

KARINA FASSI

HUG LIFE



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I dedicate this book to my mum, Ana Grondona – the strongest woman I have ever met – who taught me what is important: values, fighting for my dreams, being honest, trustful, good person, and loving the simple, being free and independent. She gave me wings to fly and showed me the way to happiness and fulfilling life despite the obstacles I would have to overcome.

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PREFACE

Suddenly, the water turns dark because it is a deep area or because the earth at the bottom is black. There is dark vegetation or algae, or the waves are rough. Or the tide stops being in your favor and turns against you or sideways and drags you and takes you to another place.

Swimming in open water has taught me to face life and learn that when I have to go through difficult situations I must raise my head, look forward, visualize the shore or the point of arrival and stroke harder, never stand still or get stuck in a place I don't like.

I remember once when swimming in Lake Lácar in San Martín de los Andes, Argentine Patagonia, the water was freezing. I was about to fulfill a 3200 meters challenge. While swimming I felt the Naval Prefecture boat sailing very close to me. Some people from the Nonthué challenge's organization had reported there was this girl whose legs were sinking and trembling a lot so they were going to proceed to remove her since she had been in the water for a long time and could suffer from hypothermia. They were talking about me.

Fortunately, the organizers knew me from previous events so they warned The Naval Prefecture men: "If Karina does not stop swimming or asks for help, do not take her out of the water, she is like this! Her legs sink and she trembles a lot. There are just a few meters to go".

Meanwhile, I did not stop stroking, never stopped, and never gave up my dream. On the contrary, I swam with more strength, trying to reach the shore and something strange happened. I started to hear strange noise after every stroke the sound was louder and I realized that it was in coincidence with my strokes. It was the people's applause, also the swimmers who had finished the challenge were encouraging to the rhythm of each stroke cheering me not to stop and avoid being removed from the water by the Naval Prefecture Finally when I reached the shore, the welcoming ovation was a moment that I had never seen before.

Nobody will ever take that moment and that feeling away from me. Nothing can delete that loud, beautiful applause from my memory. There I learned that if I don't put down my arms, if I don't quit my dreams, then there is a reward.

INTRODUCTION

I want to leave a nice footprint in this life, sowing a good seed through my books; I know that it is not easy and that most of the time I feel like I am rowing on a dulce de leche ocean to achieve my goals and projects.

I learned that perseverance and not lowering my arms pays off and over time I can achieve what I fought for; that this search to feel alive, translates into emotions that sometimes I find difficult to explain with words; I admit that it is unbelievable even for me to look back and see the path I walked since that day when I was in the swimming pool locker room of a club that did not dare to go out because of I was the shock that I thought I could cause to swimmers. They would see my skinny legs, without balance or strength or muscle mass, scars plus my trembling on a swimming suit. Taking steps and reaching the edge of the pool was an abysm.

The consequences of spina bifida had left serious consequences on my body, but above all, it had wreaked havoc on my self-esteem. I was born with a bone marrow injury, but my lack of confidence and self-love had been forged by time and circumstances; but I decided to encourage myself to go out and try a better quality of life, overcome my fears and take up the exercises as a daily medicine to stop my body atrophying and end up stuck in a wheelchair.

At that time my dreams were small, I just wanted to stay on my feet and improve, but I never imagined that over time this rehabilitation would come to be called training and that idea of improving myself day by day would grow so much that I would start swimming in open water in lakes, rivers, and oceans around the world, to see myself swimming in lakes in the south of Argentine, Patagonia such as Nahuel Huapí, Aluminé, Correntoso, Gutiérrez, Espejo, Lacar, Chocón; in rivers such as the Negro, Colorado, Quequén and also the Argentine Sea; from taking three and a half minutes to swim just fifty meters, to swimming two kilometers per hour and covering ten kilometers of the open sea. Waking up in Italy and having the opportunity to open and close the Open Water World Championships with the 30 best swimmers in the world on the beautiful island of Capri to Naples, or connect Cancun with Isla Mujeres swimming through the Mexican Caribbean; or the sublime Hudson River in New York, then in Brazil, Colombia even connecting Europe and Asia in the Bosphorus Strait in Turkey.

Some people think it is just luck, but I believe that luck must be generated, others say that it is something magical, but I believe that magic is what the universe creates once you have done your part.

The same thing happens in my profession and in everything I do. From the fear to be run over by a car while crossing slowly the avenue before the traffic light turned green when I was still trying to get to the other side, to graduate as an accountant, practice my profession, work, become economically independent, buy my apartment, traveling and owing nothing to anyone.

I believe that we must have the courage to create the life of our dreams despite the obstacles, to keep that flame burning within us so that it shines brighter than the sun, the moon, and the stars illuminating the world. Now I see myself in the place I wanted to get to and I realize that I was stronger than I thought and braver than I thought. I began by losing the fear of living.

Perhaps there are no such things as happy endings, but I can guarantee that it is worth fighting to have a nice story, a good life.

Now I see myself in the place I wanted to get to and I realize that I was stronger and braver than I thought. I began by losing the fear to live.

I see that I have benefited from everything that happened to me. Although I did not choose to be born with spina bifida, it made me the strong woman that I am today. I learned to overcome obstacles when I swim in rough water, instead of standing still or scared looking at the dark bottom, I swim harder, looking forward to getting out of that situation sooner.

I was able to recognize the power that I have and then wonderful things began to happen in my life, I became a free person and from that moment I feel that I trust myself and no one can stop me.

