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ABILITY



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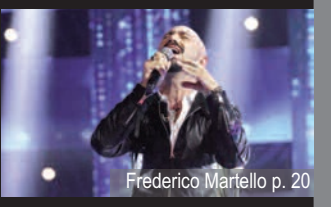
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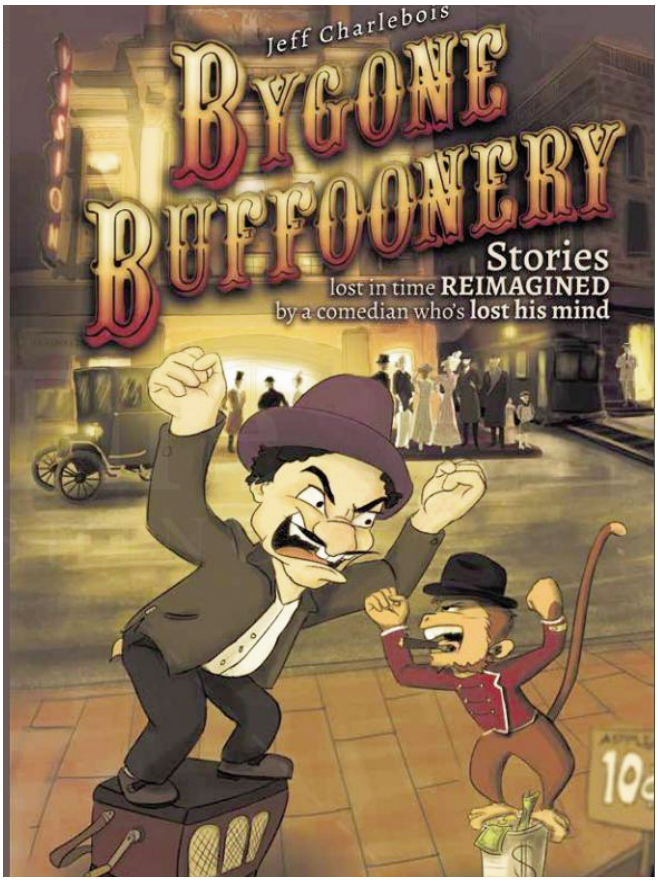


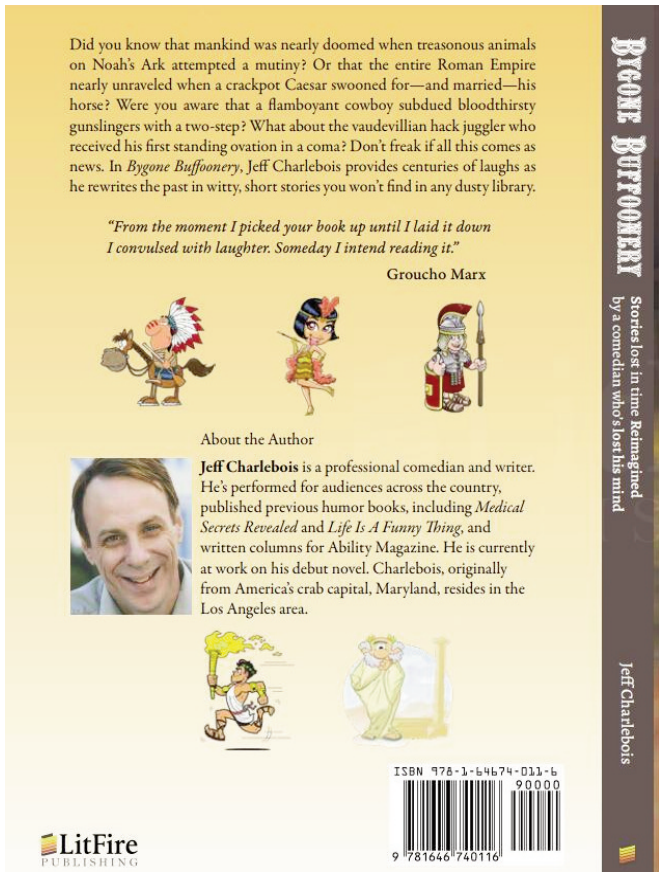
Christmas Not Looking So Good?

Well, I'm hoping this Christmas will top last year. Thanks to Covid we weren't allowed to travel anywhere to get our presents from friends and family. My God, did they get off easy. I haven't forgotten though. I sent word out to my circle of gift-givers that they're still on the hook for last year. I'm looking at two gifts from each person. I missed the whole Christmas thing last season. The excuse to getting fatter eating cookies and pies. The family arguments at the dinner table. Pretending to like a gift you'll never use or wear. I'm a little concerned about the upcoming holidays so I figured I throw out some thoughts in hopes of concerning you as well. No one likes to go through misery alone.

The good thing about living in Los Angeles is with the supply chain disruptions at the ports I'll be able to go down to Long Beach and swim out to the bottled-up container ships and get my Christmas gifts. I have a feeling a lot of people this holiday will be getting boxes with IOUs in them. "I owe you a cashmere sweater and a set of Apple ear pods." The politicians must be sweating. There is nothing that pisses off a mother more than not being able to get the toy her child has been badgering her for past eight months. She may be left telling her kid, "I'm sorry, you just weren't good this year."

Inflation is really creeping up. You are going to be gouged and goosed hard when you buy that Christmas Day goose. Food prices are soaring higher than a red-nosed reindeer. The other day I didn't have enough bread to buy, well, bread. I'm going to need a lot of cabbage to purchase, well, cabbage. I wanted to make some pies but didn't have enough dough to purchase any, you guessed it, dough. Mom always makes a bunch of pies over the holidays. This year we might each get one cupcake. I don't even want to know how much the Figgie Pudding has gone up. I've been meaning to try that before I die. We may be choosing between egg nog and booze this year. I think we know who wins. Nothing eases the pain of high prices than a bottle of Jack Daniels.





I'm worried about the climate changers as the holidays approach. Lately, they seem to be getting more fanatical and don't trust these Scrooges. They may demand that you can't put decorative lights on your house because it uses too much energy. They may require you to only have your Christmas tree lit one hour in the day. No fires in the fireplace because too much CO2 would spew into the crispy air. They may arrest Santa for putting that dirty coal in stocking. (Hey greenies, it's better than nuclear waste.) And the bearded man better be using EV reindeers this year. Elon can help him with that.

If you're planning in driving somewhere for the holidays, you're in for some severe sticker shock. In California gas is close to $5.00 a gallon, surpassing the cost of a Chestnut Praline Latte. Pleas take out a line of credit before your journey. You may be apologizing to family members when you reach your destination. "I'm sorry, we had to hock your presents to fill the tank. What I'm saying is, we have no gifts to bring a rumpa, bum, bum." Heating your home this winter will be no day at the beach either. It will most likely cost an extra $1,000. Your choice might be no presents for the kids or the kids freezing to death, which would actually kill two birds with one stone.

Another concern is the vaccine mandates. Pilots have gone on strike for that decree. This sent the whole airline industry into chaos. People were stuck in airports for several days. And when the ordeal was over, some stranders had to declare bankruptcy after buying food and drinks while trapped in the terminal for that long. Airports are crazy during the holidays. Throw in another pilot strike and staffing shortages and you're looking at Armageddon. And, who knows, maybe if too many pilots walk out, they replace them with someone like Bruno, the airport janitor. On top of that, there's weather to contend with. They're expecting a snowy winter. That's fun for the ole Christmas spirit but not when you're curled up in a ball on the filthy terminal six floor listening to canceled flights over the PA. Then, if you're lucky enough to get on a flight, you may have to deal with unruly passengers that have been coming out of the woodworks this year. One recently punched a poor flight attendant in the face and broke her nose. Maybe he didn't get his bag of peanuts. A lot of crazies out there and the holidays are their full moon.

Look at me, trying to dampen Christmas. I feel like the Grinch. So much for spreading holiday cheer. At least I never said "humbug." What's wrong with me? You know what? Don't listen to me. Forget everything I just said. I don't know what came over me. Maybe I'm just having a bad hair day. Forgive me. It's going to be a great Christmas. They'll be family, friends, toys, and pies and all that good stuff. It's time to get fat and drunk. We deserve that after pushing through this pandemic, don't we? ■ ABILITY



Jeff Charlebois

wheelfunnystuff.com

我本来想改变自己 结果却改变了别人

Zhang Chaofan

Zhang Chaofan was born in Changchun, Jilin Province, China in 1992, with her left forearm missing. Through years of hard work, she founded an art school and a charity foundation under her name. She's also received numerous awards and honors, including the China Youth May Fourth Medal, and was named National Women Pacesetter and a UN Young Leader fighting against COVID-19.

Zhang Chaofan: A Life-Changer

Listening to Zhang Chaofan's stories and thumbing through media reports on her, one might be tempted to reduce her and her journey to simple words like "touching," "industrious," and "inspiring." A face-to-face talk with her swiftly revealed how much more there is to Chaofan than any string of adjectives can capture. A vigorous 29-year-old, Chaofan has pushed herself tirelessly for many years, maintaining busy work schedules, racking up awards and recognition, and pursuing her dreams while doing everything she can to stay healthy and pretty, including foot baths, facial masks, and a thermos always near at hand. Having survived 2020, she said, she knows she can make it through anything.

Growing up with Spirit

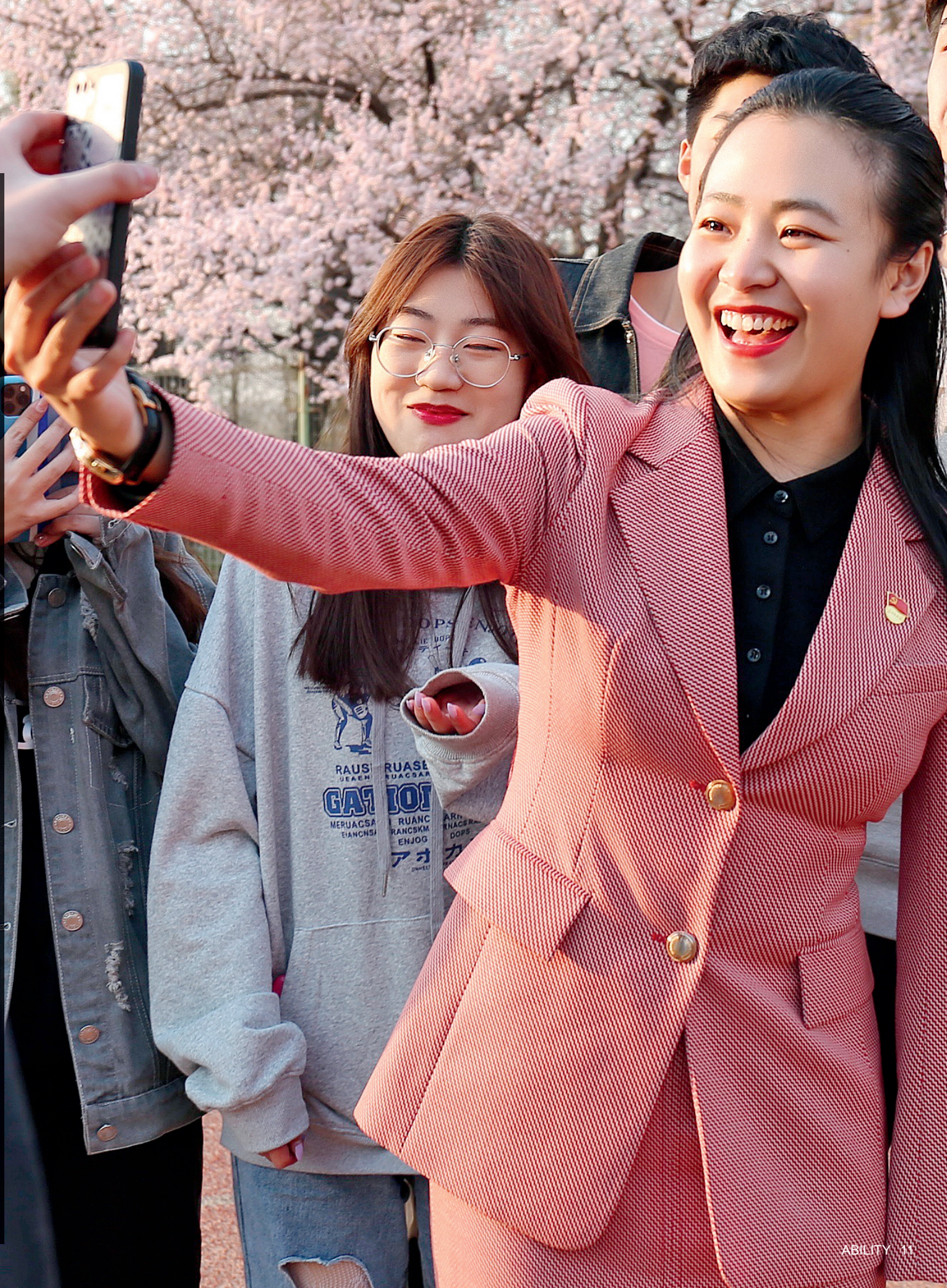
Chaofan was born in 1992 in Changchun, Jilin Province, China to a blue-collar family, with her left forearm missing. In the 1990s, the birth of a child with congenital problems was unbearable for any family. Some of her family's relatives and friends pointedly suggested dumping her in the garbage, while others advised her parents to have another, healthier baby. Fortunately, it was Chaofan's grandmother who had the final say. She decided not only to raise the baby, but also to raise her well. Her parents followed her lead and decided not to have a second child, fearing it might make their daughter feel less worthy.

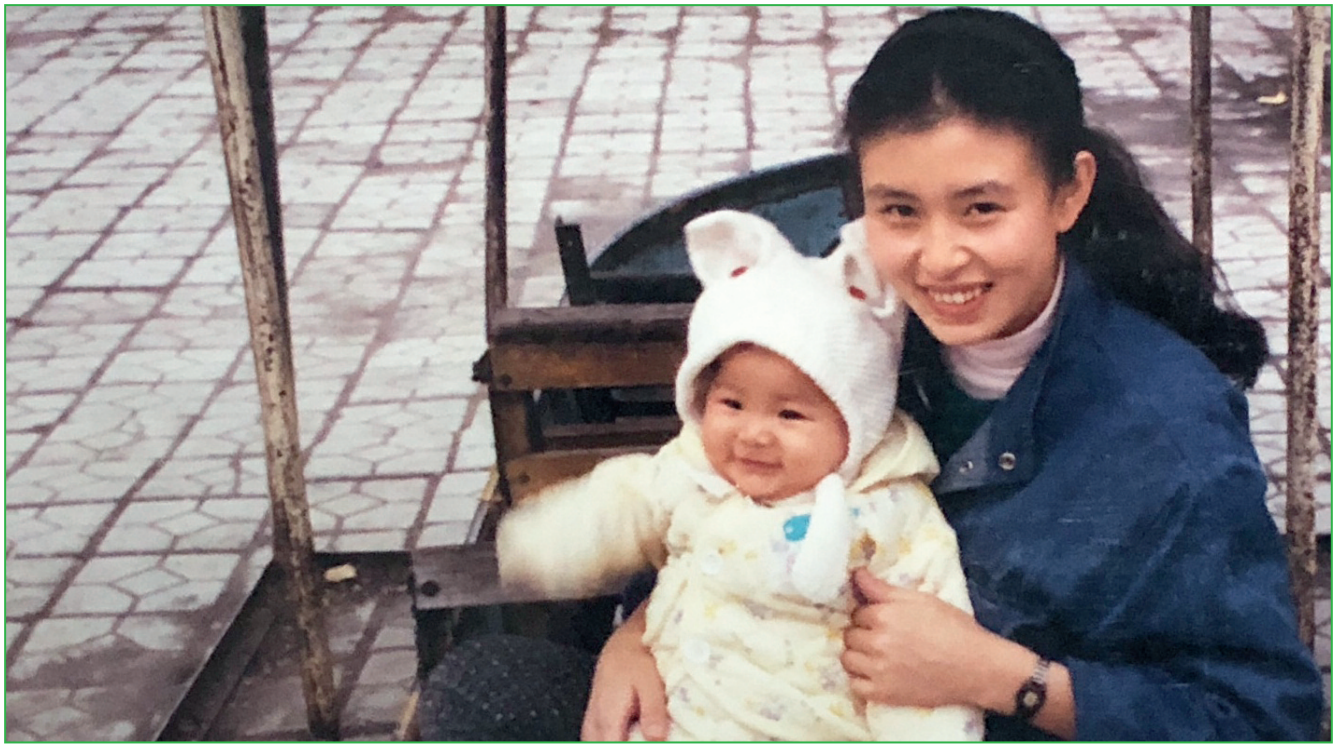
Chaofan's family raised her in the Green Park District west of Changchun, a neighborhood that, even today, isn't a glamorous place to live. When Chaofan was a child, she and her parents crowded together in a tiny room of only eight square meters. The best furniture they ever owned was a set of glass-paneled cupboards, common in China at the time. Entering the room, one would immediately find oneself face-to-face with one's own reflection in the glass. To protect the young girl's sensitive heart, her mother covered the cupboards completely.

From an early age, Chaofan learned to tilt her body 45 degrees back and to the left when posing for photographs, "to hide her left arm from view." Her empty sleeve always intrigued other children, and their attention soon became so oppressive that Chaofan refused to play with them at all. During the day, while her parents were at work, she would while away the hours indoors, alone. The room had a small wooden chair, and she would seat a doll there and roleplay, sometimes as a vendor hocking wares to the doll, sometimes as a doctor giving medications. Once she'd had enough of that, she would get out her crayons and draw on her makeshift canvas--again, the chair. The doll, the chair, her crayons, and a copy of 300 Tang poems became her most faithful companions during childhood.

"Quiet and reserved though I was," Chaofan recalled, "I tended to have my own way. Dad was quick-tempered, so we were always at odds. The more he said, the less I would listen. The harder he tried to get me to go out and play, the less likely I was to do so." The older she got, the more reluctant Chaofan was to so much as speak to her parents. Her grandmother, an assertive character, moved into the apartment and insister her parents move out and rent elsewhere. She also retired early from her job as a union director at a state-run organization. "I was raised by Grandma," said Chaofan. "She spent all her salary on me until I was 14."

Speed skating and a crew cut were also Grandma's ideas to encourage the shy and frail Chaofan to explore the outside world. Six hours of highly intensive training every day, along with 5000-meter runs and 200 sit-ups, didn't sit well with Chaofan right away, but before long, she began to enjoy them. Her teammates befriended her, celebrated her birthdays, even helped her tie her shoes. She no longer had to hide at home.





When she went to compete at the provincial level, Chaofan deliberately attached a cotton glove to the left cuff of her cotton-padded coat so she would be admitted as an able-bodied player. She ended up winning first place in the children's group of the speed skating championship. Only when she stood on the podium for the crowning moment did people around her notice her left sleeve dangling empty. "You're just like everybody else," her mother used to tell her. "You just have one small part missing." After that first win, Chaofan began to understand her mother's words.

"If any person with a disability wants to excel," Chaofan explained, "their family actually needs to put in more effort." She is grateful for her family's encouragement and companionship. "When I was a child, it was not so common for children my age to learn special skills," she said. "But I learned speed skating, and later I learned Chinese painting under the influence of my father. These specialties helped me a lot." Chaofan, with her sports and painting skills, began to stand out in junior high school. As the class communications commissioner, she set out to make her classroom the best-decorated room in the school. Her excellent essays were printed and distributed to every student in her grade as models of good writing. The school even set up a tenacity award especially for her. All this helped restore the confidence Chaofan had lost because of her missing arm.

Thriving in College

In 2011, Chaofan took the college entrance exam, specializing in art, and was admitted to Beijing Technology and Business University with the highest scores among all the art candidates. Over the next four years, she earned a reputation for acing her courses and was awarded a national scholarship, as well as several honorary titles including Beijing Merit Student and Beijing Outstanding Graduate. Despite her background in speed skating, Chaofan didn't simply skate through college; instead, she threw herself into every endeavor, taking advantage of the prime of her life to learn, excel, and thrive.

"I acted as an audience leader for four years." This is how she begins whenever she's asked about her time in college. It all started when one of her classmates, an intern with a TV crew, sat her in the audience because of her good looks. Later, she found she loved this environment so much that she became an organizer of live audiences, cheerfully handing out bread and bottles of mineral water. A show usually lasted several hours, and Chaofan would sit with the audience, dazzled by the spotlights, wondering when she would become the one at centerstage.

Ding Xinzhou, a college friend, called Chaofan "a girl of elegance": "Every other day, she would sort out her wardrobe and scent each level with aromatherapy bags. She would put up new posters every month, buy all kinds of pretty headbands and hairpins, and wear different hairstyles, even though it took her more effort to do these things."

During her first year in college, a university-level public speaking contest was held in Beijing, and Chaofan decided to take on the challenge. Shy and taciturn all her life, she found herself stammering whenever she spoke before more than two people. She didn't know. With only 20 days left before the shortlisting, Chaofan started practicing tongue twisters every day. "Once, a



teacher walked into a classroom and turned on the lights, and I was the only one there, by myself in the dark," she recalled. "She was startled! When she found out what I was doing, she asked me to practice in front of her students." Chaofan thought she was well-prepared, but once on the podium, she lost her composure and started stuttering again. In the heat of the moment, she decided to improvise so as not to "embarrass herself too much." Off-script, Chaofan started telling her stories of her own life. Her impromptu speech captivated the audience so completely that when she finished, she was asked for autographs.

The official public speaking contest was a two-parter, and Chaofan won the polls, as well as the first prize, by telling stories off-the-cuff. This marked the beginning of a string of public speaking contests and debates that she started attending whenever she could. Once, she brought home four awards in a single week. For her roommates, this was "Super cool!" but for her, "it was not a matter of glory. When I found something I might be good at," she explained, "I wanted to show it off by competing because I could make more friends that way and stay motivated to learn. I couldn't have made so much progress so quickly without venturing beyond my small circles."

In 2015, Chaofan competed in a quiz show on Jiangsu TV and snatched the title of Grand Slam Champion by defeating all eight of her fellow contestants. After that, she began receiving even more attention and was invited onto several popular talent shows, where she accrued nicknames like "Asian Venus" and "One-armed Goddess." The national audience, poised to view her with sympathy, soon realized she was already exhibiting more beauty and talent than many of them could imagine.

Pursuing "Extraordinary" Dreams

"Chaofan" means "extraordinary" in Chinese, and after graduating from college, Chaofan only continued living up to her name. She devoted herself to founding a Chinese painting and calligraphy institute while preparing for the postgraduate entrance examinations. In her view, taking the exams and starting a business were both boxes to be checked while she was young, and "it was okay to do them at the same time!" For four years running, she'd ranked first in her school in terms of academic performance. She could've moved on directly to the postgraduate level at the same university, but the idea of going home had been lingering in her mind. After careful consideration, she decided to return to Changchun. In 2015, she enrolled in the Chinese Ink Painting of Flowers & Birds degree program at the Graduate School of Jilin University of Arts with top scores: 407 on the first test, 147 on the second. That same year, she founded her own art education and training school.

Soon after it opened, parents who'd heard about the school through word-of-mouth came to visit and found that they couldn't afford the tuition. To address this issue, Chaofan started offering free and discounted lessons to talented students. She also initiated a scholarship with her winnings from the Grand Slam TV quiz show prize. Today, 300,000 yuan (roughly $47,000) is made available annually through the Chaofan Dream Scholarship to support talented students of limited means in their pursuits of art and education.



Now occupying 35,000 square meters, the art school has expanded into a public service project called Chaofan Dream Town, in collaboration with the CPC Committee and the government of Green Park District. As the hub of cultural production in Changchun, this establishment has already engaged 12,000 people in various volunteer roles to run art galleries, classrooms, and training programs for innovative and entrepreneurial young talent. Naturally, Chaofan has become the spokesperson of the Dream Town.

In 2019, she received a private Weibo message from a mother in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. As it turned out, the woman's daughter had been born without a left forearm, too. Watching Chaofan on TV, she'd began to dream of her daughter meeting Chaofan in person. For Chaofan, "reading her words reminded me of my own mom and everything she's done for me." She decided to invite the mother and daughter to visit Chaofan Dream Town. This was the first time for the young girl, Xinxin, to travel away from home. Upon meeting Chaofan, a shy Xinxin gave her favorite sticker to her idol. Xinxin stayed for a full week, with Chaofan keeping her company while she learned to skate and draw. "After she returned home," Chaofan said, "Xinxin kept in touch with me. Later, her mother told me she'd developed the best language skills in her class and had become a totally different person. Xinxin often sends me voice messages asking when we can film a show together and saying she wants to be with me onstage."

On QQ, a popular messenger app, Chaofan has thousands of followers whose children have similar physical conditions. On first joining the group, Chaofan took photos of a two-and-a-half-page letter she'd written by hand and shared them. Many parents sent her replies like, "Each word I read from you is one more ray of hope for my child." As a child and teenager, Chaofan had never imagined her story would influence others like this, even changing their lives.

In early 2020, COVID-19 forced the art school to shut down, and Chaofan's grandmother died of cancer. At only 28 years old, Chaofan found these losses unbearable, but she didn't let them stop her. By organizing a series of public service activities, she and her foundation united and mobilized caring people from all walks of life, raised goods and donations worth more than 8.9 million yuan (roughly $1,500,000), and delivered medical masks, protective clothing, medical alcohol, gloves, shoes and other living necessities to the front line of anti-epidemic forces. In September 2020, Chaofan showed the world the spirit of leadership she shares with so many young Chinese volunteers, being listed among UN Young Leaders fighting against the pandemic.

Upbeat, lively, and hard-working, Chaofan concluded her interview with this message: "Professional women in this new era must build self-worth bravely. Even more importantly, we must have a sense of social responsibility. Self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-love--I think these are essential qualities for any outstanding woman pursuing extraordinary dreams." ■ ABILITY

by Wang Yumeng
photos by Feng Huan

This story is part of a series of articles published as an exclusive editorial exchange between *China Press for People with Disabilities & Spring Breeze* and *ABILITY Magazine*


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Buck a Mile?

Next summer will mark 10 years year since I first declared my intention to ride 1,000,000 miles by motorcycle for multiple sclerosis (MS). Though I thought my mission would be nearly complete by now, I'm proud to say that each and every mile I've logged has been on the way to or from an event devoted to raising awareness, funds for charity, or both, and that I spoke at many of them.

Heading into 2021, I didn't know what to expect. The pandemic was still raging across the US, affecting almost every live event where I usually speak or attend, as well as travel and other restrictions. My health wasn't exactly in stellar shape, either. My cornea transplant last fall was a failure, leaving me legally blind in one eye, and halfway through this year, I began developing some unusual joint issues in my hands and knees. Google and my neurologist both suspect I've developed a second autoimmune disease, this time rheumatoid arthritis, though after six months, I still don't have a formal diagnosis. A few more lesions have appeared on my MRIs as well, revealing that my MS is beginning to progress as well. Lucky me!

What I didn't expect was to have a stellar year raising money for people living with MS. In fact, my fundraising efforts in 2021 have surpassed any of



the preceding decade. It started with a crazy mock trial in Texas, where I was accused of having a crazy gene that caused me to ride motorcycles. Riding from New Hampshire to Dallas in February was enough for them to find me guilty. The event raised over $6,000.

My Nut on a Bolt world record attempt on a Chopper was just as crazy and just as successful, pulling in $20,000 for charity. I set the record for coast-to-coast on a Chopper, which was then raffled off. Andrew Cole of Bentonville, Arkansas took that Chopper home.

I delivered a few keynote presentations for rallies and motorcycle clubs, which also raised about $6,000. My annual MS5000 fundraiser was a bit smaller this year, mainly because I was on the road and unable to promote it. Still, it was a great success, pulling in over $20,000 for MS Views and News.

2021 was the first year of the International Motorcycle



Show's new outdoors format, and they organized nine trade show events across the county. I presented seminars at four shows: northern California, Chicago, Atlanta and southern California. At the other five, I was on display with my sponsor, Yamaha. Of course, I rode my motorcycle to each and every event, spending time at home in between. Just riding to these nine events was over 30,000 miles logged for MS!

Add a few fundraisers and bike rallies in Sturgis and Daytona, and I rode a total of 60,000 miles this year, raising awareness and funds for charity.

Sure, my mind and body are falling apart, but my dollar-raised-per-mile ratio is only getting better! In almost 10 years, I've ridden 500,000 miles and raised almost $300,000 for MS. If my efficiency keeps improving, I may end up raising $1,000,000 before I reach the 1,000,000 miles on my journey.

Now, I suppose that wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it? ■ ABILITY

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Federico Martello

Straight out of Italy, into the hearts of music lovers everywhere.



Singer, composer, and author Federico Martello loves opera, which he's studied for years, but his passion for music is broader, spanning genres and centuries. With a style echoing classical, jazz, pop and soul, he resists the confines of a single path and goes instead wherever the music and the culture take him. He's traveled all over Europe, Latin America, the US and Russia, attending festivals and shows, and placed in several music competitions, including The Voice in Rome. He looks forward to revisiting all these places once it's safe enough to travel.

Having navigated his fair share cities, he's also a vocal advocate for eliminating architectural barriers for persons with disabilities. "If you make your city accessible," he says, "everyone can get around."

Federico's energy is delightful, and his love for music palpable. Our conversation could've flowed on forever, though eventually it had to end.



Lia Martirosyan: Ciao! Come stai?

Federico Martello: Molto bene!

[*laughter*]

Lia: Federico, when and where did your passion for music begin?

Federico: When I was a child in Sicily. Things weren't so easy for me then, but in music, I found a way to express myself. I started at about 10 years old, singing a little, playing a little piano, because my whole family loves music. I have two brothers who are musicians. Mom and dad would always sing at home. I grew up with music. I started with listening, then moved on to playing music for myself, and then finally for others. It became a way of letting people know me.

Lia: Did you gravitate naturally toward classical?

Federico: I started with classical music. Opera. Then I went through jazz improvisation, and then pop. So, my style is a little fusion. I can sing something like Bocelli and something like Joe Cocker, too. I have two faces, like a coin, and I love this because I love to have fun!

Lia: Lovely. Fusion fun! Did you study music formally?

Federico: Yes. I started studying classical music in Tuscany, at Siena. I did that for a year, but it wasn't for me. I love opera, but I don't like to *sing* opera. I switched to jazz improvisation. Then I moved from Siena to Milan and started studying voice. Even now, I'm always learning. I study music every day.

Lia: Absolutely. Learning is essential!

You're doing a lot of traveling now, with all these competitions.

Federico: I am. Because of music, I have opportunities to go around the world, from Poland to Russia, from the US to Gibraltar, London, Spain, Siberia, even. I think this is one of music's biggest gifts: the chance to encounter new cultures, to find new sounds and put them in my songs.

Lia: How easily do you pick up languages?

Federico: It's not so easy. I started with French and English. I understand French very well, but I'm not able to reply. When, for example, I sang in Russia--it's not so easy for me, as an Italian, to learn a new language like Russian. There are lots of words and letters that we don't have. For example, "*kh*"--we don't have this sound. But I love Russian songs! It's like my second language, even though I don't speak Russian.

[*laughter*]

Lia: Loving it is important. You have lots of fans in Russia, I understand.

Federico: Yes, a lot. A lot of women, especially, because when I say I'm Italian, they say, "Oh, my God, you're *Italian*!"

[*laughter*]

Federico: If you go to a Russian market and say, "I'm Italian," they say, "Okay, you're Italian? Come here! Come here!" It's like this. I love Russia. I love all the places I visit.

Lia: Have you been traveling during the pandemic?

Federico: No, no, no. During the pandemic, I went to Russia once, with an invitation from the government, but even that was hard. Travel has not been possible.

Lia: How are you staying engaged with the world of music?

Federico: It's been really, really hard. In Italy, early in the pandemic, everything was closed. Everything. Right now, if you go to a theater, if there are, for example, 600 seats, you can use only 300. We could only sing online. I spent my time at home writing new songs. I'm near the city of Bergamo, and it was horrible during the first lockdown; it was the epicenter of the pandemic in Italy.

Lia: Oh, my goodness!

Federico: Yes.

Lia: Speaking of writing songs, "Non Esiste il Destino" ("There's No Destiny") is beautiful. Can you take me to where your mind was while writing it?

Federico: When I start to write something, I don't need to be in one place. I started writing that one on a train, with just a few words. Then I arrived somewhere else, and there were other words. Then, I was at a theater: more words. One day, I took those words and said, "Okay, this is a song."

[*laughter*]

I write my feelings. Maybe one phrase comes because I had a certain feeling in a certain moment. In some other phrase, you can find other feelings. With "Non Esiste il Destino," I wrote what I was thinking about, which was destiny. All my experiences--disability, work, love, even being hungry--these go into my songs.

Lia: How do you navigate people away from the topic of disability so they can focus on the music?

Federico: Usually, when someone tries to focus on my disability, I joke about it. If you get too serious, then



others will, too. Distract them with music, and they'll follow along.

That said, I'm a man, and I like to be treated like a man. I'm not a thing. Once, I auditioned for a talent show, and someone told me, "Federico, you are amazing. You have a really good voice. But we can't put you on TV." I asked, "Why?" They said, "Because we don't want to people to pity you." I was pissed! We don't need pity. If I need help, I will ask you. If someone doesn't understand this, we need to teach them.

Lia: Indeed. What about the world of competition? What inspired you to say, "I'm going to do competitions"?

Federico: My manager! I did my first competition in Italy and won third prize. My first thought was, "Wow, this is okay!" But after a few competitions, people began to "pity" me, so my manager decided we should go around the world. I started with a mini tour of festivals in the US. Then I came back and was in Poland, then Spain, then Gibraltar, then London. I started connecting with people around the world. That's what I live for, actually: the connections. When someone tells me, "Your music makes me feel alive," it's better than any cash prize.

Lia: That's lovely! What a gift. Hopefully things start opening up again soon, so we can get back to making those connections.

Can you share a bit about the work you're currently doing to eliminate architectural barriers?

Federico: Yes. I've done a lot of this because I think everyone needs to be free to go wherever they want. Before the pandemic, we did projects to eliminate architectural barriers at different places: schools, parks, a swimming pool. We're organizing more shows, now, though everything's on hold. But there are singers, musicians, comedians…many different kinds of artists are involved.

After I went on TV for the first time with "All Together Now, Italy," I received a lot of messages from people


Jeep



with disabilities who told me, "You are strong! How do you do this? You are an inspiration." But I don't know if I like to be an inspiration for a lot of people. I think being an inspiration for just one person is the biggest thing you can do.

Lia: What about accessibility barriers in Italy? Have things changed throughout your life? How is it progressing?

Federico: In Italy--everywhere, actually--we have two kinds of barriers for persons with disabilities: mental, which is the worst; and physical, as in architectural. Since I'm living by Bergamo, near Milano, there are lots of places where you can go with a wheelchair and other devices, but once you leave the north of Italy, it gets a bit harder. If you go to Rome, for example, and you visit an older building, you may not be able to get in. There are lots of barriers. And there's lots of bureaucracy, which slows things down. This is why I'm trying to show people what they have to do. I always say, accessibility isn't just for people with disabilities. It's for everyone. A little old man, a woman pushing a baby stroller…a city that's accessible for people with disabilities is accessible for everyone else, too. If you make your city accessible, everyone can get around.

Lia: It's wonderful seeing all this activity. When I visited Venice, I noticed—

Federico: I went to Venice two years ago, and it was really hard! If you have to go up with the wheelchair—

Lia: You can't go back down!

Federico: It was horrible!

Lia: Oh, and the taxis!

Federico: You might as well take the canals! I can swim. It's much easier!

[*laughter*]

It's beautiful, Venice. It's a beautiful city. But it needs to be accessible for everyone.

Lia: Indeed. At least the locals are lovely. Were you



born in Italy?

Federico: I was born in Sicily. When I was 20 years old, I moved to Tuscany. After five more years, I moved to Lombardy and Milano.

Lia: Do you want to continue with concerts and competitions? Where do you dream to take your music?

Federico: For me, it depends on the event. Lots of people ask me to come to their festivals, but sometimes, even if it's a nice one, it's not good for me. For example, if it's only classical music, I won't go. I don't like festivals just for the sake of money. I love the ones with lots of culture, where I can find new music, new ideas.

I love to travel as a tourist, not just as a musician. But it's difficult. This summer, for example, I went to Sicily on holiday. Two days after I arrived, they were saying, "Federico, can you come, please? Can you sing?" Just like that, the holiday stopped!

Lia: Do you need a few days of quiet?

Federico: Well…it's really hard to stop me from talking!

[*laughter*]

But, yes, sometimes I need that. Especially when I sing a lot.

Lia: Understandably so.

Federico: For example, when I recorded a show in Italy, we sang for a week. Every day, we were singing! By the end, [*hoarsely*], I was like this! It was horrible. It was really cold, the beginning of December, and then I got the flu with a high fever--terrible! I still went through to the final, but I needed a week to recover.

Lia: Was that the first time you've lost your voice?

Federico: Yes, the first time.


Federico Martello

Lia: Scary?

Federico: Yes. I don't usually lose it so easily.

Lia: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us? Something you're working on?

Federico: Soon, you'll be able to hear my new single, "Come la Sabbia" ("Like Sand"). We are like sand. We are little grains of sand, and each grain is different from the others. I think this is humanity. Sexuality, disability…you don't need these to know a person. You just need to know them. "Come la Sabbia" talks about this.

Lia: Another beauty! looking forward to it.

Federico: I will send it to you.

Lia: How do you feel about people saying, "You can do whatever you set your mind to"?

Federico: It's not like this. We must find a middle way. No one can do everything. You need to be clear with yourself. For example, I'm in a wheelchair. I can't jump on the stairs. There's no need for people to tell me, "You can't jump on the step"; I already know. And it's fine. It's not a problem. We just need to be honest with ourselves.

Lia: Precisely.

This has been such a pleasant chat for me! We could talk forever!

Federico: For me, too!

Lia: We can't, though. Sadly.

Federico: No, no. It's time. You're right. It's time to go.

■ ABILITY

federicomartello.it

ITTO
outini

Blindness is the Light

Itto Outini is a multilingual accessibility advocate and human rights activist. Born and raised in the mountains of Morocco, she was deprived of education as a child. At 17, her uncle's wife blinded her, and her family abandoned her in the hospital. She spent six years homeless before graduating from high school at 23 and, with support from an American couple, pursuing her BA in applied linguistics. In 2017, she came to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a Master's in journalism. She's now a permanent resident in the US, where she serves as a disability inclusion specialist with the United Nations Development Programme and as the founder and president of a chapter of the Fulbright Association, Fulbrighters with Disabilities. Her personal journey and late but transformative experience of education have motivated her to share her story, especially with those who are suffering invisible hardships, so they know they're not alone. She is committed to building a more conscientious, inclusive and accessible world for all. *ABILITY Magazine* interviewed Itto and learned of her journey and how our paths came together with our work connecting job seekers and employers.

ABILITY Magazine: Can you summarize your journey from Morocco to the UN?

Itto Outini: Sure! I was born and raised in the Atlas Mountains and started school for the first time when I was 17. I didn't have any technology, assistive or otherwise; I had sighted friends who would read to me, help with oral exams and all of that. When I came to the US to do my MA at the University of Arkansas, it was the first time I ever used a smartphone, an iPad, a computer, even.

ABILITY: You didn't start school until you were 17? Were you home-schooled?

Outini: No. There was no home-schooling in Morocco. I didn't know how to count from one to three before I was 17. I didn't even know how to spell my own name! There was no way to learn about the outside world. No electricity, no television, nothing.

ABILITY: Were you farmers?

Outini: Exactly.

ABILITY: And that's why you couldn't go to school?

Outini: Yes and no. Yes, we were far from the rest of the world, but I was more deprived than others because my family hated me. They abused me and refused to give me any kind of education, and my uncle's wife blinded me when I was 17.

ABILITY: Do you mind sharing a little bit more? Is that too sensitive?

Outini: It's fine. It's public. It was painful in the beginning, but I'm working on my autobiography now, "Blindness is the Light of My Life," because if she hadn't blinded me, I'd never have gone to school. She threw something sharp at my face--a knife, I think--and they left me in the hospital, and when I was discharged a few months later, I had nowhere to go. A stranger helped me find the blind school. I started from the seventh grade. I was homeless all six years I was in high school, but then I graduated, and I went to the university, and I worked so hard, and I was awarded the Fulbright scholarship and came to America.

ABILITY: How were you able to finance your schooling?

Outini: Education is free in Morocco. But as for food and all of that, it was really difficult. I worked in restaurants. I cleaned. Sometimes, out of pity or sympathy, people would hand me something on the street. When they gave me money, I wouldn't even use it to buy food. I would go to the capital and buy books in Braille, which are very expensive, and carry them around with me in a plastic bag so they wouldn't get ruined by rain or snow. That's how committed I was to my education. I struggled, and I suffered, but I didn't die! (laughs)

ABILITY: (laughs) It would make for a strange interview if you were dead. I'm glad you didn't die!

Outini: Nope! Not yet!

ABILITY: Okay. So, you're homeless, you're trying to survive and find shelter. You created some kind of camp for yourself that was somewhat secure, and you went to school?

Outini: No, no, there was no secure shelter at all. We don't have homeless shelters in Morocco. Mostly, I stayed at the bus station. I slept in the snow. My body still hasn't completely recovered; I still have pain in my back and my joints, especially my hips and knees. But then, after six years, I was rescued by an American couple, and they helped me find housing. They're like my family now.

ABILITY: And where do they live?

Outini: They travel all over, but right now they're in Oregon.

ABILITY: Did they bring you to the States?

Outini: They helped me apply for the Fulbright. And they helped me learn English. When I first started--see, I'm very confident! I knew how to say, "What is your name and how do you spell it?" so I thought I knew English! But my American family, they pushed me, they would only talk to me in English even though they spoke other languages, and they took me to the American Language Center. That's how I learned.

ABILITY: In your UNPD blog you wrote you learned Braille in a day and within one semester learned—was it English? Arabic?

Outini: It was Arabic and French, and then English in six months.

ABILITY: That's incredible! Can you talk what about the Fulbright?

Outini: The Fulbright is very competitive. When I applied, I was competing with hundreds of candidates in Morocco and thousands around the world. I had to take exams, the TOEFL and the GRE, to enroll in grad school in the States. But when I got all the documents together, and the letters of recommendation, and my grades were good, the Fulbright offices in Morocco and in Washington DC were very helpful. I hope other people with disabilities hear about the Fulbright and apply. It's a wonderful community. Very supportive. We call it a global family.



ABILITY: For people who don't know, what does getting a Fulbright entail?

Outini: It's very prestigious. A lot of people say that if you get the Fulbright, you're the smartest. I don't know about one that because lots of smart people are living in poverty like I was and don't know about the Fulbright, so maybe they never even knew to apply. I hope more people hear about it. I think if someone works hard and fits the criteria, they will get it. The Fulbright Association likes people who work hard to bring peace through education. That's their mission.

ABILITY: How did you navigate grad school in America, as a blind woman from the Atlas Mountains?

Outini: My first year at the University of Arkansas, there was a lot of adjusting. Remember, I'd never even used a smartphone. I thought it would have buttons I could memorize, but then I found out they're all touchscreens! I literally had to sit for hundreds and hundreds of hours, listening to YouTube videos that my host parents would download for me, before I could learn how to answer an email. That was my first year.

My second year, I was working on my thesis, and then I got diagnosed with a rare disease, pigmented villonodular synovitis (PVNS), which causes tumors. It was the worst pain! Last year, I had surgery to remove my eyes because they were damaged and might get infected, and I did that with no painkillers because I don't like oxycodone, but even that pain wasn't as bad! They say PVNS is the worst one, and it's true. I had hip surgery in 2019 and defended my thesis in January 2020 because I couldn't do it in December.

ABILITY: For those of us who aren't medical doctors--

Outini: Right. PVNS. In Morocco, in 2014, my right side from my hip down to my toes started hurting. I couldn't even walk! My American family took me to the doctor, but they misdiagnosed me. They said it was sciatica. Everyone told me sciatica's something you can't fix, you just have to live with it. And I was like, "Okay, fine, this is very painful, but what can I do?"

It's really interesting how the body and the mind work together. In Morocco, I was in survival mode 24/7, and that distracted me from the pain. When I came to America, that's when it changed. I was staying with a host family in Arkansas--not the one who rescued me, a different couple--and my host father is a retired doctor. He called the emergency room one day and said, "I'm bringing her, you have to do an MRI." They looked at my hips and found two tumors. Technically, PVNS tumors are benign, but the pain makes it impossible to function. They did the surgery a few weeks later, and now I'm tumor-free!

ABILITY: Congratulations!

Outini: Yes! I'm good now! I had hip surgery in 2019, I had eye surgery in 2020, and now I'm good, I'm safe, I'm mostly pain-free, and I'm ready to share my story



with the world so I can help others.

ABILITY: By working with UNDP.

Outini: Exactly.

ABILITY: How did you get connected with them?

Outini: After graduating, I started looking for jobs. Because of my MA, and my seven languages, and being a Fulbright alumna, I would apply for jobs and get interviews, but then the recruiters would say something like, "Well, you can't see, and this job requires driving!" And I would say, "But there's no driving in the job description!" I wasted hours and hours that way, filling out applications, submitting forms, searching for jobs, and I didn't get anything.

Then I came across ABILITY Job Fair. For me, the worst thing I struggle with as a screen-reader user is navigating websites, but ABILITY Jobs has a good one. I was able to create a profile there, and that's how I met Erik Kinnhammar, who's now my supervisor at UNDP.

ABILITY: Your blog says it was a dream come true, coming to the US and working with the UN.

Outini: Yes, literally! When I was homeless and suffering, the only way for me to stay happy and positive was by using fantasies and dreams. One of those dreams was to work for the UN and tell my story to the world. I really believed I would do it, even when I was sleeping in the snow! And then my dream came true in 2021, thanks to ABILITY Job Fair and UNPD for believing in persons with disabilities like myself and recognizing what we can offer the world.

ABILITY: Glad to hear the job fair is working as intended.

Outini: Yes! I think it's really important to have job fairs like this one, focused specifically on persons with disabilities. When organizations attend ABILITY Job Fairs, it's not like with other job fairs: they know they're going to hire persons with disabilities, so they don't come to us with a bunch of biases or assumptions about what we can't do. They don't discriminate against us. They're more honest about their intentions. It's never perfect, but it's better to have all those conversations out in the open instead of hiding things, pretending we're not disabled, all of that.

Personally, I'm proud of my disability. I'm public about it. I never hide! It's impossible to hide blindness, anyway! But when I apply for jobs, I don't apply as a blind person. I apply as a Fulbright scholar, as a person with an MA in journalism, as a multilingual person. There's no such thing as a job that hires you just for being blind, and there shouldn't be, but there are lots of jobs I can do. All I need is for employers to recognize my abilities and give me opportunities to prove myself. My hope is that if we keep proving ourselves and building on the work done by organizations like ABILITY Job Fair, then we'll be able to come together as human beings to overcome the social ideologies that persons with disabilities face around the world. That's my mission. That's the dream I'm working on now, like I did with the UN, to make it come true. ■ ABILITY

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abilityjobfair.org

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Katie Porter

U.S Rep. Katie Porter (CA-45) of Orange County, CA grew up in Iowa watching Sen. Tom Harkin and learning about the ADA. Rep. Porter sees the rights of people with disabilities that have yet to be fully realized. Serving her second term in the House, Rep. Porter is known for whipping out her dry erase board during House committee hearings to school CEO's and other powerful officials about how their actions impact everyday Americans and how they need to make changes. Occasionally, she'll quote from a law text book she authored. With a history of being a consumer protection attorney and law professor, she is a fierce advocate and champion for equity when it comes to people with disabilities and people of color. *ABILITY Magazine* caught up the busy congresswoman to talk about her work related to mental health care and accessibility rights.

Chet Cooper: How did mental health get on your list of as a congresswoman?

Katie Porter: Like so many Americans, my family and friends have faced mental health challenges. There are very few families, workplaces, or communities that haven't face those challenges. One of the things I've seen is, even as we've made advances in the ability to treat mental health, the actual delivery of that

treatment along with affordability and accessibility often lags behind. One of the things I've been focused on is making sure insurers and providers are delivering on mental healthcare. When I moved to Orange County ten years ago, there were no pediatric mental health beds in the entire county. You might think, "Well, it's just a county." Orange County is bigger than some 20 states, and yet we had no pediatric mental health beds. Although that's changed with the leadership of our Children's Hospital over time, it goes to show you how difficult it is to find mental healthcare as well as afford it. So, when I talk about people being healthy, I mean healthy in every aspect of their lives, both physical and mental health.

Cooper: How did you know about the lack of support for children with mental health issues?

Porter: Talking to different people about their experiences. One of the great things about being a Congressperson is that people share their life stories with you. They share their frustrations with you.

I grew up in Iowa, Tom Harkin was my Senator. I remember what a big deal it was to have the ADA pass. One of the most amazing things that have occurred since is that the stigma has been reduced. More and more people feel like they can talk about their frustrations and challenges, what they couldn't accomplish, what they couldn't get in terms of wellness and what they often are falling short on.

I started talking to different to psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, schools, teachers in our community. I have educated myself on their challenges. That's part of being a Representative—that learning part—learning what the problems are in your community. The next logical and needed step is to teach other people about them to create the momentum to fix them.

Cooper: I did some homework on you, but I somehow missed your connection with Iowa. Sen. Harkin wrote for us for 14 years, I don't know if you know that, for the magazine. So that's wonderful that you have the beginnings of your awareness of the ADA and where it is. In that vein, when you look at the ADA and you look at the ADA-AA, when it went back to Congress and it was reintroduced and it defined what a disability is, can you see that kind of legislation happening again with creating new laws connected to some of the issues we're having today? If so, specifically I was thinking about the legislation that may exist about companies being individuals, that a company has the rights of an individual, and how the money now can go to corporate—you know what I'm trying to say.

Porter: Yeah.

Cooper: Can you talk to us about that?

Porter: There are real lessons to be drawn from the successes of the ADA, from the successes of the advocacy of the disability community and those who support the disability community. What these lessons reveal, is that by allowing every American, regardless of their different abilities, to achieve their potential is a great thing for our economy. Sometimes the issues get portrayed as if making sure that people with disabilities can have the ability to work, shop, worship, and to engage in their community, that somehow that is an "expense" or a "burden." Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, when we design inclusive things, not only do we create opportunity for people with disabilities to contribute to our economy but often, designing things from an inclusive perspective creates a better outcome for everybody.

I chaired my hearing this fall on the Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee on Natural Resources. I was really interested in the topic of accessibility of public lands. I mean accessibility in a lot of different ways, including the costs of getting there, the transportation issues, where we locate these public lands in terms of environmental justice. But I also meant very particularly accessibility for the disability community. Here's what I learned. Good trail design that helps people with physical disabilities is also the right kind of trail design to prevent erosion and ensure conservation. In addition to making these trails more accessible for people who, for example, may use wheelchairs, may use different kinds of mobility assistance, you also make those trails easier for people who use strollers and have kids, for people who are seniors who may have balance challenges.

The result is more people enjoying and discovering our national parks, more people on our public lands. And that is good for both our souls and our spirits and also for our economy in those rural communities around the public lands. It's a false idea that sometimes gets pushed out by corporations or by the business community that accommodating every American to the extent possible is somehow a burden or an expense. To the contrary, it is a benefit, a privilege that we are able in our country to welcome everybody into these parks, institutions, and organizations.

Cooper: We did a lot of work around accessibility in the parks. It's an ongoing effort. There are certain areas, as you know, when you're hiking, where there are challenges to the terrain and how you create a situation that maybe there were steps going up a hill, to make that more of an accessible area and carve it in such a way that a wheelchair or, like you say, a stroller, so that people can access the beauty of what we have in natural resources in our country.

Porter: A lot of the things that people think of in a strict sense as accommodations for the disability community also benefitted me, as a single mom with three kids, making those trails and parks accessible to my kids and



me. A great example here is designing picnic tables that accommodate wheelchairs. Those same picnic tables also accommodate high chairs and people who need different kinds of seating and different kinds of support when they sit. So, there's a lot of inclusive design principle that we ought to be bringing to everything, recognizing, too, it's not just one kind of disability, or just one group of people.

So, the more inclusive we can be in those design principles, we'll be better at achieving our goals and setting ourselves up for the future. I hope we'll continue to see more options and possibilities for people with disabilities to fully participate.

Cooper: Do you know the term "visitability"?

Porter: Yes, exactly. That's a great one. Visitability. I like that.

Cooper: There's legislation supposedly sitting somewhere on the Hill that says that new home development should have a minimum visibility, meaning some entrance to the home as a zero-step entrance, hallways accessible, and a downstairs bathroom that's accessible so people who might have an ability issue can visit the home. And of course, there's a greater push for the overall universal design concept, which visitability is just part of universal design. Even when you're talking about the parks, if we think architecturally in developing anything we do as a universal design component, then everyone wins.

Porter: That's exactly right. One of the things we've seen, for example, is with housing for our military. My teacher, Senator Warren, pushes for more military housing to be built that will accommodate people with disabilities. But if we were to design these houses with a visitability lens, like you said, we would build them all that way. That means as the population of people with disabilities goes up and down, we don't run into these shortages and blockages because we've designed it so that it's appropriate for everybody right from the start.

Cooper: Right! Of course, with the aging of the country, of the world, we have more and more people who will continue to acquire more mobility issues as they age.

Porter: Absolutely. Orange County, California, really boomed in the '70s and the '80s and the '90s, and a lot of those folks now are aging. In California's 45th district, which I represent, we have an aging population.



We're also homes to the second largest retirement community in the U.S., Laguna Woods. Many of us at a different place in our lives will benefit from different kinds of accommodations. That's why I don't want to think about accommodating disabilities as something we do just for people with disabilities, but it's something we do for all of us. We all benefit from having people with disabilities be in these places. We all will benefit from those universal design principles, often at different points in our lives.

Cooper: One of the issues we look at with the environment is that if we don't have a healthy environment, we don't have healthy people. Lots of things occur because of pollution to the environment ranging from getting cancer, all the things that could happen. Currently we both have experienced an issue locally with the oil spill. Can you talk about your concerns there and what we can do to move the needle even faster with environmental issues?

Porter: Look, healthy air, clean water, being able to be healthy in your environment is something that's important for all Americans, but it is particularly important for people who may be struggling with lung disease, or those who have more difficult conditions to treat. This is an issue of equity, of justice. We know that certain communities as well as communities of color have long been the repository of pollution. It's important to begin the transition to clean energy by understanding it as something we're doing for our health and for our planet, but also for our economic competitiveness. Many of our competitor countries, including China, are investing much more in green energy than we are. They understand that the economy that has the manufacturing jobs for the next century will be the country that figures out how to manufacture in a clean way.

It's the same thing in terms of thinking about housing shortage, which is a big issue here in California. How can we build more housing? Part of that is thinking about how we can build housing in a green way that minimizes the harm to the environment and lets us put in more dense housing without harming our environment.

[Assistant to Porter: I just wanted to jump in here and say that we have time for one more question.]

Cooper: That was fast! I wanted to share how impressive it was watching you pressuring to get an answer around COVID testing and the cost. How can we take your energy to do things like that again around climate change? Where can you take your expertise and that background information that you gather?

Porter: One of the things that is really, really important as an elected official is to be honest with the American people. That means pushing some of these fossil fuel companies to push against what we call "green washing." They say that they're all about clean energy transition, yet they continue behind the scenes to spend millions and millions of dollars lobbying against clean energy initiatives. It's really important not just to ask, "Do you support clean energy? Do you like polar bears?" Everybody will say yes. But to say, "What action will you take to put behind your words?" When you think back to the conversation I had with the CDC director about free COVID testing, if I had asked him, "Do you think that anyone should not get a COVID test because they're worried about the expense?" he would have said, "Oh, of course not. I think everybody should get a COVID test who needs one." But that doesn't mean that everyone will be able to get one. You have to push for, "What is the action you're able to connect this to?"

If you're testifying before me and you're saying that you believe climate change is real and you think it's an existential threat, I need to hear, the American people need to hear, and the people of this world need to hear what it is that you are doing. What are you doing to reduce emissions? What are you doing to change your business model? What are you doing to make a difference?" It needs to be meaningful and real. It can't be empty words.

I just want to say one word quickly on a couple of healthcare bills I have, not mental health, but other healthcare bills.

Cooper: Sure.

Porter: People with disabilities often face special healthcare needs, but what they get from the healthcare system is distinctly unfair treatment. We see this in a lot of different ways, everything from denials of organ transplants to very, very difficult, arduous arguments about what is and is not medically necessary for people with disabilities. I've been working across the aisle to address some of these issues, and I'm really grateful for the disability community in helping me understand these challenges and raise them. For example, with my colleague Jamie Herrera Butler, a Republican Representative from Washington, we have introduced the Charlotte Woodward Organ Transplant Discrimination Prevention Act. It would end blatant discrimination in organ donation against people with disabilities, which is often based on perceived years of quality life in ways that are unfair to people with disabilities.

We've also been working on making sure that we preserve the tax deduction for extraordinary medical expenses. That is a big issue. People with disabilities need that tax deduction preserved because they might need treatment for their disability throughout their lifetime. We have to keep looking at the performance of insurers. For me, this started with an interest in mental health parity, the promise that ensures to treat mental health and physical health the same. They do not. They break that promise year after years. So, I've passed a bill to help crack down on insurers, and that got me interested in how insurers define "medical necessity." The way that they do this with regard to things like wheelchairs, assistive devices, prostheses, is really, really problematic. It's often very, very biased against the disability community and prevents them from being as healthy as they could be.

Cooper: What are you doing about that part of how they're defining it?

Porter: I've written to the Biden administration and asked them to issue better guidance to insurance companies on what they mean by "medical necessity" and to police insurers more. We should not be putting it on patients, on consumers, to be able to go to battle with these huge insurance companies, with big insurance. That is the job of the government, to fairly enforce the law and to look behind what may seem like innocuous definitions of medical necessity and see how in real life they are discriminating against people with disabilities.

Cooper: I know you have to run.

Porter: Yes. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

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Piglet the deaf blink pink puppy

If you are a connoisseur of social media, maybe you have met Piglet, a tiny pink bundle of dachshund energy who is deaf and blind. This adorable little powerhouse has been life-changing for the Shapiro family as well has Piglet's hundreds of thousands of fans on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook. Melissa Shapiro, veterinarian and frequent rescuer of dogs with disabilities, has brought her experience with Piglet to the world and shown how much we all can learn from individuals with disabilities and how much joy one little dog can bring to the world. Shapiro (and Piglet) met via Zoom with *ABILITY*'s Dr. Tom Chappell to share a glimpse into life with Piglet and the impact he has had on his fans. Shapiro also also speaks about her recently released book, "Piglet: The Unexpected Story of a Deaf-Blind Pink Puppy and His Family."

Dr. Tom Chappell: How hold is Piglet?

Melissa Shapiro: Piglet is four and a half years old. He was a puppy when we got him, a little teeny thing. That's why his name is Piglet, the deaf-blind puppy. He's actually not a puppy anymore, he's a dog.

Chappell: Piglet has no vision at all?

Shapiro: He can see light and dark. If the lights go on or off, he is aware. But he doesn't track anything, he doesn't focus on anything. If you have a toy in front of him, he's really using his nose and his feet to touch it more than seeing it. He's looking around with his nose, otherwise he would see it. It would be obvious. He doesn't see—I'm sure that he—I'm not sure of anything. I think his nose is so sharp because he's a dog, compared to a person who is blind, that he knows everything that's



going on around him. He knows what's come and gone, who's coming and going, what's behind and what's in front of him, what's on either side because of his nose.

Chappell: So, he's really aware. Can you talk about the training, how you figured out how to help train him?

Shapiro: First of all, Piglet is not unique. There are plenty of deaf-blind dogs that are born deaf and blind as well as when they age. A lot of older dogs get deaf and blind. But when he came to us, I already had a dog that was a double merle, which is the genetic issue that he has. There's the merle gene that causes that marbly color in the dog's coat. When the two parents are merle– or it's called dapple in doxie in various other breeds. When both parents are that color, there's a 25% chance that puppy will be born with the two dapple genes. And when that happens, that is linked to a white color coat pattern and congenital eye defects and congenital ear defects.

I knew a lot of people who had deaf-blind dogs, so I was already aware of how they taught them and what they did with them to a good extent. Not totally because I had this other dog who is not deaf and blind, but she has the congenital eye defect. She's got the peripheral vision deficits and she's deaf in one ear. So, when Piglet came, I knew I was going to teach him tap signals because I can't sign to him. And I can't talk to him.

When he was a teeny, tiny little baby–He was a pound and a half when he came here.– within a few days, I started teaching him "Sit." He learned it very quickly like I taught any other puppy, with holding food up in front of them and tapping. Instead of saying the word as he sat, I started tapping his lower back. He realized that I was signaling something to him. Then when I went to the next steps to teach him other tap signals, he was ready to learn. That's how this all started. It's a lot of fun to work with a dog that has this kind of disability because he's gung-ho to do it in his own way.

Chappell: So, it's very tactile in that you touch the dog then in different areas?

Shapiro: Yeah.

Chappell: I'm sure, like myself, other people are curious. How many things have you been able to teach him with the tapping?

Shapiro: You probably know people who are deaf and blind. No one's sitting in a closet by themselves. They're out there. They're learning, and they're using whatever senses and whatever other abilities that they have to connect and be in their world. The dog's the same. The dog won't just sit there. He was really eager to connect with us, engage with his life and with the other dogs that are here and with my routine and whatever else we were doing.

So, Piglet, as I got to know him–Initially we weren't keeping him. He was a foster dog.–But as he settled in here, there's a lot of touch communication that isn't formal. It's just like with a person. You've got your kids and you're communicating with them without speaking. And other dogs as well, and this dog is the same. He knows when somebody is upset. How does he know? I don't know how he knows. He can sense that because he's paying attention. He wants to know because he's very determined to be part of his world. He doesn't want to feel alone.

He screamed for weeks when we first got him because I think he did feel very anxious and isolated and alone, and also anxious about what was going to happen because he didn't know. Once he got into a routine with us, he knows when I'm walking to the door that leads to our garage when I'm going to leave the house versus just going downstairs through that door. I don't know how he knows the difference, but he absolutely knows what I'm doing. Part of it I think it's that he senses what the other dogs are doing because they certainly know, let's say, that we're going to go in the car now. Maybe their energy and the amount of breath that's in the air and the amount of movement around him I think he's absolutely aware of. If he's sitting on my husbands' lap under a blanket, I move about. He knows when I'm leaving the house. He's literally wrapped in a blanket; his head is completely covered. So, he knows.

Chappell: How does Piglet communicate with you?

Shapiro: But as far as the actual communication with him, like touching him, do I know when he wants to go out? He's very clear on what he wants. When he wants to play, he barks. When he's got to go out, he'll bark. He's pretty well trained to go outside and not pee on the floor, but because he's so tiny, I carry him down the stairs–We carry him down the stairs. My husband is part of this as well. Because he's so little that I'm afraid he'll hurt himself when he goes down the stairs. But I have a sense of what he wants, and he has a sense of what's going on. I touch him a lot. I can tell you the tap signals that he knows that are pretty defined are "Sit," I tap him on the back just above his tail. "down" he knows. I give him a little signal on the top of his neck and also a little tap under his chin. Because I taught him with food, and he likes to have the food, even though I don't like to hold the food to get him to do these tricks. But anyway, he knows "down," he knows "Wait." I taught him "Wait, leave it." He knows to leave his food before I give him an OK to eat it. He just learned "Roll," so he'll actually roll over, which is a silly trick. He's not really part of any kind of great communication other than that he loves to do it. He loves to perform, and he loves to get treats.

And then he also knows "Go pee" because all dogs should know to go pee outside, especially when their people are in a hurry to leave the house. I have six dogs at the moment. When we had seven, I'd say, "Go out and pee," and they'd all run out and come back in because they know they're going in the car. Well, this dog, hey, I give him a little tap signal in his right armpit, just a little nudge, and he knows to go pee. If he's running in, I bring him back out and I say, "No, you have to go," and I give him a tap signal, and he goes. And then he knows just a general "Let's go," just a little swish over the top of shoulders to neck. And I talk to him, we talk to him into the side of his face, and I think he knows when we're talking to him and I think he can sense what we're saying, like telling him he's a good dog, or "Relax," or whatever we're communicating to him. I don't think we're anthropomorphizing at all and I don't think we're exaggerating the amount of communication that happens with him, despite his being deaf and blind. He doesn't miss a beat.

Chappell: I'm dying to know what the cue is for "Leave it."

Shapiro: For "Leave it"? I give him a little tap on the top of his head. He's also a very tiny dog, he's six and a half pounds, so there's not a lot of space to touch him in different places. Oh, he knows "Shake," and little tap on the side of his leg here. But the "Leave it" was a little big challenging for him because he's very food motivated. So just like any other dog, you have the food on the floor or in your hand, it has to be in a place where they can't get it. There's something there, whatever they want, and you wait for them to look up and away from the food. In his case, he's just turning his head away, he's not looking at anybody because he can't see. But once he realized he wasn't getting it, the second he moved his head away, I gave his tap to say "OK" and gave him a treat. And he's so smart and so keyed-in that it took just a few times for him to realize what I meant. Then he had to figure out how to control himself.

Within a very short time—and that "Leave it" probably took a few times over a week or two to get him really solid. I'm moving my hand with the food in it, and I

labeled it with the tap, and then I could open my hand and give him the tap. And he sniffs the food because he wants to know where it is. He doesn't want to lose track of it, so his head bobs up and down. (laughs) You can watch videos of Piglet on his TikTok, Instagram and Facebook pages. I post pictures of him. He's really literal about the instructions to "Leave it." Piglet sits there, and I tell him "Leave it" and his bowl of food is here. And he literally dips his head into the bowl, and he will lick the food but leave it there. That's how literal he is. He's a very funny dog. He's got a really comical sense of humor. He's just very present. He's happy.

So, Piglet does that, and it's really cute. Initially, he would move away from the dish. I think because he didn't want to be tempted, but now he's figured out that he's just dipping. And then I tell him "OK" with a little tap here, and he dives in. (laughs) He's so cute. He's so funny. What I think is so amazing about Piglet is that we have our social media pages, and people watch him, engage in his life, and it's inspiring to them to do the same in their lives, despite whatever their challenges are.

Chappell: What's been the impact of your story?

Shapiro: We just did an event this weekend. We have a book called "Piglet: The Unexpected Story of a Deaf-Blind Pink Puppy and His Family." The book is about me, a veterinarian, my life caring for animals, our family. My husband is in the book. It's sort of a family-oriented book. It's a nice story. It's G-rated. It's a nice book about being hopeful and bringing positivity into your life, saying "Yes" when you really are inclined to say "No" and expecting the unexpected. That's all in the book.

We went to an event in New Jersey, and they publicized it well. There were a lot of people there, and we sold a lot of books. As I was signing books, and a woman came up being pushed in a wheelchair by her son, who was, I think, probably in his twenties. She bought six books because she wanted to give them as gifts because she is so inspired by Piglet. She was in a very serious accident and hasn't been able to walk for two years, but she's just getting to a point now where they're starting her walking in rehab. And I guess she is going to be able to walk–predicted to be able to walk at some point in the next couple of years–but she's been wheelchair-bound now for a long time.

She learned about Piglet, and she watches Piglet doing his thing. She said it makes a huge difference in her life. She looks for his videos every day. They're inspiring her to move on with her own life. It seems so silly because it's a tiny little dog running around doing his thing. He's disabled, like any other disabled person. He doesn't need to be congratulated for walking up the stairs or going to eat his food or peeing outside. But he has a little extra special piece of him because his attitude is so positive and so engaging that he brings adults into his world. She's an example.

People send me notes every single day and make comments on our social media pages, which have hundreds of thousands of followers. Every single day we get notes from someone telling us what Piglet does for them. And then we have our educational program in schools, which is called Piglet Mindset, that brings him there as well to teach about growth mindset, optimism, flexibility, perseverance, resilience, and empathy. And we have Piglet's Inclusion Pack, which is our other dogs as the pack, including Piglet despite his limitations and challenges. They bring him in and they work together. They're very accepting of his sometimes-unusual behavior because he's blind. He walks around in circles frequently. He walks around them in circles, and he bangs into them all the time. They're all nice to each other as well, and they're all different from each other.

So, we have a whole teaching model called Piglet Mindset. The kids—it's mostly in schools, but it can be for anybody. There's nothing babyish about it. It's a lesson for everybody from the tiny little pink dog who happens to be deaf and blind. He's as happy as could be, and people say they wish he could see. And we see his life would probably not be so much different. We're going to carry him anyway, he's six pounds. And he enjoys himself.

Chappell: Is he a specific breed?

Shapiro: He's a dachshund-chihuahua mix, and the reason—dachshund and chihuahua can have that dapple coloring. But there was a hoarding situation. There were three dogs that were not spayed and neutered, and they turned into 30 dogs.

Chappell: Oh, my! How were they rescued?

Shapiro: (Piglet's) litter was living in a tent in Georgia because they got kicked out of their apartment. They were very tiny puppies. When they were rescued, there were four of them and three were affected. There were three white deaf dogs. Two had better vision than (Piglet) does, but all three were affected. The fourth one looked normal. He can see and hear, but he could be double dapple, just not affected. So, if someone were to be breeding dapple dogs and dapple line dogs, they should always be genetically testing them if there's a breeder who actually needs to breed dogs—which is a whole other story!

But yes. This was an unfortunate happening in that house, which was, I suppose, unfortunate and fortunate because we have Piglet, and other people have the other puppies. We educate also about special needs disabled pets through Piglet, and we certainly educate and discourage the breeding of dapple and piebald-colored dogs to each other. That's another aspect of Piglet. We have a whole thing. We have a nonprofit that supports our work as well. It's been quite an evolution of saying yes to keeping a dog that I didn't want four and a half


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Melissa Shapiro and Piglet

years ago. (laughs)

Chappell: They find the dog in Georgia, but it winds up in Connecticut. How did that happen?

Shapiro: Piglet was rescued by a veterinarian in Georgia. The reason I knew her is that she has a rescue group that takes dogs from wherever down there, and she brings them up to Connecticut for adoption events. She doesn't specialize in dogs with various issues. This is just who she got. Gina, our double merle Aussi border collie mix, who's deaf in one ear, as I mentioned before, and has the eye defects, we adopted her from Gloria six years before Piglet. It's coming up to be 11 years now that we've had Gina. So, I was in touch with Gloria over the years because when she would bring dogs up to Connecticut for adoption events, and they were adopted, some of them had medical issues that needed to be follow up. And I did that for her. We were friends and we were in communication. And when she ended up with this dog, Piglet, who's on my lap here, she sent me a note to ask me if I knew someone who would be a good fit for him. So, I said we would foster him, and that's how he ended up coming here.

Chappell: Just so we get this in, my wife and I work for a rescue. Just so Chet and other readers know, this goes on all the time. People pick up adopted dogs from all over the country and transport them in various ways. A friend of mine just went and picked up a dog she wanted to adopt. It was born without a limb, and she flew all the way to Texas and even was able to hide the trip from her husband so that she could surprise her husband with the puppy when she got back.

Shapiro: (laughs) A three-legged puppy!

Chappell: Just letting the readers know that there are big organizations of us all over the place, various breeds, some mix breeds, who travel all over the country and get adopted dogs and get them back to our other pets, too.

Shapiro: Yes, it's for all of them. The problem is particularly a problem in the South and Midwest because that's where people are not spaying and neutering their dogs and cats. That's why they are being dumped, and that's why there are so many of them being dumped. The people in the northern part of the country, it's just a fact, are taking these dogs and cats and other pets in. You're talking about down South. They do bring the animals up, either transporting them up directly, through an adoption from the South to the North, or they bring the animals up to the North and they have adoption events.

My dogs, there were seven. Susie was from Tennessee, she died in April, very old. She came up for an adoption event from Tennessee through a rescue group that was stationed in Rhode Island. Zoë, the little brown one that was up here a little bit ago, Zoë and Dean are from Arkansas.

I also have Evie and Annie, who are from California

because there are similar problems in other parts of California. And all states, really. They were flown. I went and picked one up and the other one was sent to me.

Chappell: We also do a lot of work trying to bring dogs to California as well that need homes. We mostly do go up and down the coast more. You're right. The inner part of California is probably more like that.

Shapiro: Yeah, there are parts. It's a big problem. I think it's a much better situation now than it was 20 years ago, with Pet Finder coming. It's helped place a lot of animals. It's educated people that there is a problem altogether. Without the Internet, nobody would know.

Chappell: You said "educate." I just want to bring up something before I forget. On your website, you have the vet school for kids. How did that come about? Is it popular to kids across the country? How does that work?

Shapiro: It would be popular, but I'm so involved in Piglet Mindset right now that it's on hold. We started that because I have always gone into classrooms to talk about being a veterinarian and caring for animals. Even before I had kids, I went in to talk to kids. I would bring my dog, whoever the dog was at the time, show them how to do a physical exam, talk to them about what pets do, answer their questions. They would all tell me about their own pets. It was a lot of fun. When my kids were young, I created some workshops for kids to come to and I would talk to them about physical exam, show x-rays and radiographs from them to look at the guess what the problem was like, how many puppies are in the abdomen of a pregnant dog, broken legs, things like that. I was supposed to do a two-week camp, two one-week camps last summer, before COVID came. It was canceled in person, but I had already taken videos and pictures of all sorts of things. And I would have some slide presentations and also live with kids to teach them about being veterinarian and animal care, including a rescue topic and pet safety and these sorts of things.

It all got canceled, and I ended up still creating vet school for kids. I have a domain name, which has grown to my visiting vet practice website. But I do have some topics on there, and I did last year do a virtual pet safety course for kids, a two-part course. The kids loved it. I got a few kids from advertising on Piglet's social media pages, a lot of girls, a few boys, elementary school to middle school age. And they were glued to my presentations. The pet safety course is very well done. I have to give myself a little credit because I go through all aspects of pet safety, ranging from toxic foods, dangers outside, car safety, general care, walking on flexi-leashes versus a regular leash, microchips—all of these topics, all condensed into about an hour and a half, so we broke it into two 45-minute sessions. They could ask questions. It's for kids or adult. I have given that a few times online for Piglet followers as well. I have a full course. I have to add a couple of videos to my beautiful course about veterinary medicine that I will eventually get back to. But it's on hold because I'm doing so much Piglet mindset right now.

Now, I'm doing Piglet Mindset. It's teaching growth mindset and inclusion, and it's also advocating for people and animals with disabilities. We clearly are showing and using a disabled dog, and hopefully, with the disarming nature of using animal models, kids are very comfortable asking questions and delving into learning about what it's like to be deaf or blind. I hope that they bring that into when they meet people with other disabilities as well, being empathetic, not staring, not being so uncomfortable with it, that they're just another person who happens to have this problem. When they see my dog, they realize, they see him with the other dogs. Anyways, you didn't ask that question.

Chappell: (laughs) That's a good answer. Tom, were you going to say something? I saw your hand move.

Chappell: No, the thought that's coming into my mind, though, is a little bit egocentric, but we're crazy about our dogs. Our oldest is starting to lose her hearing and her vision. We're used to it because we had another one that we had to put to sleep a couple of years ago who had that at the end of her life, too. She also had some dementia. Your dogs, the ones we've been talking about so far, were born with these disabilities. What about just aging dogs and their disabilities?

Shapiro: One of the things I do is that I have just started giving presentations to veterinarians about supporting people who choose to care for pets with disabilities. One of the things that I say is that if animals live long enough, they'll all have some disability before they die. It's normal, it's completely normalized to have deaf and blind dogs, especially as they get older, but even if they're younger. This is a novelty, having a dog born that way. In my whole practice in all these years, I had not seen a dog like Piglet. I live up here in the North, and people just aren't breeding dogs like this. And more people where I live, because they're going about their lives, aren't adopting them either. But I have seen plenty of old dogs and cats that are deaf and blind. I have a house call practice, my veterinary practice, and of course, I go to people's houses. And one of the advantages is that I see what's going on in the house. And, of course, the best candidates for a house call are older pets. They're comfortable in their homes. I walk into the home, and I see what they're doing in their home. I can see where the stairs are, the wood floors that are slippery. And I can then recommend to people various accommodations to be made as their pets are aging and developing in this case talking about being deaf or blind where they're actually not thinking about it.

