Linda Rabbitt

Courage

From the outside, Linda Rabbitt's life seemed perfect. Married to a successful doctor. Two beautiful toddler-age daughters. A 9,000 square-foot home in McLean, Virginia, overlooking the Potomac River, furnished with beautiful antiques and with a housekeeper, gardener, and nanny to help out. But inside, things were far from perfect.

So far from perfect, in fact, that Linda came to fear for her life and the lives her girls. Her husband suffered from manic depression at a time

when the illness was even less understood and accepted than it is today, and in an era where society rarely questioned the stability and authority of doctors. His bouts of cruelty were amplified through self-medication using diet pills, and Linda knew they couldn't go on as they were. Finally, she asked him to leave, and with him went all the income and stability she had come to rely on. He moved overseas, where court agreements and child support obligations had no bearing. She had

no credit card, no bank account, and no car titled in her name.

That same year, in 1980, Linda's beloved father passed away, and she had to sell an antique clock to buy the plane ticket to Florida for his funeral. Her mother was too distraught to offer emotional or financial support, so Linda had to turn inward for strength. She sold the rest of the antiques, but in time she ran out of options, and the county turned off the home's electricity and water. Linda and her girls moved in with a friend—one of the few acquaintances her controlling ex-husband had allowed her to keep during their five-year marriage. There, at age 32, Linda set to work starting her life over.

Through the help of a friend, Linda finally landed at KPMG as a secretary making \$16,000 a year. She can still distinctly remember finishing her first day of work on February 2, 1981, and

walking to the corner of 20th and K Street in DC, where she waited for the bus to take her home to her apartment in Tyson's Corner, Virginia. She had never taken the bus before, so she hadn't had occasion to learn that the vehicle might not specifically say the destination stop on its marquee. It was only after two hours waiting in the falling snow that she discovered her mistake and finally boarded the right bus home.

Staring up at the street sign with tears in her eyes as the bus pulled away, Linda made a

silent promise to spend the rest of her life making sure that neither she, nor any woman she knew or loved, ever had to go through something like that again. Through her heartache, the resolution was not the sound of her spirit breaking, but a rallying cry, calling on all the secret strengths and skills cultivated in her character through her life up to that point. Linda Rabbitt would not be broken, and she would not settle. Now the cofounder, Chairman, and CEO of rand* construction corporation, a

\$300 million firm with four locations licensed to do construction in 26 states, Linda's road from secretary to CEO was pure courage. "Courage is operating on blind faith, doing what must be done even when you don't have a clear understanding where the end zone is," she says. "Building a new life and then building a new company was hard, but it was necessary, and in the end, it was the best thing I could have done."

For the first three decades of her life, Linda never thought of herself as a businesswoman, and was never told she had a mind for corporate success. It wasn't until she first set foot in the business world via KPMG that her innate skill and proclivity was tapped into—a sense for business that comes in part from her father's influence. His own parents were very successful making carriages in Germany, and as he was their smartest son, they sent him to America at the age of



nineteen to pursue an education. The year was 1925, and he set his sights on becoming a doctor, but his American aunt convinced him to instead make a foray in the brand new industry of automotive engineering. Seeing the opportunity, he took a job with Briggs, the precursor to Chrysler Corporation, and went to school for automotive engineering at night. He quickly rose through the ranks at Chrysler, where he met Linda's mother, at that time a young, beautiful secretary.

Linda's mother hailed from a poor family in Detroit, but when she married the brilliant, elegant German auto executive, she gracefully stepped into the role of community leader, socialite homemaker, and loving mother. Linda was born in Detroit, Michigan, and the family lived in the countryside until her younger sister was born four years later. They then moved to Grosse Point, where the girls grew up. "I think my father wanted a son, but he got me," Linda laughs. "He took me skeet shooting, fishing, and to every single hockey game—things girls just didn't do in those days."