HUG LIFE

I selected this name for my second book because it's what I do every day, hugging is beautiful. It is to lean on the other person, it is healthy, why do not hug someone you don't feel anything for? It is love, it is the best way to show affection, it is genuine, a healer power. I love life above all and I embrace it holding on to it very tightly, I take care of it and protect it.

When people ask me if swimming in open waters scares me or if the fact that my life may be in danger frightens me, I usually answer: I love life and what I try to do is to enjoy it and I'm not going to do crazy, risky things. Second, I love freedom, that opportunity to get my backpack and go on a new trip, a new destination, a lot of learning, and always respecting nature, animals, and the environment. That's why on the covers of my books I am next to dolphins or elephants, because I love them and hug them like my family, and many times, I don't want to let them go. I would like that hug to be eternally strong, but at the same time soft and warm so that they feel my heart beating faster when hugging them. Very often I use the phrase: "I hug you with my heart", as long as I am alive, I will give you the best I have, and I will share it with you, like this book that I hope will help you to see and live a more beautiful life, to spread my desire, so that you realize that perhaps you are still not shining brightly.

As long as there is light, there will be hope and it will enlighten the way. I am talking about the inner spark we all have and that makes us shine. I usually compare our inner light and strength with a volcano's lava. Nothing stops it, it is imposing, devastating, amazing, incandescent, strong, and unstoppable. This is how we should be; this is how our inner strength should be when facing a new challenge and also contribute with our little drop

Teresa of Calcutta once said: "What we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But if the drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less because of the missing drop."

In this book, I try to send you that hug full of light and love so that you live and enjoy life because it is wonderful and every day, we have the opportunity to hug it, love it, take care of it, and contribute with our little drop for a better world. Let's do our best every day of our existence to be better and leave a beautiful mark in this world in which we are just visitors.

I know —despite being a dreamer— that reality is difficult to change, that I cannot solve the problems of the world, but at least I try to contribute with my humble grain of sand, my little drop because I am also realistic. The good and the bad coexist, they are part of human nature.

We meet every day good and bad people and surely people with bad attitudes are not going to read my book, but that excuse is not good enough to at least try. In the world, we coexist every day with news about murderers, rapists, people who mistreat children, drug dealers, and people who, even being aware of it, contaminate and destroy the planet. They do not care about anything. There are reprehensible attitudes that I cannot understand and I wonder how can the human mind be so twisted? It makes me sick just to think about it, it is most likely that those people will not read my book, but surely some children in some school or somewhere will read it and will learn that the most valuable thing we have is life and every human being on this planet must take care of it, protect it and respect it.

I HAVE A DREAM THAT KEEPS ME AWAKE

I always say that every person is the architect of their destiny and chooses how to live. Life is a set of decisions and moments, I am convinced that we must make decisions that lead us to the happiest moments; this theory is ideal, but when it comes to reality, sometimes there are situations we do not decide or choose, those situations hit and shake us like a bucket of cold water full of ice cubes and leave us immobilized; we feel fragile, apparently with no strength to move forward; especially if it is about health problems; the rest are not problems for me. Life has taught me that if I'm healthy I can do anything.

When we have to face adverse reality, facing a health problem, as in my case facing a diagnosis of myelomeningocele spina bifida and the whole combo of consequences, I think I found the way: it is through dreams. At least it worked for me. I will tell you how I do it: even if it is for just a moment, I escape from that reality generating a new horizon in my mind, and begin to dream.

What I call dreams is to imagine something nice, something I like that makes me happy; you can call it goals, objectives, those that make you smile and your heart beat faster, that generate adrenaline, euphoria, enthusiasm just imagining it; but be careful... I'm not talking about building castles in the air, I'm talking about dreams that from the first moment are possible and real. I visualize them and see myself fulfilling them, then inevitably I return to reality, but there is already a big difference, I return with another attitude because I have a dream to fulfill and that attitude helps me to face problems differently because I feel motivated and I direct my life to fulfill that dream, to make it come true and get strong enough to continue and skip any obstacle in my way because I am sure that if I do it, something better will be waiting for me.

I can assure you that this is how good things come up, everything flows in an incredibly simple way; everything is easier, everything is clearer and the rewards pop up. They are the prize life gives me for not lowering my arms.

Each dream keeps me awake at night and makes me wake up happy in the morning. I love to sleep with the window shades open and wake up to the rays of sunlight at dawn, it is a moment that I fully enjoy, then go to the kitchen where it is a pleasure to smell coffee and then prepare a latte; the smell of toasted bread, opening the refrigerator and find my mom's homemade marmalade (actually that's not just marmalade, it is love concentrated in a jar). This is how I start my days, valuing those little things; other people may not see it, but I appreciate everything, the bed, the sheets, the warm shower, listening to soft music or the birds singing, I love the sound of crickets or the noise of the leaves of the trees being shaken by the wind, see the clouds, listen to the rain, feel the smell of the flowers.

After such a beautiful start and those little gifts, I begin to plan my day: work, training, studies, everything aimed at fulfilling my next dream that, with a positive attitude I am sure will soon come true.

DO NOT GIVE UP ON YOUR DREAMS

Never lower your arms, "persevere and you will succeed" says a popular saying and I can prove that it is true.

Just fifteen days after the publication of my book "The power of will", I lost my job. I was fired from the company where I had worked for the last twelve years. At that time, I was about to travel to the United States to fulfill a great and beautiful challenge: in the magnificent Hudson River, I was going to swim in front of the Statue of Liberty; but on July 28, 2016, at eight in the morning, my doorbell rang and there was a letter for me... The sentence was very short... from that date on my services were dismissed.

I had just lost my job and social security, which was a very worrying situation because I would not be able to continue with my treatment and rehabilitation for my spina bifida sequelae. The first thing I did was to call my mom and tell her what happened and as usual, through her wise words, she knew how to calm me down: "It is okay, don't worry, you will never die of hunger, you will get ahead as you always did," she told me.

Two hours later I was calmer, I was able to think so I went for a walk and handed out some resumes. That was the only thing that came to my mind. I knew that if I stayed in the apartment I would stress out and that is the worst thing that can happen to me. It was a very good decision because wherever I went, I showed the letter that said that I had lost my job that same day and some people sympathize. For example, a human resources man from a company I visited asked me: "How many resumes did you print?" "Many", I told him and he answered: "give me two or three and I'll give them to some other contacts I have".

That was a very nice gesture and at that moment it helped me a lot; In contrast, I remembered my boss's attitude at work: the day before I was fired, I finished my tasks, turned off the computer, looked at him and told him "See you tomorrow" and he smiled. "See you tomorrow, Kari!" Without saying a word, the next day he fired me. After the dismissal, he sent me home a bag with the jacket that I had left hanging on the back of my chair and a cup that I left on the desk and he used every afternoon to pour me tea or coffee. I never went back to the office and finally, the company closed its doors, leaving more than a thousand families unemployed.

Crises show people's best and worst attitudes. When I worked in the company, I saw things were wrong and getting worse day by day, to the point of enduring very stressful situations, so much so that one day while waiting for the bus to get home, I vomited, as a way of unloading the accumulated stress. Some days I couldn't even get to the corner, and my vomiting became more frequent. I think that if I had continued working there, I would have ended up getting sick. I remember one day I left the office very upset since a coworker had been very rude to me, he even insulted me at the bus stop (the bus seems to take longer to arrive when you need it to arrive soon the most) I burst into tears and could not stop. Suddenly a lady whose house was just behind the bus stop came out and asked me what was wrong. "Nothing. Don't worry". But she insisted: "I'm not going anywhere! And in a minute, she pulled her car out of the garage and opened the

door waiting for me to get into her red car. It is unbelievable, but sometimes people you do not even know, you do not even know their names, help you, while others who do know you and know about your effort and struggle, hurt you.

Yet, if I focus on the positive side, thanks to the twelve years I worked in that company I was able to get my apartment and had access to good social security and excellent specialized doctors in Buenos Aires.

The afternoon after the massive dismissal of two hundred employees, we were called for a meeting. No one from the company showed up, there were only some people from the trade union and a scary lawyer. It was easy to tell from the picture that the situation was very complex. They said the dismissal was not our fault but economic and financial problems of the company and that we were very unlikely to collect any compensation. At that moment, I stopped listening to what the trade unionist was saying and started looking at my former partners crying and some with a lot of grief, anguish, and despair because they had families, children to raise, they had their children's education to pay for, mortgage loans and debts, but especially the conviction that without a job, the world would fall apart. Just witnessing what was happening made me get up and leave the room where we had been gathered. On my way out, crossing a dark corridor, I came across a person who threatened me not to sue the company because it could end up very badly.

Despite everything that was going on, I never shed a single tear, I began to think what my life would have been like if I lowered my arms when a doctor from my city told me that my life would continue in a wheelchair. And if I could get out of a wheelchair, obviously leaving a job would not be impossible. Perhaps the blows of life made me stronger and I learned that if I am healthy, I can do anything, absolutely anything. There are no limits to my dreams and in a short time, this would be one more anecdote. I decided as usual to face the adversity leaning on my dreams. I wanted to make the possibility of swimming in the Hudson River a reality, but that was not the moment. I could not go on a trip and know that when I returned, I would not have a job, that did not mean quitting on my dreams, simply postponing them until I figure out what to do.

Life is made of good and bad times; I think that's what it's all about. As I said in my previous book: life is not a bed of roses, but if it was it would be very boring.

As the days passed, I continue handing out resumes. One day I went to my city, Bahia Blanca's Council, a place where a short time before I had been rewarded as a good example of daily persistence. I told them I was unemployed. Suddenly I felt that I was wasting my time when a lady at the Observatory for Disabled People's Rights —having a coffee and waiting for me to finish speaking— told me: "You are an accountant, you have just published a book, you have enough tools to move on". I already knew that, but it looked as if he didn't really care and was just washing his hands of my situation. He would not help me so I left in no time.

Then I took my resume to an important official from the National University of the South. He told me that "there were many more than three hundred positions to fill and that I had great chances of getting a job". Imagine my expectations after a while he told me that I should wait because that position would only be available when the National President was gone.

—"But if he has just taken office", I told him.

"Well, maybe he will leave soon, but until then we have to wait".

Right at that moment, I had to be calm and make decisions to move forward. What worried me the most was not having health insurance which is a problem for anybody it is worse for a disabled person or as I prefer to call it a person with different capacities, because as I said in my previous book, what changes are the effort we must make, not only me but anyone.

When I lost my job, I was not going to be able to keep my health insurance and without income, my chances to afford medical costs were extinguished. Even when paying the fees for my social work, I had no choice but to go to trial for a writ of Amparo to get the orthopedic shells that support my legs, because I do not have enough sensitivity, strength, or muscle mass that I need to walk.

Now I no longer had social security, I had to do something so I decided to travel to Buenos Aires and talk to the doctors at the clinic where I had had my surgery in September 2008. They greatly improved my walking and also helped me with the sequels of spina bifida.

That day I recovered my peace of mind because it would not be necessary to perform new surgeries on my legs and now my treatment would be based on physical activity. I should only go to the clinic once or twice a year for checkups and the most pleasant thing was hearing the doctor say that I could count on him. At that moment it was good to hear it. The unpleasant phrase of the doctor from Bahía Blanca came to my memory "life goes on, in a wheelchair but it goes on!", to force me to resign from walking after a bad surgery.

I consider nobody has a crystal ball and it is difficult to predict the future, especially in medicine where everything changes continuously and impressive improvements can be seen every day. Leaving that clinic everything seemed to be back on track. Then I took the subway to get to the bus station and from there start the way back home to Bahía Blanca. It was a ten hours trip, the bus stopped at every little town until we reached our destination.

On the subway, I was able to get a seat and I heard my phone ringing. It was my lucky day, although I am convinced that luck must be generated, nothing happens just because. At first, I didn't dare to pick it up, because in Argentina there is a lot of insecurity and taking the phone out of my bag right in a crowded subway was not the best idea if you do not want to be robbed. But it rang so insistently that it gave me away. So, I decided to pick it up and ¡surprise!

-Is that Karina Fassi? Don't worry, you already have a job! -

The call was from no more no less than the mayor of the city, Héctor Gay. To tell the truth, I knocked on many doors and handed out resumes everywhere. My mum usually says "Only be ashamed if you steal" that gave me enough courage to apply for a job in all the places I could get to, including the Townhall. I felt an unimaginable joy, on my face the biggest of smiles was drawn; the wind had already changed and was in my favor. Having a job, I could start thinking about the possibility of another great dream coming true: Swimming in front of the Statue of Liberty in the United States of America.

Resilience is the ability to face the adversities of life, transform pain into a driving force to overcome them, and emerge stronger. A resilient person understands that he is the architect of his joy and his destiny, the truth is that I identify a lot with this idea.

Is there anything more beautiful than feeling free? I think it is my lifelong obsession, fighting for freedom. It is an inexplicable feeling every time I pack my backpack and put my passport first to start a new trip, a new challenge, without commitments, or ties, or giving explanations to anyone and being my guide; put together the logistics and itinerary of the route I am going to take and the necessary cares, the time I am going to be away from my loved ones, my home, my things, I am going to make my own decisions and take responsibility for the impact. Not depending on others, or others depending on me, that is sublime.

I remember when I was in a wheelchair after surgery on my ankle (one of the consequences of being born with spina bifida is having congenital malformations in the lower limbs and trouble walking). I didn't want to be a burden to anyone, I did not want anyone to push the chair, I wanted to be independent and sometimes I think that is the reason why I do not have a partner, a husband, a life partner, I do not want to depend on another person, nor do they depend on me, I need to feel free in all possible ways.

When swimming I experience mostly a feeling of vitality, but also freedom, that is why after swimming ten kilometers from the beach of Cancun to Isla Mujeres in the Mexican Caribbean, when at night we went out for dinner and celebrate the achievement of the great challenge, my dear friend Coco Jorge Villegas told me about another challenge. It was going to be in the mighty Hudson River, New York, swimming in front of the Statue of Liberty. I thought I should not miss this opportunity and I began to fantasize about the idea.

When I got financially stable and after working quietly for several months, I was ready to start saving and planning my trip.

From the very beginning I have always enjoyed everything that comes to my mind, every thought, every moment from registering for the challenge, getting the ticket, looking for accommodation, searching for places I want to visit, putting together the medicine cabinet, because when I travel, I walk a lot and I don't want to waste time, I sleep little, I walk too much and my orthopedic valves tend to rip me off, that's why it is necessary to take gauze, antibiotics, healing creams, etc.

The expected day arrived and I traveled alone on a nonstop flight from Buenos Aires - New York even enjoyed the food on the plane, which is like a play house when I was a child because the cutlery is tiny.

Upon arrival, it was fascinating to see those streets, those constructions, those huge buildings that seem endless to look up. After several minutes I arrived at the hotel that I had booked online and it was located in a strategic place in Manhattan, it is called Hotel Hudson New York Central Park and it is beautiful. The reception was luxurious and the suite with a double bed just for me alone

was perfect. From the window I could see the city, I was amazed unable to believe that was there fulfilling another great dream.

Without wasting time, I went for a walk, I was overwhelmed, everything was so well organized, everything working, and everything looked beautiful. I stopped by a food truck and bought quesadillas to eat on the go and continued walking.

Suddenly something caught my attention, many people were sleeping on the streets. In a country where everything seems to work well or so I thought, I did not expect to see this. Later, speaking on the phone with a friend who has lived there for many years he told me that there are places for these people to live and leave the streets, but in general, they are alcohol and drug addicts and since they are not allowed to take drugs in these residences, they prefer to sleep in the streets.

My friend warned me never to give them money, because they use it for drugs, "if you want to buy food for them, they will reject it, they want money, so just do not look at them, that's the life they chose," he told me.

I kept walking until I got to Central Park, a very green park full of flowers and plants. It has several hectares that became the lung of the city, to be able to breathe a bit of nature in the middle of that enormous city. You can take rides in carriages or on bicycles. Some squirrels looked very meek and calm, nobody bothers them which is good. I also saw lesbian and homosexual people enjoying themselves, kissing, and walking holding hands. The USA is a very liberal country and I like that, everyone chooses how to live with no fear or explanations.

I tried to take a taxi a couple of times, but they would not stop and then I found out that they are police cars camouflaged as taxis, just like the policemen who do not wear uniforms; they are strategies against crime. It would be great to apply it in our country. That's the good thing about traveling, you learn things and it opens your mind.

Thanks to a friend with a lot of experience in swimming, I was able to contact a Chilean boy, Cristian Vergara, who lives in New York and who is also an accountant like me; he was one of the security guys at the Hudson River challenge. One morning he picked me up at the hotel and took me to a beach so I could swim and also introduced me to Lesa, an American elementary school teacher, and mother of a boy, who had also signed up for the same challenge. We swam together and had a wonderful time although there were some waves. He was our translator because I did not speak English and Lesa did not speak any Spanish. She was very kind; she even wrote the right address on a piece of paper for the taxi driver to take me on the day of the challenge and arrive at the ferry port where we would meet to participate together and make my dream come true. At the end of that day, at the beach, they gave me the right directions for me to return to the hotel by subway and I made it. I arrived safe and sound.

At night in the hotel, I wanted to eat pasta, because it is my routine for the challenge, eating carbohydrates the night before, the problem was that I did not know how to order it in English and the waitress did not understand me. Suddenly she had an idea, she called the chef who was Mexican. That was funny, because the restaurant chef appeared next to the table with his huge hat, dressed in white, and asked me what I wanted to have for dinner. I told him that I wanted to eat pasta because the next day I was going to swim in the Hudson River and he invited me to come into the kitchen. There were lots of people preparing different delicious dishes and I loved his

kindness and attitude. First, he took me to a place full of different types of pasta and let me taste different pasta. Then he took me to another area to choose vegetables and the chef himself was in charge of preparing my pasta dish. When it was ready, he surprised me by taking the dish to my bedroom with extra eggs so that I eat protein to be strong. He wished me luck and asked me to tell him about the challenge when I returned. Can you imagine my joy?

Being alone so far from home and getting that gesture of goodwill was wonderful! I had a very good dinner and I went to rest early, but it is very common that before a challenge I cannot sleep, I am very anxious, nervous, excited, I feel euphoria, and I try to imagine what could happen, but all I can picture in my mind is nothing compared to reality, it surpasses everything I dreamed of.

July 1, 2017, was the day I was able to accomplish the challenge of swimming the Hudson River; I arrived very early at the port, and the ferry took me to Governor's Island together with Lesa and Cristian, the organizer of the event, a Mexican called Alex Arévalo, the rest of the swimmers and the safety team.

The challenge consisted of two miles of swimming (approximately 3,200 meters) around the Island, which is located in the middle of the Hudson River, right at the mouth of the Atlantic Ocean, and surrounded by the Statue of Liberty, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Manhattan Island. Just for a moment, picture how stunning the place is, swimming in those waters, raising your head to breathe and see that, it is incredible! Some people told me: How lucky you are! but it's not like that, luck has to be generated, we have to look for it and fight to get what we long for because nothing happens just because.

I remember getting on the ferry with other swimmers and seeing the small but beautiful Governors Island, the huge stone cliffs that raise the island above the mighty waters of the Hudson. The emotion started to invade me, I was happy, anxious, and nervous at the same time, suddenly I began to enjoy the landscape. Very slowly I began to take off my clothes and put on my thick neoprene suit because the water was fifteen degrees and the waves were strong. When I was taking out my orthopedic shells, since swimming is not what I need them for, two very tall gentlemen approached and asked me if I needed medical assistance during the challenge that surprised me and I swear that it reassured me a lot, I told them no, that it was not necessary and I thanked them and congratulated them for the organization. There were more than thirty kayaks, rubber boats, jet skis, and two helicopters that flew over the area so that everything was perfect so that nothing went wrong, also that security was excellent. When I told them that I did not need medical assistance, these gentlemen introduced themselves, they were both doctors, and they told me "We are going to take care of you just enjoy yourself!". They were behind me all the way standing on a boat watching me, that's what I call the first world and I really felt so, so cared for that my only task was to enjoy myself. When it was time to start the challenge, they made me get on a rubber boat so that I could slide smoothly along the side and not suffer an impact when falling into the water. In no time I was already swimming, making my dream come true. I felt the current was strong and taking me very fast towards the Statue of Liberty. Next to me, Lesa put her head out to breathe and checked on me: - Okey? -Yes! I replied.

Suddenly, I was in front of the statue of liberty which I feel so identified. Because it is a woman holding a lighted torch and on the other hand a book.

I see myself reflected in that image. Swimming in front of that monument, as if I were paying it honor and admiration for everything it means to me and inspires me. The truth was a unique and unforgettable moment in my life, difficult to describe with words. I felt that my heart was beating very fast, I was very happy and excited, in those moments I feel full of life.

Then, as I went on swimming and bordered the island, I began to feel the current against me. I decided to get closer to the coast so that the current would not take me back, at that point I was passing in front of the Brooklyn Bridge and the doctors and lifeguards approached me to check on me and told me not to get so close to the shore because I might hit against stone cliffs because of the waves. Little by little I moved away and began to see the arrival point, where the challenge finished, right in front of the island of Manhattan. I had to make a big effort to get there because the current was very intense but sheltering near the island. Upon arrival, I found a new issue. How would I get out of the water and go through the big stones to get to the island? But I had an easy solution: the two doctors who accompanied me all the way held my arms and suddenly I flew out of the water, they were so big and tall that it was easy for them to get me to the island and at the same time funny to hear them say: "I'm your fan". When on the island, everyone started to congratulate me until a Chilean swimmer who was on a jet ski helped me with my English and asked me: - Have you noticed why they congratulate you? – Because I did it well, with no major problems, and finished the challenge. – No, Karina. You got the first position in the ladies' category. I, of course, did not expect it and I could not believe it, it was really the icing on the cake and then he told me: - Do you see how important it is to work as a team? Honestly, between the swimmer Lesa, the organizer who also took care of me from a kayak, Cristian who took excellent photos that I treasure, and the two doctors we were a great team.

I feel that even though I travel alone to fulfill my dreams (I was the only Argentine in the event) I have my family, friends, and several people who encourage me, and help me up to a certain point are my team, they accompany me in every stroke.

At the end of the awards ceremony, we went with Lesa, Cristian, and other swimmers to enjoy the beach, the sun, and the sea. At night I went back to the hotel to eat delicious food, take a shower and rest happily after a day full of emotions.

To be honest, I found out what I'm looking for in my life and what motivates me: emotions! I also realized that this is addictive, that I want more and I am dreaming of new moments, with new emotions that make me feel that everything was worth it, that the effort was not in vain, that I am on the right track...

The next day I explored New York City on my own and when taking the ferry to go to the Statue of Liberty, several people approached me and offered to help me as they extended their hands. I realized that they were offering me their help to get on and walk around the ship for me not to fall or get hit since the floor is slippery when the ship is in motion. Again, I had the feeling of care, respect, and protection. Suddenly I saw an image that got me very emotional, it was a sculpture of the world, but broken, damaged, burned, a piece was missing and it was quite dented. People told me that it had been placed right in the middle of the two twin towers in Manhattan after the September 11th attack, where a terrorist group hit passenger planes the towers, they collapsed, but the sculpture remained and is preserved as a symbol that the world suffered an attack and was damaged, but still standing.

Just a few days later, I was back in Argentina, working and back in my daily routine, but alert and ready to face the challenge that life itself is, always keeping the flame within my heart, which gives me the strength not to let myself down. Overwhelmed by problems and worries. I know it is not easy, but that is why I decided to write my books for you to see that everything is possible and you should never give up in the face of adversity. What would have happened if I gave in to the aftermath of spina bifida and chose to become a bitter person, suffer for what could have been, and be frustrated watching my life go. No, that is not what I want for myself.

BRAZIL, THE LAND OF HAPPINESS

Sometime later, the chance to swim in Angra Dos Reis, Brazil with a group of Argentinian swimmers arouse. The challenges consisted of joining small islands swimming. It was very nice and fun, especially getting together with a woman from Buenos Aires, Claudia Paladino, to follow sea turtles in those transparent and warm waters. There, I had an experience that I had never imagined: swimming at night, I swear it is beautiful and suddenly being able to discover the luminescence of plankton, which are small luminous bugs living under the water, and with each stroke, the water shone.

What nature produces is magical and one only has to respect it, contemplate it and take care of it so that this wonder continues to exist and is not lost because of human beings who often act out of greed, selfishness, and useless excuses to defend the crime they are committing, fully aware of the irreparable damage to the world, where every day we suffer from global warming and environmental pollution because the world is small, it is our only home and we must protect it, it is so easy to understand and at the same time so difficult to achieve.

After swimming around a small island and contemplating the brightness of the plankton, we all remained still and silent, just floating, lying on our backs, and looking at the stars. There is a before and after in each of these opportunities, especially because there are not many people who live intensely, who do not skimp on pleasures, in letting themselves be carried away by the moment and the place, and also because they meet people who like to do the same, their new friendships are created.

Returning to the hotel where we were staying, while having dinner I met two women, Liliana and Rosa who like swimming and diving, they told me that they planned to take a trip to see Thailand and I couldn't resist the temptation to accompany them and again I started planning a new adventure.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD

It was February 2018 when one afternoon from Ezeiza airport, Liliana, Rosa, and I took an Emirates airline flight. My God, what a luxury, what a beauty! Never in my life had I traveled on such a good airline, excellent is the word to describe it. The plane made a stopover in São Paulo, Brazil to refuel, and then Dubai, to finally get to Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. Upon arrival, I was

surprised that most people wore masks, and then I realized that it is a fairly deep-rooted custom in Asian culture.

After so many hours of travel, we went to a very nice little apartment that we had rented and that was only half a block from a market where we could stock up on food, then shower and rest.

The next day we visited Buddhist temples and learned a little about Thai culture. We went passed many foods stands in the street but I am very doubtful about the hygiene and maintenance. Thai people are known to eat anything from rats, and reptiles to insects. We went into a market and there were some fountains with fish, worms and even toads covered by a net so they wouldn't escape and I saw a person buy toads as if it was meat, they took them out alive by grabbing their hind legs and hit it with a stick on the head to kill it and put it in the shopping bag. We are different cultures, but let's not be so horrified, because we also kill animals to eat, I think that is why I am becoming vegetarian, although I eat dairy products, and eggs, but less and less meat, from time to time, obviously, not I reject a delicious family barbecue.

