



'I was determined to prove I could do anything if I tried'

Choosing to do something utterly terrifying can be life-changing, as

ALICE MORRISON discovered when she made a promise to herself on a landmark birthday...

This is what COURAGE looks like

It doesn't matter how great or small your fears may appear to others, it takes equal amounts of bravery to conquer them. These four women had very different goals, but all had to dig deep to find the self-belief to overcome their doubts. And now nothing can hold them back...

Alice: 'I felt as though I had conquered the universe'

ALICE WEARS: COAT, LK BENNETT; TOP, JAEGER AT JOHN LEWIS; JEANS, WALLIS; SHOES, LK BENNETT; NECKLACE, DOROTHY PERKINS; BRACELET, HER OWN; CONRAN CHERNER CLASSIC WALNUT ARMCHAIR, THE CONRAN SHOP; (CONRANSHOP.CO.UK); SHEILA WEARS: TOP, PHASEEIGHT; NECKLACE, WALLIS; YOU CAN SEE SHEILA'S PAINTINGS AT SHEILAMARSHALLARTIST.COM

FOR MY 50TH BIRTHDAY, I decided to give myself a very special kind of present. I wanted to celebrate my life still to come, which, I'd decided, would be filled with challenges, excitement and, most of all, adventure. So, I pledged I would run the toughest race on earth, the Marathon des Sables, and raise money for the charity Mencap. Six marathons in six days in the Sahara, where temperatures reach 50°C and you have to carry on your back all your own food and kit for the week. Only one in 10 of the competitors is female, you sleep in a communal, open tent - and the sand gets everywhere.

I felt wiped out after one session of Bikram yoga in 30°C heat, and I'd never run a marathon before - so this ultramarathon in the desert was a pretty terrifying prospect. And while many of my friends and relatives encouraged me, my mother told me she thought I was off my rocker, and one of my best friends told me that I was bound to fail, that it was just too hard.

But I was determined to prove to myself that I could survive outside my comfort zone, and that I could do anything if I tried. So last January I left my home in a beautiful Derbyshire village for the blazing heat of Morocco, so that I could train in the same conditions I'd be racing in. I rented a room in a flat with a young American woman. I was feeling pretty positive about my progress, until I took part in the Marrakesh Marathon. I came last. That didn't do much to calm my fears.

On the first day of the big race, I knew I'd done all the preparation and training I could, and fear was replaced by excitement and adrenaline. Setting off was a huge thrill, but over the next six days I experienced some very painful lows. No matter how excruciating my blisters got, or how much I dreaded the next day's marathon, I just kept putting one foot in front of the other. I knew I couldn't give myself the option to bow out - I kept my eye on the finish line, and I refused to give in to the fear.

On the last day of the race, I sped up the final hill. When I crested the summit, I could see the finishing arch and hear music and cheering. Every hair stood on end, and joy and light flooded my body - I felt as though I had conquered the universe. At that moment, every single minute of strife, pain and self-doubt was paid back in a currency that will never leave me. Months later, all I have to do is think back to that hilltop to feel the intense shot of self-belief again.

Being fearless has now become a way of life for me. I've stayed in Morocco and set up my own training camp, called Epic Running, to help others challenge themselves as I have. I know a lot of women lose confidence with age, and don't see their value, their beauty, their strengths. Now I'm determined to help open their eyes to how much they can do, so no one lets fear hold them back.



Sheila: 'I clicked submit at 4am and fell into bed, triumphant'

A fear doesn't have to be big to be powerful. For **SHEILA MARSHALL**, what started out as a small and simple task threatened to overwhelm her, until she finally found a way to rebuild her self-esteem

'My son gave me the knowledge, courage and support to keep going'

LAST YEAR I FOUND MY CONFIDENCE DRAINING away as I tried to find a job. I'd previously had a career in the Civil Service, but after leaving to have a family and working as a self-employed artist, I'd been out of the workplace for more than a decade. For financial reasons I needed to go back to work, but the problem was, I couldn't even make it to the end of the application forms. The first time I tried, I thought, how difficult can this be? I filled in my personal details and employment history, but I just couldn't get past the jargon of 'person specification' and 'competencies' - it sounded like another language. I wasn't getting anywhere, so I told myself I was being silly, and decided to leave it for another day.

But with every form I attempted, the same thing happened. When I got past the first few pages, my eyes would well up, my heart would start racing, I'd feel like I was suffocating - and my self-confidence plummeted. I kept berating myself, questioning why I was being so hopeless. I must have started more than 20 forms, and I didn't finish a single one. I lost any sense of self-worth, and I felt like a complete failure. I even stopped painting.

It wasn't until I confessed my problems to my 20-year-old son that I started to turn a corner. I discovered that he was far more in touch with the working world than I was, and he gave me the knowledge, courage and support to face my fears and keep going.

One night, I promised myself I would start on a new form, and not go to bed until I'd clicked submit. I knew I had to do it to break the pattern I'd fallen in to. Every time I wanted to give up, I had another cup of tea - I finally finished at 4am and fell into bed exhausted, but triumphant.

