

TURNING point

Rising to the challenge when life stops you in its tracks

BY ALISON PALKHIVALA

Where is rock bottom and what happens if you find yourself there amidst a climb to the top of the corporate ladder? This is a question two of Canada's most powerful and influential women had to consider when faced with gut-wrenching adversity. What's inspiring is not only how they've kept going since their derailment, but how they've evolved and grown stronger as a result.

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES CLOSE TO HOME

Just a few years ago Sandra Hanington was enjoying a successful career at BMO Financial Group as Executive Vice-President, Product Operations and Process Simplification, Technology and Operations. Her husband Eric was an entrepreneur with two companies on the go. Her three children appeared happy and well-adjusted, on their own roads to success. Despite their busy schedules they were close-knit and made time to enjoy family life.

"Eric and I had been out for a work-out and had just gotten back in [when] we got a call saying the police were

trying to find us," Hanington recalls. "We immediately [tried] to figure out where the kids were." Their two younger children were quickly accounted for, but they were unable to reach their eldest son, Jack, who was away studying biology at Queen's University. When the police finally reached the couple, they were told Jack's body had been found. The cause of death was suicide.

"People grieve in their own way," she says. "My husband immediately wanted to know more. What had happened with Jack? Did it happen to other people? He started researching, talking online to psychiatrists and people in the mental health field to try and understand what had happened."

"I was the head of operations for BMO [at the time]," she continues, "which is a very hands-on job and that day I turned my Blackberry off because I couldn't devote any brain cells to it, and my view is there's nothing more dangerous than a part-time leader. I just sat and thought and had my friends come around."

In fact, Hanington credits the support of friends with getting her through those first painful months. "They just circled around me, and I'll treasure them

PHOTO BY DANIEL EHRENWORTH



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forever because of it,” she says. “I had friends who had very busy careers and would drop their schedule [to] come have coffee with me and just sit and talk. It made a huge difference.”

The family’s openness in talking about Jack’s suicide is a large factor in their survival. Instead of hiding in shame and guilt, as many families of suicide victims do, Hanington and her husband speak publicly about suicide and mental illness. As a family, they regularly talk about Jack, and celebrate his birthday by sharing stories about him.

“It’s just an illness like any other, and there’s no reason to hide the name or the cause,” she says. “In fact, we don’t say that Jack ‘committed suicide’ because that suggests that it’s a logical, rational choice, and for people in distress, it’s not. They die of suicide just as they would die of another illness.”

Three months after Jack’s death, Hanington felt ready to go back to work. “The bank was amazing,” she says. “I was very happy to be back. The team had done a great job [in my absence]. It seemed like everything was going great, and then I came down with a case of pneumonia, and

it took my legs out from under me.”

Two weeks later, she tried to return to work a second time but just couldn't get through the day. So, she took a medical leave and eventually left the bank. “That was very hard for me because I hadn't consciously chosen to do it,” she says. “I had chosen to go back to work but my body wasn't quite there with me. Coming to terms with that took a lot.”

Hanington managed to turn this setback into a life lesson. She realized that after the blow she and her family had endured, it was crucial that she take the time she needed grieve, to heal and to figure out what her next step should be.

“I'm a list-maker, so I sat down and made a list of what were the things that it would take to make me feel good about this next stage of my life,” she says. Then she discussed it with her husband and children. She also listened to the advice of friends and finally decided upon work in the European financial world. She's currently looking into board of directors and consulting opportunities with financial institutions in London and Paris. “At this point, there's an interesting portfolio of opportunities that I'm trying to put together,” she says.

Hanington and her husband feel strongly about helping others avoid their son's tragic fate. They had been supporting the Children's Help Phone before Jack's death, so they stepped that up, enabling the program to start offering an online chat service. They also founded The Jack Project, a program designed to educate and remove the stigma surrounding mental illness in universities, colleges and high schools. The program is aimed at parents, students and educators. Currently limited to Ontario, the plan is to take it national in the coming years.

Through the abrupt loss of her son, Hanington has found the strength to use her struggle to save others.

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PHOTO BY OWEN EGAN

WHEN CAREER DERAILEMENT HAPPENS IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Senator Pamela Wallin's setback, although less traumatic than losing a loved one, resulted in a shocking turning point nonetheless. In a moment she went from high-profile TV news anchor to unemployed when she was fired from the CBC's Prime Time News in 1995.

"It shakes your self-confidence, and it's difficult to go through in the public eye," she says. "You're sitting at the anchor desk one night and the next night you're not. The hardest thing was to tell my mom and dad about that one."

Her dismissal from the CBC was followed by a moment of panic. What would she do next? How would she support herself? "I knew that I would do whatever it took to survive and keep on going," she says. "You've got to have that ability to get your ego out of the way and be self-reliant."

So, she took a breath and jumped into the deep end, starting her own production company. "Irony of ironies, less than six months [after being fired] I was selling the CBC a program. It was a really important turning point in my life. Was I going to stop them from letting me do what I love and I believe in? The answer turned out to be 'no.'"

She credits her quick turnaround to values instilled in her at an early age. Her parents taught her to get informed, then speak her mind. They also emphasized the importance of character. "There's literally not a day in my life that I don't reach down to this: character

trumps genius," she says. "You can be the smartest kid in the room, but if you're not kind, if you're not generous, if you're not decent, if you don't understand what the other person is going through or why they're doing what they're doing, if you don't have any empathy, all the brains in the world are for naught."

She also learned resilience from those she has interviewed. "People who have succeeded in some traditional way – they became famous, they became rich, they became important – they'd all been dealt some pretty tough blows, and it strengthened them and it made them smarter the next time around," Wallin says. "That was the common thread I kept finding."

With a career that has continued to flourish, Wallin's turning point has taken her in some unexpected directions. When she and her production team went to New York City in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, it led to an opportunity to work as Consul General of Canada, as well as to serve on an independent panel about Canada's role in Afghanistan. In the fall of 2006, Wallin joined the Americas Society and the Council of the Americas in New York as a senior advisor on Canada/U.S. Relations. And in 2008, she was appointed to the Canadian Senate by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, where she acts as Chair of the National Security & Defence Committee, serving on both the Veterans Affairs subcommittee and the Special Committee on Anti-Terrorism, and is a member of the Senate's Foreign Affairs & International Trade Committee.

MOVING FORWARD

Both Hanington and Wallin have risen from their disasters stronger and ready to guide others. "You can make any opportunity work if you're prepared to," says Wallin. "Take circumstances that you've created or that you find yourself in and make the best of them. Squeeze every bit of benefit for you and others out of it."

"It's clichéd," she adds, "but it all comes back tenfold."

In any situation or encounter both women attest the importance of making sure you know what the issues are, what is expected of you, what is needed by others, and what role you can play. "Those are the basics I return to time after time," says Wallin. "Taste the situation, figure out what the right thing to do is, then it's easy to do it"

Another lesson both women have learned is to take chances.

"Do your work and face up to the challenge," Wallin recommends. "If you say 'yes', you can make a difference in people's lives, and you end up in the most incredible situations."

Hanington agrees that remaining flexible is key, and recommends reaching out to your social and professional network in times of crisis.

"I spent a lot of time thinking and getting advice from people who knew me well and people who knew the industry, to get a feel for what was right," she says. "Take the time to think through what you really want. Don't assume and don't settle. You may not be able to get what you really want, but unless you aim for it your chances are really diminished."

"I wouldn't have hoped for any of this," Hanington continues. "I thought that I would end my career with BMO because I loved them so much, but it just didn't work out that way. So you just roll with it and try to make the best of it."

"And always," she adds, "be true to yourself." ♦

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