

How Writing the Story of My Lifetime Disability Brought Me Freedom, Peace, Joy, and the Compassion to Help Others

By **Victoria K. Mavis, SPHR**

I NEVER DREAMED OF WRITING A BOOK—JUST AS I DIDN'T IMAGINE MY CHILDHOOD ROMPING IN A BARN WOULD RESULT IN A LIFETIME DISABILITY THAT MAKES EACH STEP PAINFUL, CAUSES PEOPLE TO STARE, TURNS HEADS IN AVOIDANCE, OR SETS OFF WHISPERS AS I LIMP BY. HOWEVER, LIFE TEACHES US THAT ALONGSIDE FOLLOWING OUR DREAMS, IT'S ESSENTIAL TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF UNPLANNED OPPORTUNITIES; TOGETHER, THEY CAN LEAD TO A LIFE BEYOND OUR WILDEST IMAGINATION.



I first realized my life story could help others find healing while listening to a keynote address at a diversity conference in the early '90s. I was the only attendee with a noticeable physical disability in a room of over 500 people. As the speaker recounted being bullied and discriminated against as a minority (Puerto Rican), my cheeks felt the burning of his tears. I didn't share his race or skin color, but I did share the emotional pain of his mistreatments based on my walking disability, which demands an awkward limp and ever-present forearm crutches. Flying home, I mentally outlined my life's book; it would be about the tragedy I had suffered since early childhood as the result of falling headfirst from a hayloft onto the cement below, resulting in a coma. When I regained consciousness, I was left with significant neurological and muscular damage, as well as a loss of speech.

It's quite the beginning to a life story, huh? However, it lacked a navigable track of healing readers could benefit from, especially since I felt anguish every time someone asked, "What happened?" With this mindset, the only story I could envision involved the main character spewing resentment for the things she didn't have and blaming her shortcomings on her disability. Waiting in the baggage claim area, I brushed all thoughts of writing a memoir aside as my suitcase slid down the chute.

Several years later, the book idea resurfaced after receiving accolades for my inspiration to workshop attendees. This was a first; most people I've met over my lifetime walk up, ask, "What happened?" and promptly walk away after I answer. Dumbfounded, I met with the facilitator who expressed, "People want to hear stories of passion, ones that leave them with an array of experiences and emotions—from the depths of sorrow to the pinnacle of euphoria. Your message of overcoming tragedy is inspirational. Others will want to know how you did it, to help them or their loved ones." Leaving the workshop was the start to writing my life-inspired book, *Every Scar Tells a Story*.

For me, the writing was painstaking. While trying to tell how I overcame the many obstacles I faced over my 50 plus years with a disability, as well as identifying good things associated with it (other than handicap parking), I was forced to recount the tragic past in precise detail. I cried over childhood memories (i.e., being excluded from birthday parties, the embarrassment of being picked last for team sports, being tripped in the cafeteria line, or having "gimp" spray-painted on my locker). Some days it was impossible to escape sorrow as I viewed everything I didn't get in life that I wanted (i.e., the guy I fell in love with married someone else, or when I was denied the job promotion to manager) was because of my disability.

Eventually, I asked a friend and business colleague to be my co-author. His role was to review my writing to give impartial feedback since he, as most people who knew me, didn't

know what caused my disability. His experience as an educator, former coach, and superintendent helped craft details of how I overcame my disability to lead a successful professional and personal life. His input was invaluable as it helped the storyline develop to appeal to and inspire a diverse group of readers, both with and without a disability.

Despite the emotional toll I felt from writing and rewriting, I continued; the days quickly grew from months into years. Many times my co-author must have felt the same high level of frustration with my writing avoidance as I had a distaste for his prodding. It was like physical therapy I had as a child—although it's for growth and development, the process was relentless and painful. When he pushed for answers to the "whys" and "hows" involving the accident, people's treatment towards my disability, or how I managed my physical limitations, my gut wrenched as I dug for a response other than self-pity or being a victim. More than once, "I quit." It was too painful to continue reliving the past without coming up with answers that put my heart at peace. However, I would always return to writing after enough separation had occurred to replace some level of grief with acceptance; thus, the mosaic of my life was changing, but not at a pace fast enough to prevent me from repeating the same theme in subsequent chapters—being the victim to a disability.

