

High Profile Jackie Waldman

Helping others replaced MS as her life focus

By DARLA ATLAS
Special Contributor

Everything in life always came easily for Jackie Waldman.

With a thriving marriage, three great kids and her own hair-accessory business in Dallas, she felt she was leading a charmed existence. That all changed in 1991, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and was told there was no cure.

"I thought, 'Is this payback because things have been so easy for me?'" she says. Determined to get her perfect life back, "I decided I would be the one to beat it." At one point, she even traveled to Israel to take part in a drug study.

"It didn't work," says Ms. Waldman, 51. "I finally had to accept that no cure meant just that."

But seeing the movie *Schindler's List*, she says, helped adjust her attitude, as well as her plans for her future. In 1995, she and a friend organized Random Acts of Kindness Week in Dallas, to coincide with the national Kindness celebration. She then started her *Courage to Give* book series, which spotlights real people who have been through a tragedy but choose to give back to others. A two-time guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, she's now in the midst of a 130-city speaking tour, hoping to teach people to avoid the mistake she made: "I was really feeling sorry for myself for way too long."

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● On your tour, you talk about your latest book, *People With MS With the Courage to Give*. Can you give an

example of someone who fits that description?

I talk about a woman who loved to play piano, but her right hand was numb. She hadn't played in so long but wanted to volunteer. Through volunteermatch.com, we found an assisted-living home 10 minutes from her house. She played a concert, and the residents were so happy. Do you think they even noticed if she missed a note? And when she drove home, do you think she was thinking about her disease?

It's fascinating how much the act of giving to someone else affects our own happiness.

I have an article and picture of me when I was 4 years old, from 1956. I'm with two other people; it says that "three tiny members of Temple Emanu-El sort through 563 pairs of socks" for the needy. I look at this 4-year-old and she's so happy, her hands in the socks. I'd forgotten that joy when I got sick; I'd forgotten where true happiness comes from. It wasn't until I started giving again that I found that joy again.

You've said that you now feel the disease is more of a blessing than a curse.

Oh, my gosh, yes. I'm such a nicer person, a happier person. I'm blessed to meet the most inspiring and motivating people and to just enjoy life with my husband and children on a level I'd never known if this hadn't happened to me. By being able to



NATHAN HUNSINGER/Staff Photographer

Jackie Waldman is known from her books and speaking tours about volunteerism. She says the first time a producer for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* called, she thought it was a friend playing a joke.

put my own stuff aside and do for someone else, my life became even better than before.

Why do you think the movie *Schindler's List* affected your outlook so much?

The people's courage and acts of kindness toward each other in the most extreme circumstances made me realize so many things are worse in this world. It's not what happens to us; it's what we do with it. My pity party ended when I saw that movie.

By 2000, you were nationally known for your work. Is it true that when Oprah's producer first called you, you thought it was a friend playing a joke?

I did! The dog was barking, the doorbell was ringing and I was paying the pizza guy. As I was making sure it was a mushroom pizza, I was trying to figure out which friend was playing the joke. Come to find out, it truly was one of Oprah's producers. After screaming and crying, I sat down for a moment and thought, "Thank

you, Oprah. Now so many people are going to find out how powerful this message is."

Now the question you've probably been asked a million times: What's Oprah like in real life?

She's so authentic, so dedicated and committed to the human family. When we broke to commercials, we were still just talking and talking about the courage to give. Oprah's cool. She's wonderful.

After your first appearance on the show, 7,500 people signed up to give of their time on volunteermatch.com, which you'd recommended. What advice would you give people who have never volunteered before?

You can start on a really small scale. You don't have to start a nonprofit; you don't have to volunteer your life away. I also want to make the point that having the courage to give doesn't have to be for a stranger in the community. Moms who are busy with the kids and are involved in the school — that's volunteering, too.

And what do you say to people who say they don't have anything to give?

If someone wants to give to their community, there's a way to do it. If someone is bedridden and wants to volunteer, they can be a phone buddy to somebody else. Someone else is worse off than we are — maybe they were diagnosed yesterday. Someone out there is alone. It's amazing what happens when we pick up the phone and make that call. It's about our healing, too.

How are you today, healthwise?

There are treatments available now to slow the progression of the disability. I take Avonex once a week, which is medically proven to slow the progression of the disease. And I exercise regularly and try to eat right. But we still have M&Ms around the house.

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