After visiting the city center and some temples, it was time to return to the apartment and we had no better idea than to do it in a Tuk Tuk, which is a means of urban transportation. Generally, a motorcycle or bicycle with three wheels and a cabin where two or three people travel. The most complicated thing is that the driver speaks only Thai and does not understand English, nor Spanish, so using the phone's translator we wrote that we wanted to go for a ride and then go to the apartment, but there was another problem. He didn't know how to read either and we had to find someone to explain to him, when we finally agreed, the boy drove off and left terrified through the streets of Bangkok.

At that moment I began to suspect that there were no controls of any kind, just as there was no bromatology to control the food. No traffic controls or any regulatory entity, suddenly I found myself on a Tuk Tuk holding myself tightly to the kind of door. Besides tremendous traffic of all kinds of vehicles, trucks, cars, and bicycles, through those streets that do not even have sidewalks, the driver was irresponsible, he was speeding and I could not help laughing nervously because we could not say a word to the guy, he would not understand our language. Suddenly he took out a cell phone, placed it on the steering wheel, and began to make a video call with his girlfriend, lover, or wife speaking in Thai and even singing a song. I was getting more and more and more nervous but tried to take it easy because what was happening was very funny and I tried not to think about the dangerous situation we were in. Luckily or by the grace of God we arrived safe and sound at our destination.

The next day we took a train to Chiang Mai. The trip was very long, we left Bangkok early and arrived at night after going past many stations. When we arrived, a Spanish boy named Juan who had contacted me online was waiting for us at the station. He offered us accommodation in a nice house, a place with wide vegetation. He prepared a delicious dinner called Pad Thai, a typical dish based on rice noodles and seafood usually added. Juan's partner was a Thai chef, and the breakfast the next day was generous: scrambled eggs, late and homemade sweets. Juan offered to tour us wherever we wanted in his truck. There were different shows with animals such as tigers, cobras, and elephants but I do not like animal abuse and consider respect as a value for human beings, animals, and the environment. However, I wanted to see elephants because I do not usually see them.

I would have died of a broken heart if they had been chained not to leave, and tortured for touristic purposes. Then Juan told us about a sanctuary where the elephants are free in several hectares of fields. They are cared for and protected, we could see them, feed them, caress them and we could even bathe them in a small lake. Upon arrival, they gave us breakfast and made us change clothes. I would not have imagined leaving the field so dirty. Then they gave us some bags and, in some baskets, there were some sticks of about 30 centimeters approximately they were sugar canes. I filled the bag to be able to feed them and we headed to the field. Suddenly I found myself surrounded by these beautiful creatures; I began to give them sticks in their trunks. The strange thing was that they did not eat the sticks, they just threw them away and asked for more, so I asked the caretaker Why were they doing that if they were playing or just not hungry. He replied that elephants are not satisfied with crumbs and that I should give them a bouquet of sticks in their trunk, so they would take them to their mouth and eat it. How smart they are and how much I learned from them! We, human beings settle for crumbs and remain silent, we bear situations we do not like, mistreatment or humiliation.

At that time, I began to collect sticks and put them in their trunks. I saw how they ate them and touched their rough skin. Then they slowly went to a small lake to take a refreshing swim.

Once they settled in, we were able to go in and bathe them.

You had to wait for them to sit or lie down in the water because they are huge animals that can step on you without realizing it. Very carefully we stepped in the water with buckets and brushes, they stayed still and settled down slowly so that we scratched them and one put his trunk under the water for a few seconds, he filled its trunk with water and throw water to me, I was wet! Now I got the reason why they made us change clothes when we arrived. Besides, if you could see the color of the water, it was dark brown because of the animals' pee and poo, I had the water on my waist.

My brother Walter asked me about the color of the water when he saw the photos: - You could have got an infection! - he said.

The truth is that I did see it, but bathing elephants is something I had planned to do once in my life and I did not know if I am going to have another opportunity to interact like this with such intelligent and large animals. Even more so if they want to in a single movement they can crush you, but they do not do it, they just want to live and deserve respect and protection. That is why I chose one of those photos for the cover of this book, to convey the message of respect, protection, and care for animals, the environment, and the world that is ultimately our home. My

The place was very well prepared, there were showers and after changing our clothes we went back to rest after one of those days I felt that reality exceeds dreams.

Those images will remain in my memory, if I close my eyes magically they come back to me as one of the many moments I treasure.

The next day Juan took us to see waterfalls, rice fields, strawberries, and amazing landscapes with thick vegetation. We heard a very loud noise, they were crickets that live there.

We said goodbye to Juan and continued our trip to Phuket, which is a transit city to reach the islands. There we went to visit a giant Buddha statue on a mountain and there was a very high staircase to reach a viewpoint to see the landscape from above. Going down and walking through the streets, we saw a lot of poverty, and people sleeping on the streets, and they told us about refugees from different countries with serious conflicts who stayed to live in Thailand.

At night the three of us went for a walk in the center of Phuket and I was shocked to see many massage parlors, which are undercover brothels, where prostitution, pedophilia, and child abuse are commonplace. Every paradise has its hell they say and it is no coincidence that humans are the creators of that hell.

The next day we left on a Thai boat heading to the islands, at first sight, it didn't look bad at all, the problem was when I wanted to go to the toilet and saw that there were only latrines. But finally, we arrived at the paradisiacal island of Koh Phi Phi, with its waters ranging from green to light blue and turquoise. Suddenly, different shades of blue can be seen, its huge stone cliffs full of vegetation, where small boats leave like gondolas with flowers on the edges. The low waves make the bottom of the sea look very clear, even in the deeper areas.