Although I didn't get that job, I found the confidence to keep applying. Now I have two part-time jobs, and I'm painting again, too. Many women feel excluded if they've been out of the workforce - it can seem like a foreign land. But if you focus on the small triumphs instead of on your failures, you will get there in the end.



Elizabeth: 'Suddenly I'd found a fierce sense of empowerment'

'What I've created will endure for ever'

When music teacher **ELIZABETH CAPENER** was registered blind, she was terrified of how her life would change. But she turned adversity into inspiration, and sang her fears away

WHEN THE CONSULTANT explained the test results, it didn't really sink in. It was two hours later, in the supermarket, that I burst into tears. And I didn't stop crying for three days. That was October 2013, and I'd just been told that I was going to be registered blind. When I was a teenager, I was diagnosed with the degenerative eye condition retinitis pigmentosa, but my sight had remained stable, and I carried on as normal. Now my sight had deteriorated so much that I had no peripheral vision. Although I was lucky still to have some central vision, my life was going to have to change drastically. I would have to give up my career as a secondary school music teacher, but most terrifying of all was the thought of losing my independence. My self-confidence disappeared and it seemed that there was only darkness ahead of me; I felt hopeless, desperate and very afraid. But last January, a friend of mine gave me something extremely precious that would change everything: a great idea. When she suggested I make

a CD of me singing my favourite classical pieces, that was it – I was on a mission. I'd found a fierce sense of empowerment, and the self-belief to know this wasn't going to beat me. Yes, I was scared, but I wasn't going to let that stand in my way. I created a crowd-funding campaign online and recorded a video telling my story and explaining that the money raised from the album, which I called Viva To The Diva, would go to the Royal National Institute for the Blind, so that I could help other people in my situation. The campaign raised £1,600, and I found a photographer, sound engineer and editor who all agreed to help. When I opened the first box of CDs, I felt so proud of what I'd achieved. Holding the discs in my hands made me realise that what I'd created was real and would last for ever – while my fears were fleeting, and had disappeared. The funny thing was, without my vision problem, I wouldn't have had the courage to put myself out there. The darkness that scared me is the very thing that made me fearless – there's nothing that can stop this diva now.

ELIZABETH WEARS: JACKET, EAST; TOP, OASIS; SKIRT, KALIKO; NECKLACE, MARKS & SPENCER; BRACELET, DOWER & HALL; SHOES (JUST SEEN), RUSSELL & BROMLEY; DIAS ONK COFFEE TABLE, DWELL (DWELL.CO.UK)

'The thought of leaving behind familiar things was terrifying'

Just the idea of a family holiday filled **HEIDI STERNBERG** with dread and drained her of confidence. Now the memories of that trip have given her the confidence to overcome anything

FOR MOST PEOPLE, A SUMMER HOLIDAY IS something to look forward to – but for me, it was very scary indeed. For years, I couldn't even contemplate going away, because of the trauma I'd been through. Before my two daughters Aimee and Delphine were born, I'd had five miscarriages, and the grief was too much to bear. After my younger daughter was born, I was hospitalised with severe depression and my marriage never recovered. I lost my husband, my home and my successful corporate career. I had a beautiful life, and it all went. All of the material aspects, that is – I still had my girls. They are the light of my life, and they kept me going. Without my children – now aged nine and six – I don't know if I would still be here. Gradually, I rebuilt our world, thanks to a network of loved ones who supported us along the way. We moved into a council flat in 2012, and I started a business, Polkadots & Blooms, sewing and embroidering vintage homewares. Although our lives were not what I had expected, we were happy. Our new life felt almost complete. The one thing I hadn't managed was taking the girls on holiday. It seems like such a small challenge in comparison with starting over as a single mum – but the thought of leaving behind familiar things was terrifying. I kept making excuses like I was too busy, or money was too tight, but in January when I saw an advert for a boutique camping holiday in Cornwall, it just looked like such fun. Without thinking about it, I booked. As our departure date approached, I grew more and more anxious, and I wished the car would break down so we wouldn't have to go. But the girls were so excited about our first proper holiday together, I knew I couldn't let them down. The trip did not start well. A drive that should have lasted three hours took eight, and we arrived after midnight, drained and fed up. But the next day, I woke up feeling like a true heroine. We had reached our destination after an epic journey, and I knew we were going to be okay. Every day the girls collected eggs from the chicken coops for breakfast, and we spent a week under the glorious Cornwall sun, playing in the sea, eating ice creams and having long chats – it was idyllic. Since coming home, I feel so content and confident, it's as if a heavy weight has lifted. It was such a small step in my journey, but the experience proved to be a huge milestone for me. I've achieved something without anyone's help and I have learnt to let go – nothing can scare me now. □



Heidi: 'I have learnt to let go: nothing can scare me now'

HEIDI WEARS: COAT, LINEA AT HOUSE OF FRASER; TOP, UNIQLO; JEANS, PHASE EIGHT; EARRINGS, DOROTHY PERKINS; NECKLACE, NEXT; YOU CAN FIND HEIDI'S HOMEWARES AT POLKADOTSANDBLOOMS.CO.UK. FEATURE: MOVA SARNIER; PHOTOGRAPHY: NEIL COOPER; MAKE-UP: ANNA DURSTON; HAIR: JULIE READ AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT