

Stop Standing in Your Own Way:

Susan Armstrong's Story of Survival and Success

By Christopher Cussat

Alcoholism, drug-addiction, street gangs, motorcycle gangs and being shot...No it is not the character progression and plot synopsis of the next Bruce Willis or Jet Li action blockbuster, but rather a summary of the struggles and experiences through which Susan Armstrong actually lived! Most people outside of a movie set would not survive any one of these wrecking balls, let alone all five. But Susan Armstrong not only survived them, she went on to reinvent herself, establish her own company, author a book and use her personal experiences as the blueprint for helping others to be successful and achieve their greatest potential.

However, before learning how she saved and found herself, it is important to understand how she became lost. Armstrong feels that her eventual "end" began at an early age as she struggled to please a mother who was a perfectionist and to be accepted in a world where she did not feel she fit. Said Armstrong, "Very early on in my life I got the message [from my mother] that nothing I did was good enough." Even as an intelligent child, Armstrong did not find social acceptance at school and often, from fear of being different, chose not to participate. "I didn't want to raise my hand in class because I thought the other kids wouldn't like me if I always knew the answers." This strange dichotomy of never feeling good enough for her mother and (as a result) not having the confidence to apply herself in school, created a tightrope upon which she balanced personal uncertainty with her desperate desire to please others. As Armstrong described it, "I always felt that I had to walk on eggshells for everyone." The struggle to balance herself amid her family and society's tensions of expectation and acceptance led to deep feelings of inadequacy and eventually, a deeper desire to escape them.

One day at age eleven, Armstrong and her friend got a case of beer. It was an epiphany and release for her young, troubled mind. She explained, "When I drank the beer it took away all of the eggshell feelings and I didn't care anymore if I didn't fit in or if I wasn't perfect enough for my mother." Thus, she found a way to escape the strains in her life and began the cycle of dependency on alcohol (and later drugs) in order to drown out the feelings that haunted her. "That was it, from that day forward I wanted more of the same; I didn't

want the nervous 'eggshell' and 'not being good enough' feelings anymore."

Alcohol was Armstrong's first addiction and she searched for it often and for as much as she could possibly get. This took her to the street. "Of course when you are eleven years old and you want that kind of escape; there is only one place to get it." Armstrong continued, "I made friends out on the street who could provide me with the alcohol, but with it, came the drugs as well." Although Armstrong considered alcohol to be her primary addiction, it was not long before she progressed to harder drugs including marijuana, crystal meth, angel dust, PCP, MDA and cocaine. She noted, "In my case, I kept searching out an escape and whatever form that came in was acceptable."

This constant search for mental escape led to Armstrong's involvement with street gangs until she was sixteen, at which point she "graduated" to motorcycle gangs. In addition to supplying alcohol and drugs, the gangs also provided Armstrong with something she never found at home or at school. She explained, "It was a lowest common denominator because I didn't have to be perfect there and I felt like I was accepted for who I was; so I stayed where I fit in – with the gangs."

In addition to homelessness, rape and physical abuse, Armstrong's alcohol and drug dependency almost led to her death on numerous occasions. However, the lowest point came in her late 20's when she was involved with an abusive gang member who was also an addict. "One night after he beat me really bad, I snapped; I told him if he wanted to kill me then go ahead." She continued, "He shot me in the back

and left me in a van on the side of the road for dead.” Miraculously, when the gang returned for the van days later, she was still alive. Even though Armstrong survived the incident, she still had to save herself.

Armstrong’s turning point began after she recovered and went back to work. A female bartender came up to her and said, “We’re tired of this, if you don’t care about yourself and if you don’t want to look after yourself, we’re not going to do it for you anymore.” This ultimatum stuck with Armstrong and she knew that she had to change her life.

She soon engineered an escape from the motorcycle gang and went back to live with her father. This was by no means the end of her addiction problems. “Unfortunately, I had been living that lifestyle for so long that it was like I was brainwashed...I didn’t have them to abuse me anymore so I still would use drugs and alcohol to abuse myself.”

Through the help of friends, Armstrong finally recognized that she had a problem. Her acceptance happened after a year of trying to quit drinking and failing. “One morning I woke up and opened a can of warm beer, took two sips and suddenly realized that if I continued to do this I was going to die.”

The Phoenix House (like Alcoholics Anonymous) in Hamilton, Ontario was the first step. They eventually sent Armstrong to a recovery hospital in California for six weeks. Even in her group counseling sessions, she still struggled with her adolescent fears of not fitting in. In fact, she struggled with these feelings of inadequacy to the point of almost leaving the hospital. “I made up my mind that I was going to leave because I felt like I wasn’t good enough to be with the others.” That same night, Armstrong won the AA Big Book in a hospital raffle. “I never won anything before and all I remember is saying to myself, ‘You’re not going to let me leave are you?’”

It was at this moment that Armstrong began truly to heal. “I gave up; the minute I stopped constantly exerting my will, fighting everything and insisting on doing things my own way, I started to change.” In other words, she had to give into herself because her own will and strength were holding her back. Armstrong admitted, “That fighting spirit is what kept me alive, but in the end it also kept me from seeking help, seeing the truth and getting better for a long time.”

In order to make it in the real world, Armstrong had to

accept that everything she had ever known was wrong. In a sense, she had to relearn how to be normal again. “I called it how to be a real person training; I took any class that was available and read any book I could about people, their behavior and how to communicate.” Armstrong’s determination to succeed was very different from that of other people in her classes. “Properly learning and applying this information were necessary for me to stay alive; I knew that if I didn’t, I would go back to the streets and I would die.” Not only did Armstrong master what she had learned, she also discovered

that most “real people” do not understand themselves or others. They also did not know how to live in the world around them.

This discovery inspired Armstrong to establish her own company, Susan Armstrong, Training & Development. “One of the strengths I have is an ability to connect with people on an emotional level.” Armstrong combined this gift with her knowledge and experiences in order to help people (and companies) deal more effectively with each other. “By teaching people how to interact with the world around them, I help corporations and individuals get better at what they do, recognize how we actually communicate and further develop human and business relationships.”

She also hopes to help other addicts by sharing her story. Her new book, *An Invisible Prison – a true story of survival*, chronicles

and details Armstrong’s life, addictions, survival, change and recovery. “The book is about the feelings and emotions that one experiences while going through this, about what keeps us stuck in these situations and about what I had to do to get better.”

After surviving all that had been thrown at her, Armstrong vowed to pay the world back for getting a second chance. She concluded, “I made a promise a long time ago, that in return for my life, I would be the best person that I could be and help as many people as possible...I truly mean that and try to live that every single day.”

For more information about her company, Susan Armstrong, Training & Development, visit www.susanarmstrongtraining.com or call 877-368-9200. Her book, *An Invisible Prison – a true story of survival*, is available on Amazon.com, IUniverse.com and Barnes & Noble bookstores and website. Or visit www.stopstandinginyourownway.com. ■

