

## self-improvement

**Kathy Medley put everyone else's needs ahead of her own, until one day she'd finally had enough**

**A** shiver ran along my spine as I leaned against the door and watched my five children sleeping. *What have I done?* That day, I'd stuffed our belongings into garbage bags and moved out of the home I'd shared with my husband, Joe. *How will I provide for these kids?* I wondered. My skin felt cold and clammy and I could feel beads of sweat forming on my upper lip as I trembled uncontrollably.

I was terrified. At age 28, my marriage was over, and I had five young children to raise. My husband was an alcoholic, so I couldn't rely on him for child support. And there was no future at the pizza parlor where I worked, earning \$4 an hour.

### A dream unravels

*It wasn't supposed to be this way,* I cried. I was 16 when I met Joe. He was 11 years older, charming and handsome. I dreamed of marrying him after I finished school and became a nurse. But when I discovered I was pregnant, I realized I'd have to quit school and put my future on hold. Still, my heart soared when Joe and I stood before the justice of the peace and said, "I do." But I had no idea then of the heartache in store for me.

While we were dating, Joe never drank. But soon after we got married, I began to find liquor bottles

hidden all over the house. As the years went by, and we had four more kids, Joe's drinking got worse.

*If only he'd stop drinking, everything would be fine,* I thought. But I was so busy dreaming of how wonderful Joe *could* be, I couldn't see how bad things *were*.

Finally, one night, I snapped. Joe came home drunk and demanded I take him out to a bar to meet his friends. When I refused, telling him I couldn't leave the kids alone, he grabbed the car keys and stormed out of the house.

Minutes later, Joe stumbled back in, his face covered in blood. I went numb. I rushed to the window and saw our mangled car.

As I wiped his face, it hit me: *He'll never*

*change—I have to.* I'd been afraid to be on my own. But I finally saw that I'd been on my own for a long time.

The next day, we moved out. But that night I cried myself to sleep. I'd never felt so vulnerable. Finally, after sobbing for hours, I felt strangely peaceful. *I'll find a way to turn my life around,* I vowed.

The next morning, I went to the library to research possible careers. If I was going to make a life for us, I'd need a job with a future. When I read about dental hygienists, something clicked—my childhood dream of entering a health profession came rushing back. And the flexible hours and good pay made it ideal for a mom like me.

*But how could I afford to*

*go back to school?* Determined, I researched loans and grants, and applied for all of them. Yet, even if I was approved, I knew I wouldn't be able to work enough hours to pay my bills and a baby sitter. It was only when my mom agreed to watch the kids that I knew I had to try. *I'll find a way,* I thought.

And I did. One day at school, I saw an announcement for the Soroptimist International's Women's Opportunity Awards. That night, as I filled out the application, my eyes filled with tears. "The past several years have been filled with many challenges," I wrote. "But I'm not looking

**'I earn more in a week than I used to in a month'**

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# Sometimes you to put yourself

**Another smart idea...**

*When you feel overwhelmed, slap your knee and shout, "Stop!" The sting will shock you into a more rational state.*



# Achieve your ambitions

Whether you put off a career in favor of marriage and motherhood, or simply fantasize about making a change, it's never too late to pursue your heart's desire

The truth is we all need to redefine ourselves many times throughout life," says Tina Tessina, Ph.D., author of *The 10 Smartest Decisions a Woman Can Make Before 40*.

"It's never too late to become what you might have been. You first have to grieve over what you regret—a missed education or job opportunity, or a failed marriage," says Dr. Tessina. "You need to let go before you can move on."

The next step involves figuring out what you'd like to accomplish or change in your life. Dr. Tessina's five-step strategy, below, will help you get started:

**1 Brainstorm** Think about what you're good at and what motivates you. Perhaps you love making personalized birthday cakes for friends and family, or enjoy making ceramics and showing friends how to do

it too. Make a list of everything that excites you.

**2 Research** If you dream of opening a coffee shop, get a job in one first. "That way you can see firsthand if it's really what you want, and you won't be risking money on something you know nothing about," Dr. Tessina says.

**3 Evaluate** Your ambition has to fit where you are in life. For instance, if you've always dreamed of being a professional dancer, but now don't want to cope with the rigorous demands of performance training and practice, that doesn't mean you have to give up on your dream. Consider teaching dance—you could even aim to start your own school.

**4 Get support** Find a mentor who'll offer information and encouragement. "Stay away from people who only have negative things to say. Instead, align yourself with positive, successful people," Dr. Tessina says.

**5 Believe** You must believe in yourself. Start by acknowledging that you're smart and that you can reach your goal. "If you're going to change your life, there'll be some challenges," says Dr. Tessina. "You shouldn't have to fight yourself, too."

## Did you know?

If you decide to go back to school, you won't be alone. Here, the number of women over age 25 enrolled in colleges or vocational schools

2.1 million

1976

2.5 million

1982

3.8 million

1997

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

# have first

back; I'm looking ahead. And I want to build a life for myself that will make me—and the people I love—proud."

A few months later, the president of the organization called me to say I'd won their highest award—\$10,000!

That moment made the struggle worthwhile. Instead of working at a menial job, I earned my degree in dental hygiene, and am helping other people.

If I had never put myself first, I wouldn't have the wonderful life I have today. I earn more in a week than I used to in a month, and I'm married again—to Tim. The old saying "It's never too late" is true. You just have to get out there and make it happen.

—KATHY MEDLEY

AS TOLD TO JACKI VAUGHAN

## Finding the money to pursue your dreams

There are plenty of scholarships and grants out there—you just have to know where to look

PROGRAM	\$ AMOUNT	ELIGIBILITY	FOR MORE INFO
<b>Soroptimist International</b>	\$500–\$10,000	Women seeking an undergraduate degree, vocational or technical training program. Awards are based on financial need.	Send a SASE to Women's Opportunity Awards, Soroptimist International, 2 Penn Center Plaza, Suite 1000, Philadelphia, PA 19102-1883.
<b>The Business &amp; Professional Women's Foundation</b>	\$500–\$2,000	Women 25 or older who plan to upgrade skills, train for a new field or re-enter the job market.	Send a self-addressed, double-stamped envelope to: BPW Foundation Scholarships, 2012 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.
<b>Jeannette Rankin Foundation</b>	\$1,500	Women 35 and older attending an undergraduate program, or vocational or technical training program.	Send a SASE labeled "JRF" in the lower left-hand corner to: P.O. Box 6653, Athens, GA 30604.
<b>Federal Pell Grant Program</b>	\$400–\$3,000	Students who demonstrate financial need.	Call 1-800-4FEDAID.
<b>Federal Supp. Ed. Opportunity Grant</b>	\$400–\$4,000	Students in financial need.	Call 1-800-4FEDAID.

Editor's note: To find other sources of financial aid, call the National Scholarship Research Service at 1-800-HEADSTART or visit their web site at [www.800headstart.com](http://www.800headstart.com).