mold. People who know Castor note that, having been born fifteen weeks premature, weighing less than a pound and half, she's always been this way.



Jordyn Castor during the National Braille competition

I first met Castor at Camp Tuhsmeheeta while filming "Can You See How I See?" with camp director George Wurtzel. She was fifteen years old then, a young lady with a sharp sense of humor and beautiful blue eyes. She was a regular at Camp Tuhsmeheeta, where she loved to read from braille books to younger kids. "God made me this way," she said with an underlying sense of unshakable

self-confidence, “and I wouldn’t change it for the world.” I was taken immediately by her and her view of life and knew she would have to be part of our documentary. Castor had developed her other senses to such a super-human level that she was able to ride a bicycle alone and navigate using echolocation — the technique bats use to “see” in the dark. In humans, the ability must be honed over the years of practice; it’s done by creating sounds — for example, tapping canes, lightly tapping the foot or clicking the tongue — then listening to the sound waves bounce back to accurately identify the location and size of objects. The first filming I did with Castor was at the Braille Challenge in Los Angeles, the only academic competition of its kind in North America for students who are blind or visually impaired. There first are regional competitions and the finals in L.A. are like the Olympics for the young blind community. Only fifty competitors make it to the finals.



Jordyn Castor checks out the stars on Hollywood Boulevard.

This would be my daughter Alicia’s first assignment as a field producer. Alicia helped me with the camera, lights and sound. At the time, she was also nineteen; I felt certain this would be a great experience for her. The three-day competition was far more intense than I had envisioned; competing students rotated between braille computers, pounding keys in a fury of concentration. Their braille skills are measured in reading comprehension, spelling, speed, accuracy, proofreading, charts and graphs. Although Castor did not win, for me it was the beginning of telling her remarkable story. Later that week, I filmed her at the Hollywood Walk of Fame in front of Grauman’s Chinese Theater as she used her hands to feel the imprints made by some of the entertainment world’s biggest stars. To say that it was a touching moment has double meaning.

A few months later, Castor’s mom Kim invited me to record her daughter’s first day of high school. Kim, of course, raised Jordyn to be the woman she is today; making her a special woman in her own right. I arrived at the house at 6 a.m., as Jordyn and her family were having breakfast. There was a vibe of energy in the air. Afterward, Castor and her mother invited me to film Jordyn brushing her hair as she was in the final stages of getting ready for that monumental day. As I filmed, Castor was leaning over a bowl that held those striking blue eyes that had amazed me upon our first meeting.

Embrace of Aging

One of my all-encompassing wishes – the desire to age gracefully – was recently put to an extreme test while I was at home recovering from rotator cuff surgery. The reason for the surgery is itself a humbling moment of self-reflection. Having been on an hiking adventure with one of my mentors and surrogate big brother Tom Rau, we had ascended Snow King Mountain in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and decided not to wait for the tram to take us back down. Like a pair of feisty mountain goats, we thought that descending the mountain on a beautiful, sunny September afternoon would be a breeze.



Three days after shoulder surgery I can still catch EJ my grandson

At fifty-eight, fate tends to be more fickle than it was at eighteen; on that trip down the mountainside, I slipped, fell and tore two shoulder tendons directly from the bone. Being as stubborn now as I was at eighteen and, in many ways, just as ignorant, I chose to wait until I got back home to see a doctor. After an MRI and operation, I am penning these words from the comfort of my living room, attended to by my darling Katrin, amazing daughter Alicia and her eight-month-old son E.J. Along with the help of the Oxycodone, I am currently navigating through the

pain after having spent a restless night. My sleep apnea didn't help and neither did the new Darth Vader-type system that accompanied a recent diagnosis of an enlarged heart, thanks to the diligence of doctors from the University of Michigan, especially Dr. Kim Eagle and Dr. Monika Leja, cardiac specialists who have been a part of my team since I was first diagnosed with coronary heart disease.

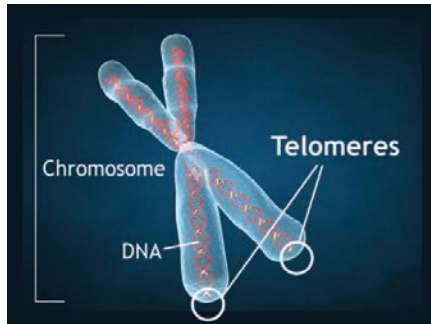
It's mainly genetics, but I'm sure that all my years of eating rich, butter-laced culinary creations, including duck foie gras — French for “fat liver” — didn't do much for my fifty-eight-year-old body. Sitting there, floating on painkillers, I decided it was time to rock the gray hair. For years, I've worried about my looks in a world of dark-haired dudes, especially during my appearances on television, but I've learned to love my gray hairs; I've earned every one of them.