Linda idolized her father, a disciplined Prussian who took her with him when he made the Saturday rounds to various engineering companies doing work for him. He'd check on their progress as they built die-cast model cars, pointing out imperfections. "Do you see this, Linda?" he would say. "This is a sixteenth of an inch off. You can never be a sixteenth of an inch off." He developed in her an eye for precision, accuracy, and perfection, which proves invaluable in the construction world today.

These high standards extended into Linda's schooling, where she only got her father's approval through absolute excellence. "I remember bringing home a report card with all A's, save for one B+ in home economics class," she says. "My father threw down the card and said, 'I simply don't understand the B+,' and walked away. I learned quickly that I needed to be perfect to get the respect I wanted from him."

When she wasn't inspecting automotive engineering flaws or putting in the work to be a star student, Linda partook in every lesson imaginable. Her mother signed her up for swimming, piano, singing, skiing, and ballet lessons, eager to cultivate her daughter's talents and give her the opportunity to explore every avenue available. When Linda was in fifth grade, they wrote a newspaper together and sold it for a

penny apiece around the neighborhood. "She made sure my sister and I were very involved and active, always learning," Linda recalls. "She was very outgoing, always volunteering or engaging with the community in some way. She threw wonderful dinner parties and had a wide network of friends, putting a very high premium on friendship. I picked that up from her, and it would become absolutely vital to my success later on as a businesswoman."

Linda's father was always adamant that she would go on to get a college education, and that she attend the University of Michigan, the best school in the state. Through her whole life, she called him at his office only once, to give him the good news that she made it in through early admission. She was to become the first woman on either side of her family to complete college, the first to get a masters degree, and the first to get a divorce.

In college, Linda got a liberal arts degree majoring in Social Studies and English, following her love of history, psychology, and sociology. Her mother had always pushed her to become either a nurse or a schoolteacher, and she hated the sight of blood, so she imagined she would go into education. In college, her aperture was opened enough to realize that if she wanted to make something of herself, Michigan probably wasn't the place to do it. "Many people I knew there were pretty chauvinistic, and the auto industry was the only industry in town," she reflects. "I studied political science and developed an interest in the way the federal government ran, so I decided that Washington, DC was my best chance."

Upon graduating in 1970, Linda made the move to DC, where she found teaching jobs were hard to come by. She instead enrolled at George Washington University to get her masters, and when she completed her coursework in 1972, she landed a job teaching English and American History to seventh and eighth graders for the Fairfax County Public School system. Her starting salary was \$7,800 a year, and she taught for three years until marrying her husband in 1975.

Had Linda maintained her teaching credentials through the next five years, she probably would have returned to what she knew when the marriage fell apart. Fortunately, her credentials had lapsed, compelling her to seek the position at KPMG. She joined the firm as the secretary for two of the partners, quickly coming to

realize that the business world was the place for her. "I loved what they did—the conversations they had about how to get clients and how to manage the accounts," she says. "I found business exciting."

Having grown up around successful people in a high performing environment, excellence was simply Linda's modus operandi at the firm, and when the managing partner needed an executive assistant a few months later, her name was submitted. In the interview for the elevated position, the managing partner mused at her two degrees from prestigious universities, and asked if she knew how to take dictation. Linda had not been trained as such, but she pointed out that she had a minor in English and could write the letters for him—he'd only have to sign. With that, she landed the job as Steve Harlan's executive assistant.

Through close observation, Linda's mother had learned how to speak and behave as the wife of a corporate executive. Displaying her mother's same ability to observe and interpret the world around her, Linda mastered the world of business, and after only three months, Steve promoted her to a new marketing position as the Director of Practice Development. Linda initially tried to turn the job down, citing her complete lack of marketing expertise, but Steve told her to learn. In this way, the people at Peat Marwick became her friends. "He saw something in me, and I made sure he was very well taken care of," Linda recalls. "He was the head of the Washington Board of Trade at the time, and I marketed him very well."

Through their work together, Linda and Steve came to be the best of friends, and when she was asked by an acquaintance to join her in the area's woman-owned launching first construction company, he wanted the best for her. The woman, the Director of Marketing for an architectural firm, was convinced that they could make six-figure incomes within three years. Not only did Steve encourage Linda to pursue the opportunity-he also lent her the money she needed to start the company and insisted on being their first client. With that, in 1985, Linda joined her partner in launching Hart Construction.

"The less you know about an opportunity, the more interesting it looks," Linda laughs now. "At the time, I knew nothing about construction, or business, or starting a company." Fortunately, the DC metropolitan area was going through its

first big real estate expansion when Hart was formed, and its two young female owners caused quite the stir in the traditionally-male field of construction. They were featured in Washingtonian Magazine, and though Linda had never taken a business class in her life, she learned how to run a business through observation and osmosis. Cognizant of the unparalleled value of relationships, she also joined the Washington Board of Trade and got involved on a committee. "Professional services firms are all about meeting people and showing them that they can believe in you," Linda says. "The more people you know, and the more people that like you and trust you, the more you're able to grow your business."

Personal connections and trust also landed Linda a blind date with an executive at the Oliver T. Carr Company, a client of Hart, who needed a date to the opening party of the Willard Hotel. John Whalen turned out to be a perfect match for Linda, and the two got married several years later. "What I love most about him is his value system," she reflects today. "His True North is True North. He's the most principled person I know, always looking for ways to give back, and he keeps me grounded. I'm extroverted and he's introverted. I'm the big picture girl, and he's the one that fills in the blanks and plugs up the holes. In our differences, we're incredibly compatible, and his support would prove key in my professional success to come."

By 1989, Hart had grown to a \$3 million company, and Linda had big ambitions to scale the company. As the 49 percent owner, however, those ambitions were frustrated. "My partner was also divorced, but she was receiving alimony. She didn't quite have the fire that I did," Linda says. "We decided to part ways in 1989, and with the money I received for my Hart stock, I decided to start a new construction company."

Linda brought in a 30 percent partner whose last name was Anderson, combining portions of their two names to form rand*. The new company, focused on tenant and office buildouts, quickly found itself faced with the biggest recession in the history of real estate, but Linda excelled at getting work and connecting with the many workers being laid off from larger construction companies. Her first clients were local and national developers like Hines and the Oliver T. Carr Company, and rand* was off and running.

In those early years, Linda ensured her

clients were well-served, which sometimes took the help of John and her two girls on nights and weekends. Focusing on commercial interiors and building renovations, their client list accumulated notable names like the Washington Post, Politico, General Dynamics, BCG, and around half the law firms in the area. Always a woman of the people, Linda would visit job sites to praise the blue collar workers that truly became the backbone of the company, and more important than the long series of "Best Places to Work" awards rand* received, her efforts garnered loyalty that has kept team members onboard for many years. "I have the utmost respect for every one of my employees, and I always tell them that rand* can't be successful without them," she explains. "We all have to share, be kind, and have each others' backs. I'm incredibly proud of what we've been able to accomplish together."

All the while, Linda raised her daughters to be independent and creative thinkers. She taught them to take a sense of responsibility and pride in their schoolwork, in the same way she took responsibility and pride in her leadership of rand*. Today, she laughs at the memory of coming home after a twelve-hour day to find that she needed to assemble a Martha Washington costume for a play the next day. "In an entrepreneurial environment, the highs are high, and the lows are low, and there's nothing in between," she remarks. "But together as a family, we built a life we could be proud of -a life well-spent." The Rabbitt household was a chaotic, nurturing, supportive atmosphere for all, and from 1989 to 1995, rand* grew to \$20 million. By 2000, it had reached \$75 million.