Those dogs adapt. Don't forget, most of them are becoming deaf over time. It's a slowly progressive

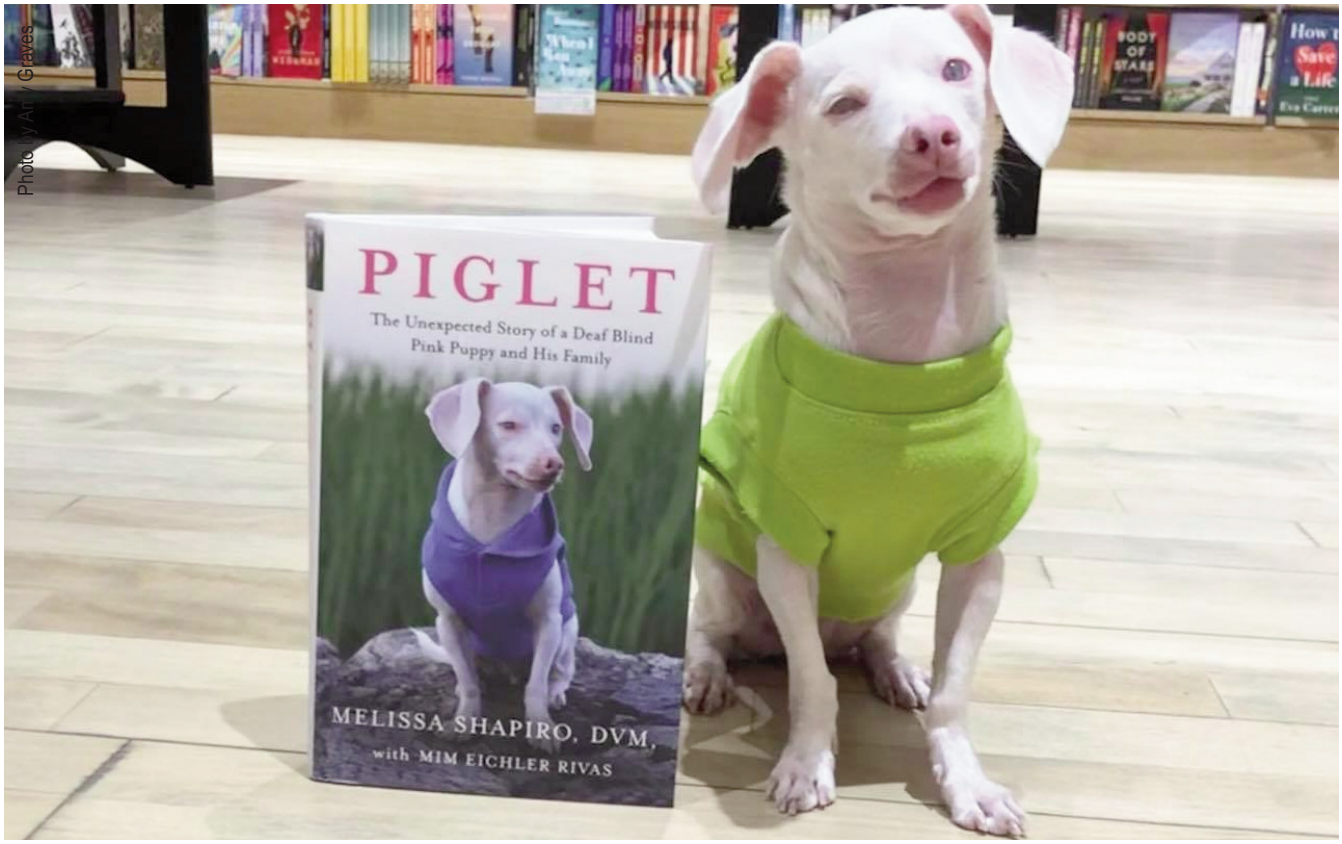


Photo by Art Graves

issue. We only notice that they're deaf when suddenly they're not coming when we call them and we're not able to get their attention, but they didn't become deaf that day or overnight. It's been a gradual process for them. They're used to it. They're not startled as easily as you would think. The vision issues can be acute because with glaucoma sometimes, it's not gradual, and with some of these other retinal diseases, they become blind very quickly, again, probably not as quick as it seems. A lot of people contact me because I'm sensitive to that, and for some reason the veterinarians, while there are a lot of very, very compassionate, caring veterinarians, but a lot of people don't have the time or the inclination to spend with people whose animals are becoming much more needy. In my practice, I spend a lot of time with people. I'm not seeing one appointment after another, driving around. I spend time in a house or with people even if I see them at the master vet hospital. I stand and talk to them. I'm not scheduling this way.

So, it's not a specialty. It's not a board specialty, but it is an area of interest that I have. And I think it's really important for vets, especially young vets coming into the profession, to realize that these are our best clients. They are taking the most interest and really putting out for their pets who now need accommodations and a lot of extra care. I think it's regional. You find people who dump deaf and blind dogs in a shelter because they don't want to pay to have them euthanized, and then others take care of them till the very last breath.

Chappell: What accommodations do you recommend?

There are a lot of things you can do with those animals in the house to help them adjust, to help yourselves adjust and make it easier for you to take care of them. You just need someone to give you maybe some tips and guidance because it's not natural for everybody. You might realize if a dog is blind and really disoriented. Because some of the old ones also have dementia, they're walking around in circles and bumping into things. Others are fine. They have cataracts. And sometimes you do cataract surgery, and they can see again, at least well enough. I tell people to use different floor coverings, changing the floor coverings so that there's a mat by the food dish, there's carpet in the kitchen now so they can recognize using their sense of touch in their feet where they are. Some of them never get it, but most of them do. They adjust very well.

I have frantic people contacting me. They don't know what they're going to do, and they're looking at Piglet and thinking it's not the same because he's very well adjusted.

There's this halo, like a little vest, that has a little handle on the top and a plastic ring that goes around the front of the head and the face of the dog, so that when the dog is walking around and they're hitting into the walls and other places, they're hitting this ring rather than their face. That's a nice little piece of equipment, not very expensive to use for an older dog that is having trouble and is disoriented from the blindness. It gives them a little more confidence. I have a video of Piglet that I did

within the last couple of months. I took the halo out because a lot of people have thanked me. "Why doesn't he have a halo?" He doesn't want one because he wants to be able to move around freely. This is cumbersome for him, and it gets in the way. Piglet goes into little cocoon beds, and he has to go inside it. So, first of all, he didn't want it on. When I put this halo contraption on him, and he's trying to get into his bed and it's hitting, he can't. I have a video of him not being able to get into his bed.

And then I took it off him, and he went into his bed. But I have videos of him running into the house, playing with the other dogs. It wouldn't be helpful to him. Even if we go to a new place, he's the kind of dog that goes to a new place, in a hotel room, for example, he walks around. He bumps his nose into things systematically and very gently to scout out the area that he's in, and then he immediately relaxes and wants to play with a toy. That's his routine going to a hotel room, a new house, a new place where he's never been.

A dog that's old would have a much harder time. That's not their routine, and they're also not using their noses like Piglet does because they never had to. It would take them some time to realize, "Wait a minute, I can actually smell my way around." A lot of them never get that. I have my dog Gina, who can't hear very well in the other ear that was good. Initially she would have trouble placing sound and locating us if she wasn't facing us. In fact, I almost lost her one time because she heard me, but she didn't know where I was. And she was running away from me, thinking that I was in a different direction from her unilateral deafness. Once, she was sleeping, and I was getting their food together. Piglet immediately pops up out from under a blanket because he knows the food is in the kitchen. She's sleeping and is completely oblivious because she has not had to use her nose for anything.

When we go to a hotel with my dogs, Piglet knows when we get into the elevator that we're about to get onto the floor where he's staying. He has a little stroller, and he gets taken out of the stroller. He runs down the hallway and finds the room that we're staying in after we've been there for one time back and forth in the hallway. The other dogs walk right past the room, They're not even paying attention. He's so diligent in paying attention. He does not want to be out there alone. He's always connecting. He's just amazing. He really is. And I think that it's a nice example to show the difference between the senior pets becoming deaf and blind versus a dog that's born that way and has had to use his other senses and optimize them. He has the same nose as every other dog of his breed mix. They don't need to use it. He does. So, he uses it, and he does so in a very directed way. He knows what he's doing. He's really good at it. It's really fun to watch him.

Piglet's attitude is so inspiring and so positive to so many people. And that's why he is very well known on social media. That's why people are telling us how much they love this book because they really—They see it in him, and it's more than just—it's not being sympathetic or feeling bad for Piglet. It's watching somebody who does have some disadvantages really grab their life and move on with it in a really, really positive way. That's how he is compared to senior pets.

Chappell: We've been struck by it since this friend of ours adopted this little dog who was born without—

Shapiro: The three-legged dog, yeah.

Chappell: Yeah. And you watch this dog play, and he doesn't realize he's supposed to have a fourth leg. (laughs)

Shapiro: The only thing with those dogs is that they do end up with some back—They'll have some spinal curvature. And if they're born without one front leg especially, they do get bowing, depending on how big the dog is. For the little, tiny ones, I don't think it's a big issue. It is recommended that they learn to use a cart, a front cart. And some of them will even use a prosthetic, and others are just fine. It depends on the dog and the structure of the dog and the activity that they do. I was at Eddie's Wheels is in Massachusetts. They make custom wheelchairs for dogs, all different kinds, quad carts, front carts, back carts. There was a little dog there. I think that dog had an amputation very young. So the dog's leg was bowing and there was a lot of strain on the joints in that front leg and then the shoulder. So, they were going to do physical therapy with that dog to get things rebalanced and then get wheels to use from when they went on especially long walks. It's all available to animals as well.

Those little dogs with both legs missing in the front, they run up and down stairs. They just figure it out. And they have carts for certain kinds, just to make it easier to walk down the street instead of hopping along like a kangaroo. But on uneven terrain, they hop along. It's amazing. They're all inspiring to people for the right reasons. I was very sensitive in writing the book. I spoke to a woman who's deaf and blind. I wanted to be sure that we're not exploiting Piglet, discussing it in a way that would be insulting and improper, using the words "special needs," and all of these things. I feel like these animals are really nice examples. They are not aware that we're looking at them and using them as teaching models. It's a very nice teaching model, especially for kids.

Chappell: Can you tell us more about the Piglet Mindset program?

This has been so much fun for me, to have this dog, have him on social media, where we connected with a teacher to have a program that's used around the coun-

try and the world, in classrooms.

The program is PowerPoints that are on the PigletMindset website. There teachers can download the materials. There are lesson plans to be used as a guide. Everyone can use them to fit their own teaching styles and curriculum. And then we make virtual visits. I send them stickers and Piglet's Inclusion Pack membership cards, which the kids can have. I'll make a virtual or an in-person visit. All of that came about because of Piglet. But the other part of this is that I am a vet and I enjoy being a vet. And I've been able to help people who are adopting pets with disabilities, not because I'm sitting and talking to each one of them as an individual, but that they take some inspiration and also information from my pages. And they're better equipped to take care of these animals.

But the most fun I've had now is creating these talks for vets, which I can also use for the general public, about wheelchair dogs. One of them is a general disabilities talk. I have all sorts of networks on social media of dogs and cats and turtles and others with a range of disabilities that I'm showing veterinarians, and they have never seen. I had never seen this kind of deaf-blind dog. I saw plenty of old ones, until I got this dog.

I had never seen people changing diapers and expressing bladders and bowels of dogs that they chose to keep that had a spinal fracture and are paralyzed. I hadn't seen it directly, I didn't have a dog like that. I just knew people were doing it in houses if they kept them. I don't even see that many dogs like that up here because no one wants to keep them. But now I have a whole network of people I know who do, and they were delighted to send me videos of them caring for those dogs so that I could show veterinarians what they're doing at home so they would be less likely to recommend euthanasia for those animals when they come into their practices. That part of it is a lot of fun. It's really fulfilling for me. I hope to get increased exposure for the disabilities world, normalize disabilities in pets, through those kinds of presentations. I'm doing that, and that part of it is a lot of fun also.

I think having this dog, using him in an appropriate way has been a really—I've reached thousands and thousands of people around the world. On our pages we have hundreds of thousands of followers, which means that each one of them clicked the button to follow us, and that means that they saw this dog and they saw what we're doing. It's a nice project for me, that's for sure!

Chappell: Do you have any connections or work with any of the animals that happen to have disabilities and becoming service dogs?

Shapiro: That's one of my talks. (laughs) I made a presentation about—it was called "Pets with Disabilities." I featured a number of dogs. One in particular is in New Jersey. The dog is deaf, and he goes to veterans' hospital or home where there's like 300 vets. They love him there. The dog was adopted by an elementary school music teacher (Chris). The guy signs to (his dog). (Chris) was going to adopt a dog when he found out about a deaf puppy. (He overheard) the people at the front of the line. A man said to a boy, "Oh, that dog is broken," referring to this tiny four-month-old deaf puppy.

Chris immediately adopted that dog. He has a young nephew who's deaf. Chris started bringing the dog to school with him, and the dog became the resident dog at an elementary school in New Jersey. He greets the kids when they come off the bus in the morning. They all learned to sign to Cole. They all do sign language. They all wear his shirts. They sing to Cole, and he can't hear them. His website, if you're interested, is ColeTheDeafDog.com. Chris does a really nice job.

I have videos that I show of Chris signing to the dog. People are sitting there watching and they begin to cry because it's such a nice thing to see someone relating to their dog. Forget about the deaf part, he loves him. And one of the things that people say to me about my dog is that they see how much I love the dog. It has nothing to do with Piglet having a disability. I love the dog. I love my other dogs also. But people love Piglet because Piglet is Piglet, adorable and pink.

So, Cole has a whole educational program. He's a certified therapy dog. Piglet is not, but he is.
And I do know others, a little dog in a wheelchair that goes to nursing homes. There are plenty of them. My talk was about some of those that teach kids in one fashion or another or adults who have some sort of service therapy function job.

Shapiro: This dog is such a character. He would not go to a nursing home or a veterans' place. He gets himself so worked up. He's overstimulated in, like, two minutes. He's carrying on, he wants to play tug. He's really cute, and everyone likes to see the tap signal demos. He has a little stroller he can't wait to get out of and show everybody.

We have Piglet Mindset presentations that we do in addition to the school program and now we have our book. We had all these book signings. I felt like we really shouldn't be focusing so much on the book, which has our whole story, which you have gotten some of, but that we talk about Piglet Mindset and show his videos.

It's hard to describe Piglet and what he does without showing a video of him. Just look at him.