When I turned fifty, I embarked on a production journey directly related to the aging process. The resulting series involved both men and women and delved deeply into the medical community from the perspective of clinical patients and doctors, as well as the cutting-edge in research. In one of my early, eye-opening interviews, Dr. Ergun Sahin from Harvard Medical School explained the function of telomeres — repetitive nucleotide sequences that protect the ends of the chromosomes from deterioration. Each time a

cell divides, the telomeres get shorter; when they get too short, the cell can no longer divide and it becomes inactive (or “senescent”) and it dies.



This shortening process is associated with aging, cancer and a higher risk of death. Telomeres, Sahin said, have been compared to the fuse of a bomb. We all face aging, some more stoically than others, but it's hard to get away from the fact that each breath we take during each passing day is another grain of sand in our hourglass.



Among my goals in making these documentaries was to interview people involved in slowing down the inevitable and to determine if anyone is close to discovering a fountain of youth — one of the questions that has haunted humankind since the beginning. In this chapter, I hope to share some of what I learned during the production of this seven-part “Embrace of Aging” series on male perspectives on aging, followed by a thirteen-part “Embrace of

Aging” series from the female perspective. After that, I followed up with what I determined was an inevitable sequel: “The Embrace of Dying,” exploring our various means of coping with life’s end. Notions of, and cases involving, longevity played an important role in all of these documentaries and, as such, I began to research places in the world where men and women live beyond one hundred years, frequently with the lowest rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and many other life-shortening ailments.

In 2005, National Geographic’s Dan Buettner identified five locations he referred to as “blue zones” — a concept that grew out of demographic work done by Gianni Pes and Michel Poulain and was outlined in *The Journal of Experimental Gerontology*. These culturally-rich environments have many common characteristics: strong social relations; an emphasis on respect for their elders; high volumes of low to moderate intensity purposeful movement, spread throughout the day; a minimally processed plant predominant diet, commonly (but not always) supplemented with seafood, some poultry and small portions of pork and other red meats; as well as a commitment to faith. Alcohol, if any, is consumed in low doses. The identified locations were Ikaria, Greece;



Sardinia, Italy; Ogimi, Okinawa; Costa Rica; and Loma Linda, California. Loma Linda, nestled in central California, east of Los Angeles near San Bernardino, is Spanish for “beautiful hills” and is home to a community of nine thousand Seventh-Day Adventists, who generally follow a vegetarian diet, ranging from semi-vegetarian and pescatarian to vegan.

In order to present a first-hand view of these fonts of longevity, I set out on a journey that took



Dr. Tom Rifai is filmed in front of a sign for a village on the island of Sardinia.

me first to the verdant landscapes of Sardinia, where the mountain sides are dotted with small cobblestoned villages and herds of goats, often urged from slope to slope by a healthy goat herder of advanced years. At my side was Dr. Tom Rifai, a Michigan physician and expert in the areas of lifestyle medicine and metabolic health; he shared my fascination with the latest studies of “blue zones.” I also hired Valeria, a local woman who acted as a guide and an ambassador, to ease us into the personal lives of Sardinia’s senior population. This was a trip I took without my usual crew; I filmed all the interactions myself. Rifai and I were like kids in a candy store — minus the candy — and encountered an endless series of landmark discoveries, for him as a health doctor and for me, not only as a producer, but, as a chef.

My history of food preparation and study of world culinary traditions gave me a certain knowledge on these details and they formed an important facet of the documentary. Sardinia’s concession to healthy eating proved to be as much a matter of circumstance as tradition. Residents rarely eat anything they haven’t grown or raised themselves and, invariably, each home had a carefully-laid out garden that featured rich, deeply colored vegetables and greens that are high in antioxidants. The local diet contains all the nutrients required for long-term survival and the wine that accompanies most meals is made from the thick-skinned grenache grape. Cannonau di Sardegna is reputed to contain among the highest levels of antioxidants of any red wine. Rifai and I wondered if we had truly stumbled upon an elixir of life — a genuine fountain of youth. We were enthralled by the joie de vivre lifestyles and positive attitudes that seemed to emanate from the residents. The particular focus of this trip was the male perspective, so we applied a magnifying glass to every aspect of daily life among men who were approaching one hundred years of age. We looked at everything from prescribed medicines



This 101-year-old Sardinian villager had the most delightful personality.