"I was just beginning my fifties at that point," Linda recalls. "I felt like I had overcome a lot of obstacles, and now that my daughters were growing up into wonderful young women and my company was on solid ground, I was ready to enjoy the fruits of my hard work." But everything changed that fall when, at the insistence of her college friends, she got a mammogram for the first time in several years. When she found out she had breast cancer, it was like a punch to the stomach. "I couldn't believe it. I felt like I had finally overcome all odds," she says. "But my husband told me there was a blessing in it, so I looked for one. And it turns out he was right. The blessing was my decision that, if I was going to die, it would be with the fewest regrets possible."

With that, Linda, began living life with a new sense of meaning and value. She let go of baggage she didn't need to carry anymore, and she no longer allowed people to treat her without the respect she deserved. "It was actually very liberating," she reflects. "I made sure my house was in order and that I was square with all the relationships and circumstances in my life. I was going to do everything in my power to make it through, but in case I didn't, I made sure I had everything taken care of."

The next year, Linda was elected Chair of the Greater Washington Board of Trade and also served as Head of its Executive Committee. She underwent four rounds of chemo during those leadership roles and never missed a meeting, showing the world what courage looked like. "I felt a calling to serve as a role model and to teach people that they can face adversity with grace, overcoming it to have satisfying, fulfilling lives," she avows. "Now, fifteen years later and cancer free, I have only three regrets: that my father never got to see my success, that my mother never understood my success, and that I never got to be 5'10" with long thin legs."

rand* went on to open offices in Atlanta, Austin, and Denver, and as partners came and went, Linda has rebuilt the company four times. She made smart, strategic business decisions that kept the company very cash rich with no substantial debt. She came to understand that everyone has the same 24-hour clock, and that life is about choices. "Everyone gets to choose how they want to spend their time," she says. "I chose to be a great mom and a great business owner, but I didn't read novels or take long vacations or learn how to play golf. Because of those choices, I have two smart, well-grounded, happy daughters, and rand* is a great success."

That success has allowed Linda to support an extensive list of causes, many of them brought to her by clients and friends. Her personal experiences have led to her support of the Susan G. Komen Foundation and the Breast Cancer Coalition, as well as a number of initiatives to help battered wives. As a Trustee of George Washington University, she founded a program to teach women how to sit on corporate boards—an initiative she is now cultivating through Harvard's business school. She served as the Chair of the Federal Reserve for the Fifth District and has served on various corporate boards herself. Her

community service work won her recognition as the 2004 Washingtonian of the Year, and in 2016 she received the Horatio Alger Award for Outstanding Americans.

Through these various commitments and recognitions, and through her position at the helm of rand*, Linda finds herself teaching others far more now than she was able to as a school teacher, and demonstrating on a daily basis how good leadership makes a difference. She seeks out smart, ambitious, nice people to join rand*, and she considers each team member a leader in their own rite. "I think that every successful leader builds a culture of one for all and all for one," she says. "You have to be inspirational and aspirational. You have to be a good role model that inspires trust and is fair and honest and nice. It may seem trite, but not everyone is those things. Not everyone knows how to counsel people to find their best light."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Linda remembers one of the many conversations she had with her mother before she passed away at age 87. Linda used to call her every morning on her way to work, and two weeks before she passed away, the elderly woman expressed her discontent that she hadn't accomplished anything that day. "Mom, you're 87 years old," Linda had remarked. "What have you not accomplished?" Her mother replied, "I don't know, but if I don't accomplish something everyday, I just don't feel alive." The conversation clarified for Linda the importance of incremental progress in ensuring one's happiness, and the

power of taking life-affirming actions on a daily basis.

Beyond that, Linda tells others to take her journey with a grain of salt, but with enduring hope for their future. "I would not advise others to do what I did, starting a business in an industry I knew nothing about when I had no business background," she says. "But I hope my journey teaches other women that they don't have to be secretaries if they don't want to be. I hope it shows people that not everybody tells their story, but everybody has one. Everybody faces problems and setbacks through their lives. It doesn't matter where you come from. It only matters where you're going, and that you allow yourself the courage to get there."

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