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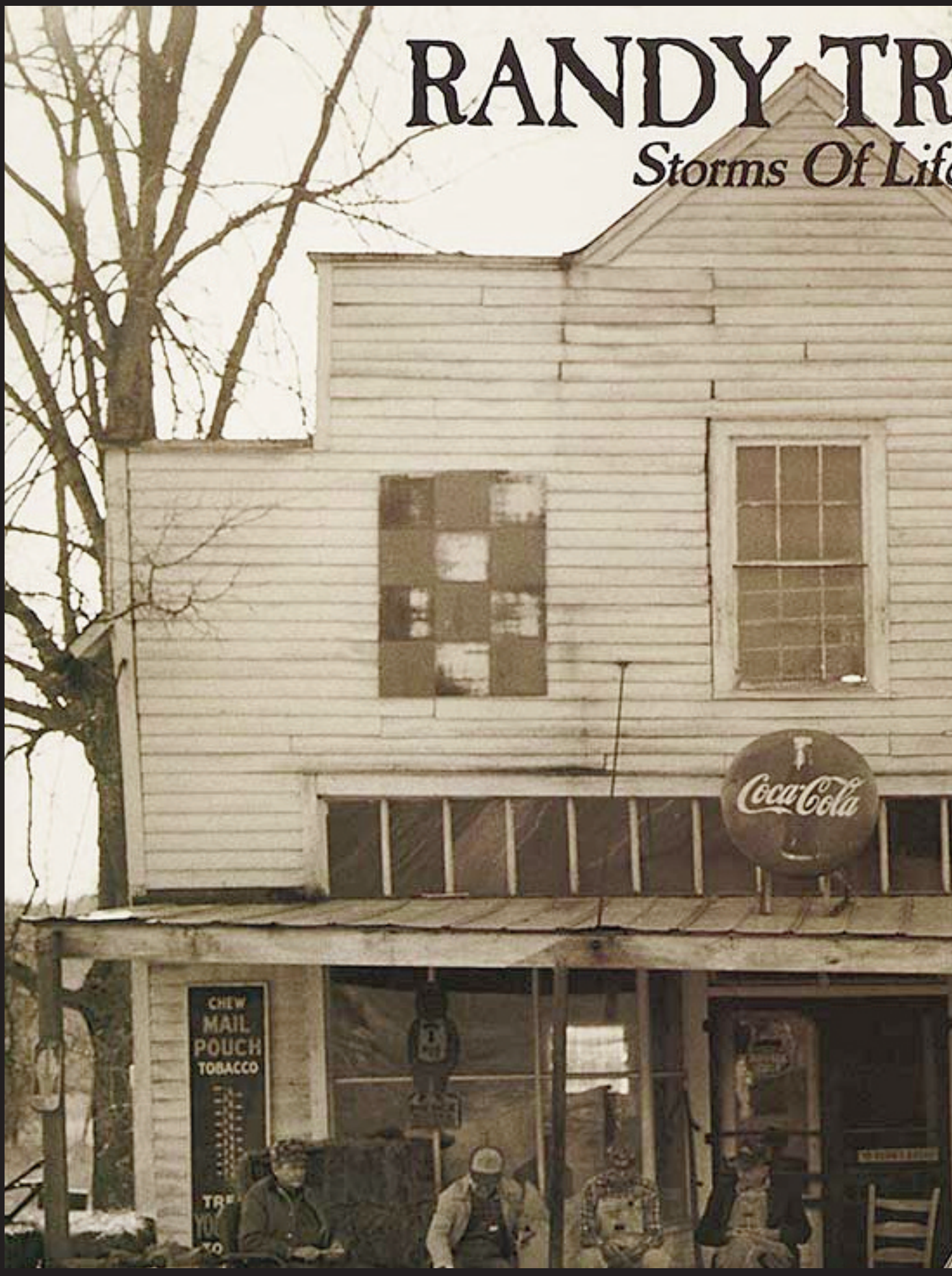
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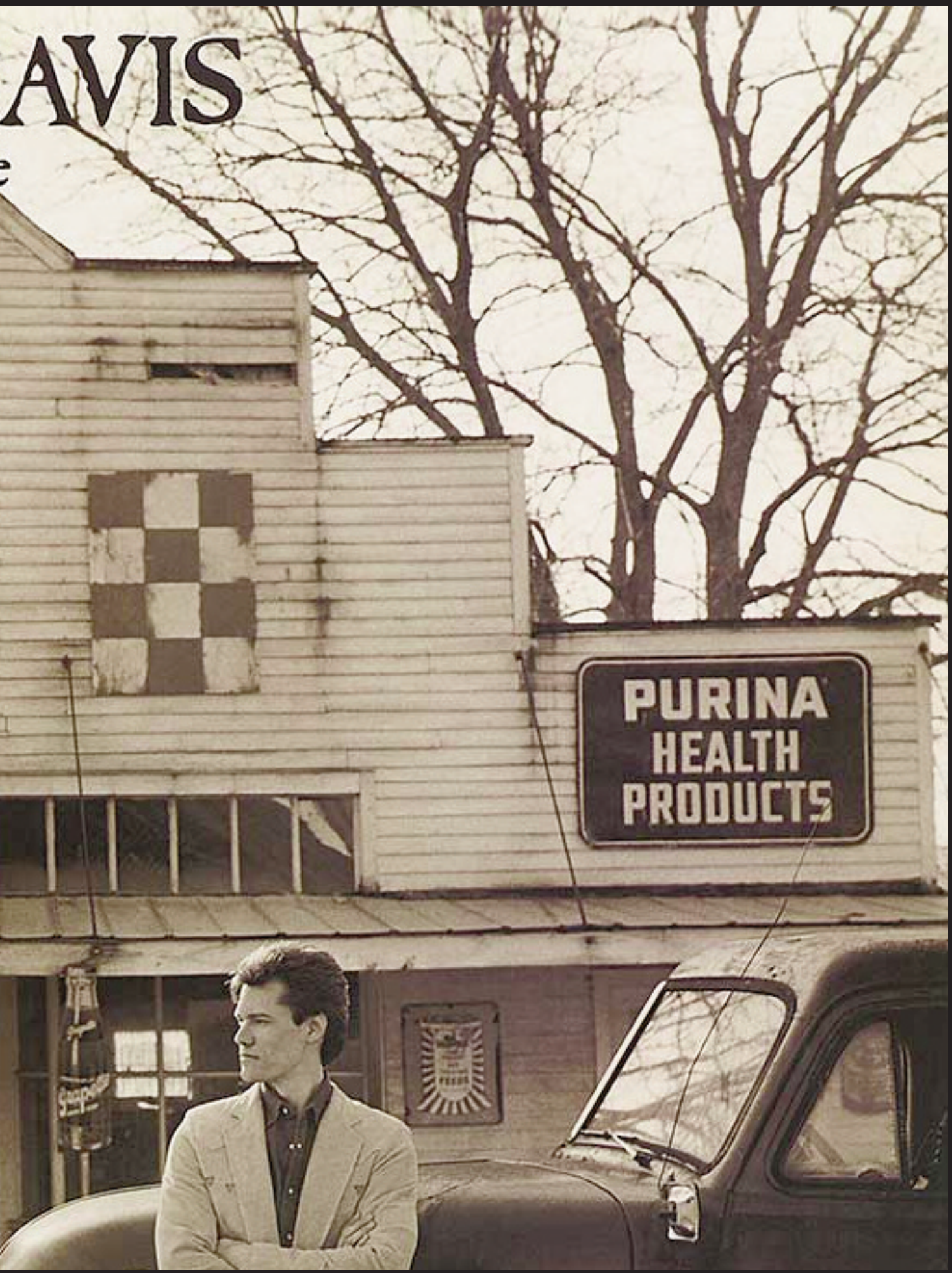


RANDY TRAVIS

With lifetime sales in excess of 25 million, Randy Travis is one of the biggest multi-genre record sellers of all time and a recent inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame class of 2016. His honors include seven Grammy Awards; 11 Academy of Country Music statuettes; 10 American Music Awards; two People's Choice awards; seven Music City News awards; eight Dove Awards from the Gospel Music Association; and five Country Music Association honors. In addition, three of his performances earned CMA Song of the Year honors: "On the Other Hand" (1986), "Forever and Ever Amen" (1987) and "Three Wooden Crosses" (2002). To date, he has 23 No. 1 singles, 31 Top-10 smashes and more than 40 appearances in feature films and television shows to his credit. Four of his albums are Gold Records. Four are Platinum. One has gone Double Platinum. One is Triple Platinum, and another is Quintuple Platinum. In 2004, Randy was honored with his own star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame and is honored on the Music City Walk of Fame in Nashville, TN. He has been a member of the cast of the Grand Ole Opry since 1986. In 2017, Randy was honored with a wax figure at Madame Tussauds™ Nashville.

Since his near fatal stroke in 2013, with the help of his wife, Mary, and


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rigorous physical therapy, Randy continues to make improvements in his speaking, walking, and yes, singing. With the help of author Ken Abraham, he released his critically-acclaimed memoir in 2019, Forever and Ever, Amen.

Chet Cooper: Randy, are you capable of speaking at this stage in your therapy?

Randy Travis: No.

Mary Travis: Simple words, yes, that's how aphasia goes, as you know.

Cooper: Did you know or read the book by Kirk Douglas, My Stroke of Luck, after his stroke?

Mary: Yes, sure did. Actually, Kirk sent that to us after Randy's stroke, with the kindest note. We still have that. It was signed, with a sweet note to Randy as we read it. It meant a lot to us.

Cooper: That is so nice to hear. I spent some time with him after his stroke at his house. I don't know if he had mentioned in the book how he had a new awareness in his own life about being human, observing other people and seeing how the caregivers and others around him were supporting him. He realized that he was selfish, and it changed his view from being self-centered in his life. Randy, it seems like you were more of a giver. There's something there that seemed to be a little bit different from the Hollywood scene Kirk grew up in and the battle within. But there might be a similar battle in music. Can you say anything about a change of attitude after your stroke, looking at other people and caregivers, especially Mary?

Mary: You hit the nail on the head. Randy's always been very humble, kind, appreciative, cordial, and always made time for his fans as far as autographs and pictures. He'd be late for a show if he had to if there was somebody who wanted to tell him a story. Randy was known for that. He's still known for that. That still happens to us today. We'll be in the middle of dinner somewhere, and people will come over, "Do you mind a picture?" and he'll do it. Because Randy understands that those are the people who brought him to where he is, and without those folks, there wouldn't be a need to be up on that stage singing. So Randy has never forgotten his roots. He didn't forget the dance, the ones who brung him. And maybe that's different in music and being up there on a stage singing to people. Because you have those people right in front of you. You see responses—faces, tears and smiles—and maybe that makes it a little different from Kirk Douglas in Hollywood.

In his case, you're acting for a camera. You never really see the response that you're having from the people watching the movie, other than the ratings you get. But as far as putting a face and a name and a smile or a tear with those people, you don't ever see that. So maybe it's a little easier to become calloused or self-centered, if you will, like you said. I see less of that maybe in music, especially country and gospel music, for that reason. You're in touch with your fans more on a daily basis than Hollywood is.

Cooper: That's a great answer. I always felt there was something humble about Randy. It came across. You only know as much as you see. You never know the real person, but it certainly seems to come across that way. The way you're describing the music, that the audience is responsive, that's something. If you think about movies, it's a lot of hurry-up-and-wait and lighting and this and that, and there's lots of crew. I'm sure it's more stressful than we think, and everyone wants your attention as well, Randy, and that at some point, it takes a toll, I would think.

Mary: I've never even really thought about it. You're the one who brought it to my attention. That's where I see the difference. We did go to Hollywood, we did do 44 shows, TV, movies, things like that, but he took the heart with him that he already had, and he didn't change. He was doing Westerns and they usually have the heart, maybe just from being country folks. And in Hollywood, they cater to you. There's somebody there to peel your grapes and powder your nose. You learn to expect that. But once you get on that stage and you've got a couple of hours all on your own up there, all by yourself, there's nobody catering to you.

Cooper: Nor powder your grapes! (laughter)

Mary: Or peel your nose! (laughter)

Cooper: I forgot you're an actor as well. And here I just threw Hollywood under the bus.

Mary: We understand what you're saying.

Cooper: Tell me about you finding out about aphasia and getting more involved in that awareness movement.

Mary: I'll be honest with you, it's something we didn't know anything about. I'd never delved into stroke that much to begin with. It had never touched my life. I know Randy hadn't; it wasn't in his family. Until you go through it, until you educate yourself, just like anything else in life, you're basically an idiot about it. And I was. The aphasia part was a real eye-opener for me, because I know that I've run across people in my past who didn't speak, and I misconstrued it as if they just didn't like me, didn't have anything to stay to me, or were stuck up or whatever. But that's not the truth.

And now that we've gone through this, if somebody speaks to Randy or they try to have a conversation and he doesn't talk back to them, I've heard them walk away and go, "Well, I guess he doesn't have anything to say to me." And you think, "Oh, my gosh, he really does, but he has aphasia." Then of course they feel bad, but I want them to understand that there are people like that. I think two-thirds of stroke victims are affected with aphasia at some point, to some degree, some more severe than others, depending on what part of the brain is damaged or affected.

It's an awareness that people need to have. There have been so many people I've been able to bear witness to, to explain to them what aphasia is and how it affects stroke victims. It's a matter of letting the world know what it is so they can be more of a help than a hindrance.

Cooper: Randy, can you write? Which arm was affected? Are you right-handed or left-handed?

Mary: He's left now. He was right-handed.

Cooper: Have you tried writing?

Mary: He was left brain. He learned to write his autograph with his left hand.

Cooper: I have a check I'm sending you. Can you sign that for me? (laughter) And what about typing? Can you type with your left hand?

Mary: As far as letters on the computer.

Cooper: So his brain's not connecting yet with the keyboard and letters? OK. There was someone I met years ago who had aphasia and through his rehab, he was watching movies with the captioning on and he was connecting the words with what he was hearing. That helped him to start to build his vocabulary again, to build those words. Have you thought of doing something like that, Randy?

Mary: We do have movies that have captions. I think he recognizes words here and there, and as far as the captioning, I will read those to him so that he can see the word. We do a lot of that. And there are still everyday words, even eight and a half years out, that I see he's starting to recognize that he didn't last week, last month or last year. I know the brain is still working on it. His was a massive stroke in the central cerebral lobe of the left side, where all of those speech patterns take place and all of the communication, the writing, the reading, occurs.

He had some vision problems the first six to nine months afterward, but the vision came back, which was wonderful. As far as the communication, it's limited but getting better.

Cooper: The person that I know, I think he was ten years out, and he was also still getting words. He was always by himself with these movies. He eventually started watching the words in foreign films. He found that time spent getting his brain acclimated to seeing and hearing helped. And I think he actually spoke different languages when he was younger, so that was another good thing for him, to try to reconnect to a foreign language. Like you said, it's different and everyone has a different capacity for rehab. It takes sometimes so much longer than we expect. You just keep going.

Mary: We went for two and a half years every single day for four to five hours of occupational, physical, and speech therapy, and it did get to the point where Randy had pretty much shut down. He got to the point where he didn't want to go, but I made him go, and we'd get there, and he'd just sit there. He had shut down. Even the therapist said, "When it gets to that point, they need a break." And it's exhausting. I can only imagine being in their shoes and trying to start over. It took us about two and a half to three months just to learn the sound of A, just to say A again.

We would get one sound, two sounds, three sounds, and they started getting better. It's tedious. I can see where they would want to give up real quick, because it's "giant baby steps," but to us they were huge. Saying the first word—all of these things—meant so much. When we got home from the hospital, he didn't recognize the channel changer. He didn't know what a phone was. He didn't know things that we take for granted. Until the brain gets those connections that had been clipped, it has to figure out how to reconnect to the world again.

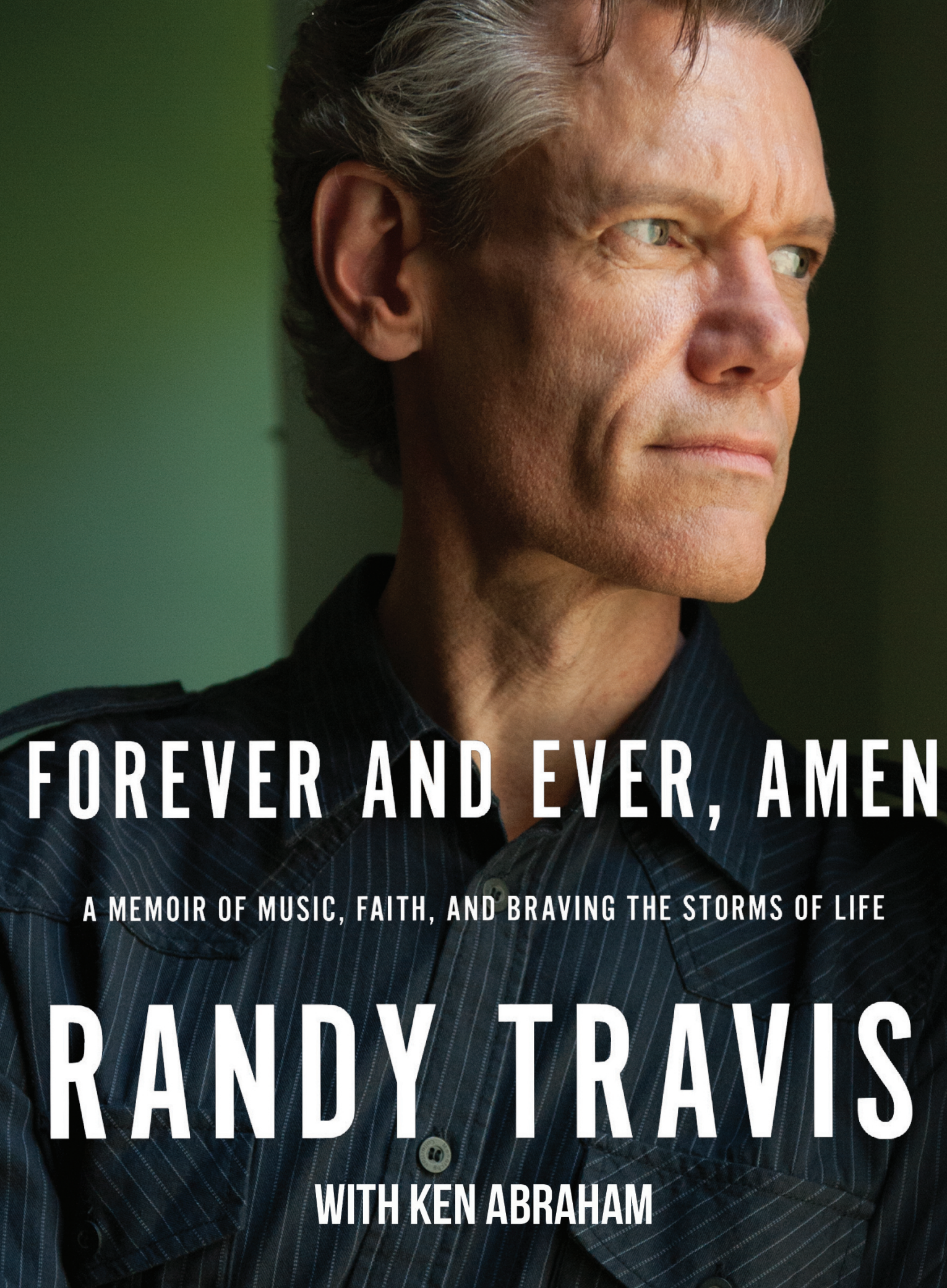
Cooper: It sounds like you've gone through both the medical and rehab sides, but it comes down to your own efforts. Once you get through the frustrating times as you had, you can get depressed. There are a lot of things that are really challenging. Maybe because I am a journalist, I've seen so many people who have done so well over the years, not full recovery per se, but more than huge steps. I'm glad you're feeling more optimistic to continue to move forward in your ongoing word-building and everything you're trying to do to regain more of your ability.