Near the end, I knew what was left to be done to move forward with the book. It was to reconcile one seemingly small—but significant—piece of my past, so I don't continue the grief with every painful step I take or every stranger who asks me, "What happened?" I know...I know...reading this sounds like I should have seen a therapist or gone to church, right? Well, those were tried, and like some of my surgeries, they didn't work for me. So, I decided to attempt a different approach: to revisit the past in the present.

This meant interviewing family members who had firsthand knowledge of my accident and my adoption and visiting the barn where the accident occurred. My thought was to piece together what happened from interviews or by reliving the accident; by doing so, I hoped to release the misery and haunting nightmares associated with it.

The interviews and visiting the barn successfully filled in the missing details; however, I wasn't ready to publish the book. Yes—it had a good storyline, but the reader (me) didn't feel healed from my journey as I read the final draft. At this juncture, I screamed in an email to my co-author that I couldn't write another word or edit another page; it was time to shred the manuscript! Thankfully, he prodded for one last push towards the finish line—I did what he asked. I can't say exactly how it happened, but one day all pages flowed perfectly, and I had a peaceful heart. I FINALLY felt the freedom, joy, and self-love I dreamed this journey would end with. I now live without tears for the past or fears of the future.

As I envision readers may experience the same positive feelings at some point after reflecting on their own respective journeys, I can say with confidence that you can't predict the time needed to heal the soul or the exact steps your journey will take for it to happen. My co-author knew this long before I did as he patiently supported the 10 years of writing and more than 15 manuscript versions before *Every Scar Tells a Story* was ready to print. When asked why he thought it took me so long, his response was simple yet insightful: "How could you write the ending to a journey that you hadn't yet experienced?"

If you're inspired by my passage to acceptance, freedom, and inner peace, take what action you deem appropriate to understand the past so you can learn, adapt, and grow from it. As I discovered, everyone has their own story that molds their core identity, as well as the ability to choose to remain a victim of that story or to pursue a life that leads in a differ-

ent direction. In the end, I discovered the key for my living an empowered life was not how many hurdles I conquered, the amount of stuff I owned, or the number of friends I had; rather, it was found interwoven in the fabric of how I overcame the limitations of my past, including the self-defeating statements that replayed continuously in my head. To be victorious, we must breathe in the freedom, peace, joy, and love the present and future can bring rather than remaining stuck in past tragedies or injustices.

I'll close with the words of my co-author, Angelo R. Senese, EdD, "Daily we must choose how to use the gifts given to us; above all, we must use them to benefit one another. Life is difficult, but we are sustained by the wonder of all that we see and feel, the warmth of friends, and the love of family. We have the freedom to make friends, embrace those we love, find joy in the beauty all around us, and serve others. Use the time wisely."

Sources

Every Scar Tells a Story by Victoria K. Mavis and Angelo R. Senese, EdD, 2020



Victoria K. Mavis, SPHR, had a tragic accident in 1964 at the age of four that resulted in brain trauma and left her partially paralyzed. Facing a grim diagnosis, she fought for her life and relearned how to perform basic functions such as walking and talking. Within a year of her accident, she would be the first physically handicapped child to enter a school system that wasn't equipped physically or culturally for her special needs. She was a pioneer for equality of treatment in an era when people who were handicapped were considered social misfits who should be institutionalized, openly ridiculed, and discriminated against for access to public systems. Victoria paved the way for others who "didn't fit in" long before the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) was ever proposed or before "bullying" was a community epidemic to resolve.

Victoria is a speaker, author, and human resources (HR) professional who has owned her own businesses, as well as been employed by private industry ranging from privately held companies to large international manufacturing corporations. She holds an MBA, is lifetime certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) by the Society of Human Resource Management, and is certified as a behavioral specialist. She has held memberships in Rotary International, BNI, and other business, professional, and community organizations.

Victoria recently relocated to her home state of Michigan. She is developing programs for disability agencies, educational institutions, and healthcare providers to increase disability awareness so individuals with disabilities can maintain independent lifestyles.

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