

Inspirational Stories: Focus, Persistence, and Success

By Sonny Wong

What are the ingredients of career success? Supportive friends and mentors certainly have a strong influence. Clarity in your own mind of what constitutes success for you is another factor. Strategic planning will put you on the right path and persistence will keep you there. The 'ah-ha' moments, which you may experience as you look at someone else's story or as you reflect on your own, will provide you with insight and inspiration. Tough times do not last but tough people do, and here are the inspirational stories of some tough people.

Jonathan Rogers, a handsome man in his late forties, completed high school in Trinidad. After working as a flight attendant for five years, he quit because he realized that life as a flight attendant was not what he wanted. Instead he took his customer service skills to the cruise line industry as a purser. At that time, Jonathan's career aspirations were undefined. When he boarded the ship, his goals were to be employed for a few years and save enough money for a new life in Canada. Once in Canada, he would gain employment in a hotel and move up to become a hotel manager. Unfortunately, those plans came to a complete stop when our government rejected his application to immigrate.

In the fifteen years since that time, Jonathan's story has become truly inspirational. He realized that he could just as easily achieve his career plans at sea. Within a few years, he became chief purser by refining his computer skills, accounting competence and customer service techniques. He also participated in all professional development courses that the corporation offered him. His hard work started to pay off when he caught the attention of a superior who recognized his potential. This person served as a mentor and assisted him in focusing on a career plan

Jonathan spent many years as chief purser and took on special projects, where he developed his training and leadership skills, cost management expertise and staff relations skills. Soon he had a diverse portfolio of talents, and he was rewarded with the position of food and beverage manager on a prestigious ship. At every opportunity, Jonathan expressed his career goal to be a hotel director.

Now fifteen years later, Jonathan has become a hotel director. When asked what the secret to his success is, Jonathan's response was, "Surround yourself with supportive people who believe in you and who can help you with a plan to make your dreams come true. It is important to ask for feedback and realize what is constructive criticism and what is not. If you don't ask, you won't know, you won't learn and you won't grow."

Emily Lee is the daughter of immigrant parents who worked long hours in their 'survival jobs.' With the parents practically absent, Emily assumed the role of surrogate parent of her two younger brothers. Life in Canada for Emily involved mastering the English language and balancing school with her 'parental' responsibilities. She was also constantly battling a weight problem that has been a lifelong struggle for her. She recognized that her parents' motivation for leaving their homeland was to provide better opportunities for their children and so Emily worked a double shift as student during the day and big sister/surrogate parent in the evening. In the early eighties, she graduated with a business degree with top honors from York University. Upon landing her first entry-level position as a financial clerk at a commercial bank, she realized that she needed to shed some pounds when she encountered some discrimination from the corporate environment because of her weight. Two years later she married her university sweetheart. Soon afterwards they started a family and were blessed with two healthy boys.

Emily's traditional husband did not share equally in the division of household labour, but for Emily working nine to five and then being a mom for the rest of the day was not new given her previous responsibilities as a student and as a 'parent' to two brothers. She realized quickly that her degree did not guarantee promotion at the bank. Moreover, she recognized that motherhood was perceived as a career barrier by her male work mates as was her weight. Emily took action. She hired a personal fitness trainer and went from a size 14 to size 6; she obtained more professional certifications and still maintained her household and childrearing responsibilities.

Despite her responsibilities at home, Emily studied at night and worked productively during the day. And productive is what she was; her energy level increased significantly with her regular workouts with her trainer. Over a twenty year span, Emily's career progressed from

account administration to client relations and then to stocks and portfolio management.

More important, Emily survived two recessions in the financial field by making many lateral moves. Emily says that in the competitive financial field, it is not enough to be a top producer, you have to move to safe zones during hard times and then re-position yourself during good times. When asked what her secret of success is, Emily's response was, "If you don't like something, fix it, whether the issue is overweight, glass ceilings or family responsibilities. People have to recognize the difference between an 'excuse' and a 'barrier.' I want to set a good example for my kids. I don't believe in stereotyping and discriminatory practices. I know I can't change the world, but I know how to change a person's misconception of me."

Matthew Ford started strong, but one day he decided to explore the world of work and got lost. He had the rare opportunity, for an undergraduate, of landing a position as a teaching assistant for four terms at the University of Toronto. Matthew's mentors were established professors, and they guided him through various research publications.

When Matthew finished university, he planned to leave the security of the university, but on the day of his graduation he decided he would be happier with a master's degree. However, when he applied he was denied acceptance so he ventured out into the world of work.

With a recognized degree, publications and award nominations behind him, Matthew still ended up as a call centre representative for \$12 an hour. Twice, he attempted to establish a career in marketing and advertising but realized that it just was not for him.

Through these experiences, he learned to be one amazing networker and self-marketer. Those skills landed him in jobs in executive recruitment, publishing and social services. Regardless of the job, he was unfulfilled by his accomplishments because he wanted a master's degree—but he was still unclear about his area of specialization.

One day, in a job interview, the potential employer told Matthew that he was doing everything wrong in terms of career. The employer suggested that he research the counselling field. For Mathew this was an 'ah-ha' moment.

Matthew investigated the labour market for counsellors and landed a job as a generalist in a counselling/outreach centre working with street youth. Eight years later his career had progressed from counselling to coordinating special projects that utilized all the skills that he had gained in his previous work. He even sat on two senior advisory committees and advocated for various social causes.

Two years ago his inner voice shouted at him to pursue that master's degree even though he was content with his career. Matthew was honest enough to admit to himself that he lacked the confidence to re-enter the education setting since he had been originally rejected. With the support of two colleagues, many conversations with previous professors and self-examination, he applied for a master's program. Today, Matthew is working towards his master's degree at the University of Toronto with a clear focus specializing in counselling and psychology.

When asked what his secret is to overcoming barriers, Matthew replied, "Stay connected to your past and keep looking ahead to your future. When you are presented with an opportunity, ask the people in your life who have been with you for a while to help you make the change. Then change is just a matter of sharing experiences with old friends. Be brave enough to create opportunities for yourself so that you have choices."

Although everyone's journey is different, everyone should understand that a big part of success is about being open to the 'ah-ha' moments of life. If opportunity does not come knocking, you have to go knocking in search of opportunity. Look in the mirror and see if you see success. There are people around you who believe you deserve success. Do you believe you deserve success?

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March 2006