With music, tell us how you're doing. It's almost like a relaunch of your music. There's a lot of activity going on, lots of press releases coming our way about you. How does that all come about? Is it just new to me? Is it new to you as well, this resurgence of music that you're putting out?

Mary: There are songs that he remembers recording. There are songs that were in the vault. But they were songs that Randy had recorded back in the '80s and early '90s, maybe for an album and they ran out of room on the album and were put on the shelf. The songs that just came out with the remastered Storms of Life were three of the ten songs that were cut from the Storms of Life album. They put down 20 songs and 10 of them made the album, which was all they would put on albums back then. So these three new ones were made for that album. They get to see the light of day. It just took 35 years to get them off the shelf.

Cooper: Is there a specific reason it's coming out at this time?

Mary: Thirty-five years ago is when Storms of Life came out. It was the pivotal album that turned country music back into country music. There had been urban cowboy pop, which had lost the traditional country flavor. And Randy had come to Nashville and been there for several years before anybody would ever consider him because they kept saying, "You're just too country."



FOREVER AND EVER, AMEN

A MEMOIR OF MUSIC, FAITH, AND BRAVING THE STORMS OF LIFE

RANDY TRAVIS

WITH KEN ABRAHAM



And he never understood, because he said, "How am I too country to be in country music?"

Cooper: (laughs)

Mary: He was having some issues there. But the radio was playing your urban cowboy and your pop stuff. They weren't looking for people like Randy. There was a lady, Martha Sharp, who was the head of A&R at Warner. She went out to Nashville Palace and listened to Randy, and she loved what she heard. She loved this good, wholesome-looking boy, dressed in a jacket and his boots and his pressed slacks. He looked so sharp. She heard that voice and she said, "That's what I'm looking for!" So she signed him with Warner without even asking the president or anybody else. Pretty soon after that they put out the Storms of Life, and that thing just took off. It went multi-platinum. Soon thereafter, he followed it up with another album, Always and Forever, and that went even bigger than Storms of Life. At that point, the guys who were wanting to play traditional country music, who had been shoved to the side now, had a foot in the door. They started getting heard, like Clint Black and George Strait and Garth Brooks. They got heard, because they had been playing the music, but nobody wanted to hear them, nobody was taking a chance on them. To the extent Martha did Randy and Randy just came out with that voice, and everybody stopped to listen. They turned him down for ten years, and after the last 35 years they've been turning him up.

Cooper: (laughs)

Mary: It's worked out just fine. I think that's why, getting back to your original question, it's been 35 years since the Storms of Life, and they wanted to reissue it in

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a remastered format with technology from 35 years forward, which is much cleaner and crisper than what they had back then. That's when they decided to add the three new songs. People were excited about that, to hear his voice again with new songs, and he has some new Christmas songs coming out also.

Cooper: That were in the vault?

Mary: Right.

Cooper: What is the combination of the vault, by the way?

Mary: (laughs) 1982! (laughs)

Cooper: How did you two meet?



Mary: In 1990, I was working with my brother Stubbs, who had a shirt company called Stubbs Collection. We made the first shirt in our farmhouse here in Plano, Texas.

Cooper: Is that silk-screening shirts?

Mary: Yes. The first ones were silkscreened. They were dress shirts built for bodies like Randy's that were kind of the nice perfect pyramid shape, with a little bitty waist. My brother was built the same way. He had work shirts and he said he felt like he was buying shirts for Omar the Tentmaker.

Cooper: (laughs)

Mary: They fit in the neck and shoulders, but he had a little bitty waist, and so he was tucking this tablecloth in his dress slacks. So he started coming up with this design, and with buttons that were on a button tape so you could take them out, get the shirt dry cleaned, and not melt your buttons.

Cooper: Oh, clever!

Mary: He had all kinds of wonderful ideas, and he made a beautiful shirt. He had his hands on all of them. None of them ever left with a string hanging out. If it wasn't perfect, it didn't leave the shop. Randy was wearing them. He'd found them in a shop in Nashville, so he'd come to Dallas and he came by the office and would buy shirts or get new buttons or whatever it was that he wanted, and that's where we first met, in 1990.

Cooper: You met him at the store?

Mary: We did meet at the store, and then we went to dinner.

Cooper: Is this before or after you took his shirt off—(laughs)

Mary: (laughs) At that point, he was of course in a relationship with his manager, and I was in a relationship, but neither one of us were married in 1990. He went off and got married and I went off and got married, and 20 years later, in 2010, we had kept in touch as family friends over the years, but there was nothing between the two of us other than the friendship amongst the family. In 2010, we reconnected. He was going through a divorce, I was going through a divorce, so we met up, and he can't get rid of me. I'm like an old suitcase, you can't get rid of it!

Cooper: (laughs) Are you still wearing those shirts?

Mary: Oh, a lot of times. You'll see him in those Stubbs shirts in a lot of his pictures and appearances. They were wonderful shirts. They lasted forever.

Cooper: Randy, did you work out to get the V-shape for the shirt?

Randy: Yeah.

Cooper: You normally need to work out a lot to have a broader chest and a smaller waist. It takes real effort.

Mary: He did work out a lot. He was very fit, very conscious about it, very conscious about his diet, his vitamin regimen. He worked out with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Chuck Norris. He did some jiujitsu and martial arts with Chuck Norris. He was good friends with Jack LaLanne. He was very much into fitness. Going forward, when we had the stroke, the doctor said if he hadn't been in such great shape, he never would have made it.

He was in top shape. He'd worked out three hours the day before we first went to the hospital.

Cooper: Are you able to do some exercises now?

Mary: His right side is paralyzed. His left side is amazingly strong, because it always was, but it had to take over the work of the right side. It kind of makes me mad, because he's so disciplined, if you will.

Cooper: I think getting into any career the way you have, you have to have a certain internal discipline built into your DNA to make it that far, to get to that level. It just doesn't happen, no matter how lucky one is, and to maintain it. So you worked out with Arnold Schwarzenegger?

Mary: One thing Randy always told me was that Arnold always said that your workout is not as important as the food that you give your body. The food you eat is as important or more important than the type of workout, the length of workout, the amount of workout you do. The food is more important than any of it. And that makes sense. I'm sure they've told you: you are what you eat. That was Arnold's theory on it.

Cooper: Are you going to go on tour? What are your plans for the future, depending upon what happens with COVID?

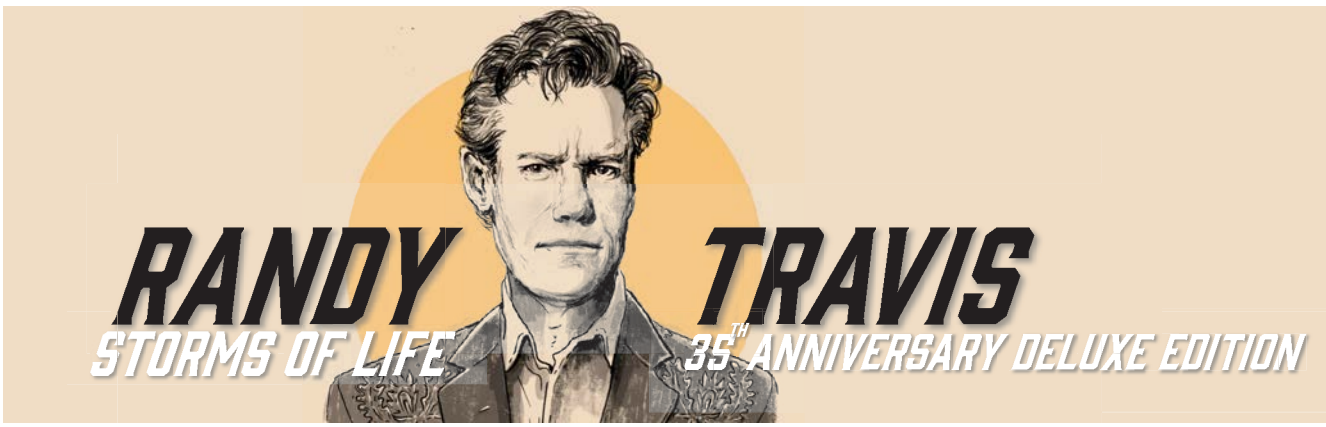
Mary: As far as traveling, we've taken personal trips. As far as touring, we had a tour at the end of '19 that was the Randy Music tour. Randy was there, present on the stage, but there was a young country singer named James Dupré who sang Randy's songs. It mainly consisted of his hits. We want to travel and go on tour.

There's nothing Randy would love more than to do concerts. But if that's not the will of God, we're OK. We'll just do what we're doing, go to concerts, listen to concerts, and have friends. If they do another Randy Music tour, we'll be there too.

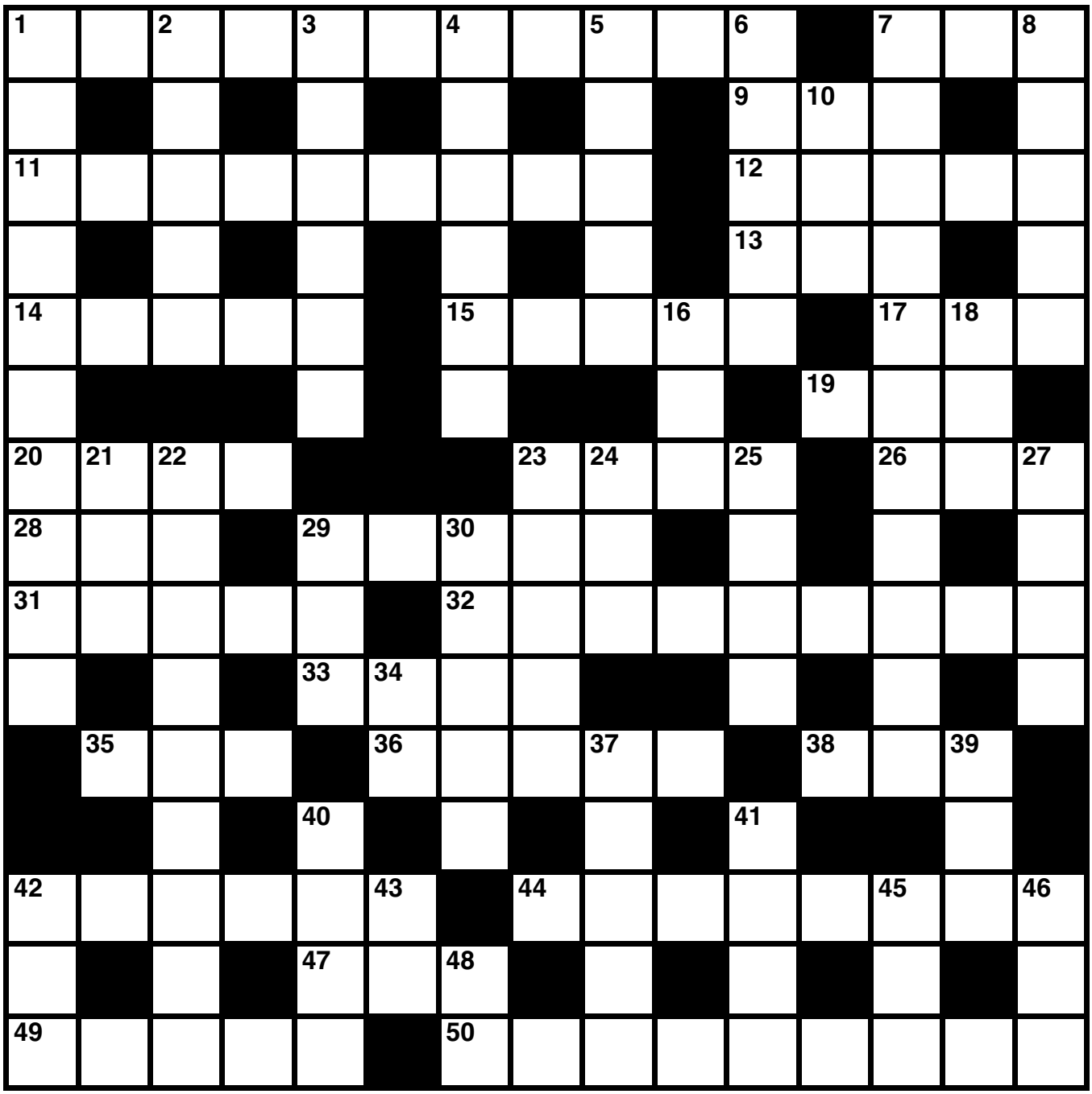
Cooper: Is there a movie in the works about your life, Randy?

Continued in Randy Travis part 2

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ABILITY's



Crossword Puzzle

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ACROSS

1 Grey's Anatomy star who supports the Thirst Project to bring safe drinking water to communities around the world, 2 words
7 ability ___s: site offering careers for disabled job seekers
9 Beatle's wife
11 Not discouraged
12 Like a rare baseball game, 2 words
13 Ending for east and west
14 Assign
15 Tests
17 5th is special for Latinos
19 ___ Tai cocktail
20 Relieve
23 Green vegetable used in protein shakes
26 Large coffee pot
28 Quaker cereal
29 Cut at an angle
31 Rental truck brand, 2 words
32 Documentary highlighting access problems in the NY City metro, 2 words
33 Like Shaquille O'Neal
35 Something we all look up to
36 Chinese lady who is the first blind contestant to board the "Chinese Poetry Conference" - 2 words
38 Disability Equality Index (it's used to score companies) - abbr.
42 ABILITY contributor who is deaf and is a stuntlady and motocross rider and has a dog called Bambi, Ashley ____
44 Actor who played Alan Turing in "The Imitation Game", ____ Cumberbatch
47 Air traffic controllers
49 TV's vampire vanquisher
50 Company that made the Power Assist Suit to help people with disabilities lift things

DOWN

1 Brave
2 Song made famous in "The Sound of Music"
3 Fair treatment
4 Idris Elba's character in a TV crime series of the same name
5 Gandhi's nation
6 Perfects
7 Deaf actor known for "Ordinary Hero: The SuperDeafy movie"- 2 words
8 "Ugly ___" - TV show
10 Correlative of neither
16 Prefix meaning badly
18 Voice
21 "That feels good!"
22 Disability rights movement pioneer, Colleen ____
23 "Yellowstone" star, ____ Reilly
24 Nothing's opposite
25 Dr. ___ of "Austin Powers" films
27 Nail-biting margin of victory
29 Diner sandwich
30 Regard highly
34 ___, shucks!
37 Large body of water
39 Company letters
40 Openly oppose
41 Pollinators
42 Little lie
43 Cirque du Soleil show
45 Place for an overnight stay
46 First O of O-O-O
48 ___ wire service

Crossword Puzzle

answers on page 68

Crossword Puzzle

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