When I got to Koh Phi Phi, I don't know if it was because of the trip or the heat but I felt exhausted and there were no taxis or cars on the island, there are no streets either, just walking and they offer you to carry your bags in some very rustic carts with only two narrow wheels and carried by a man as if they were wheelbarrows and you know what? I couldn't resist the temptation to get on and be carried on top of the bags to the hostel. It was a shared bedroom and one bathroom for the three of us, very modest, but clean, and the people were very polite and friendly. I just needed a shower and sleep; I could hardly speak.

After a refreshing rest and a good breakfast, we explored the island on foot and it is a place worth visiting once in your life. Everything, its landscape, its nature was beautiful. We began to ask for a beach that we wanted to visit and a man offered to guide us. He took my hand pointing to the orthopedic shells that were visible, because it was so hot that I was wearing shorts, he signaled me with his thumb up to check if I was okay.

At one point he pulled up a plastic chair for me to sit down and rest. It was a pity we could not communicate because we did not speak the same language, but after a while, we were able to ask him where he was from and he answered that he was from Burma and when he spoke I realized he had no teeth. I felt very sorry for the poor man, so kind, so polite, so humble. After resting for a few minutes in his borrowed chair, we continued walking and he did not let go of my hand until we reached the beach we wanted to see. I received a great lesson from that humble man who accompanied us without any interest, just to help us on an island on the other side of the world. We wanted to tip him but it became very clear that he was not doing it for money and he left.

Several times it has happened to me that locals or tourists when they see that I am walking thanks to my orthopedic valves offer me a hand to get where I wanted to go. When we rented one of those little wooden boats that are gondolas to visit nearby beaches and islands, some Italian tourists offered to help me get on and off the boat; it was spontaneous and supportive. Those attitudes always amaze me. Traveling through those calm turquoise waters we arrived at the

island of the monkeys and they warned us to take care of our belongings because the monkeys tend to steal things and they suggested we leave our things in the boat.

When I arrived, the first thing I did was to sit down and contemplate that white sand beach, that water with different shades of turquoise, a paradise. Monkeys appeared from every corner, descending very quickly down the cliffs between the caves and the vegetation. There were males, females, little ones, little monkeys clinging to their mother's belly, newborns, of all sizes and people came down from the boats with fruits, cookies, and food to get closer and photograph them closely while they ate, but this should not be done, because animals must look for their food in the jungle. Besides the garbage left on the island: packages and containers contaminate and ruin the beauty of the place.

While contemplating what was going on, a guy from Guatemala named Enrique came over and asked me to take care of his belongings as he had not left in the boat. That was a little red bag, with a couple of other things. As he took a sip of water, I said yes. I watched him enjoy and swim when suddenly a monkey stole my red bag and quickly climbed the cliff and got into a cave that was several meters high. I couldn't believe what had happened to me and I wanted to tell the boy, but out of nerves I forgot his name and started calling him: Fernando! Ferdinand! so the boy did not look at me because he had gone far away swimming and also because his name was not Fernando. When he saw me waving, he came back and told me that his name was Enrique and I told him: Enrique the monkey stole your things! —Tell me it is a joke, —No, he stole them from me and got into that cave up there. The boy started to climb because the monkey had his passport there; when he finally arrived, the monkeys attacked him, because he was stealing what they wanted to eat. He jumped from up there and fell among the stones, quickly got up and ran to get into the water avoiding being bitten by the monkeys. I watched this scene in panic and other Italian tourists told me that it was not my fault, that I took too much care of his things, when he should have left them in the boat and that it was also very silly and unnecessary to take the passport to the island of the monkeys. When the boy came out of the water he apologized to me, because if I had grabbed his bag, the monkey would have bitten me.

After that moment, we got on the boat and continued touring such beautiful beaches, with transparent and warm waters, surrounded by giant stone cliffs and vegetation, places so paradisiacal that they are used to film movies.

On one of those islands, the actor Leonardo Di Caprio filmed the movie "The Beach" where he showed its beauty, the closest thing to paradise that I visited, but they are also famous for tsunamis, which have devastated entire islands and left thousands of dead and disappeared people in one of the greatest tragedies of nature. Being there and seeing such beauty it is hard to believe that all that happened. I tried to enjoy myself not thinking about the bad things that could happen. I took advantage of the moment and swam, snorkeled in those blue waters, and saw colorful fish I have never even known existed.

One day a multicolored fish caught my attention because it was too beautiful and very bright and I wanted to follow it to see if I could find others just like it or if it was the only one of its kind. It got between some stones of a reef probably because it wanted to protect itself from me. I was so excited to follow it that I did not realize that I was touching the reefs with my knee and hurt it. Suddenly I saw the water dyed red and realized that I had hurt myself, so I tried to quickly get out

of the water and reach the shore. Besides my difficulty to stand up when I do not have my shells on, there was blood coming out of my knee through the injury. Luckily it was just a cut and by chance, there was a young doctor from Brazil on the beach who helped me to stand up and accompanied me until she made sure I was okay. I did not mention my condition but she diagnosed me through her medical experience; I am still in contact with her through social media.

When I arrived at the hostel, I had my kit to heal the wound with my creams and during the night after a shower. I remember I went to sit on the beach to stare at the moon reflected in the sea; that is a unique landscape that not all of us are lucky enough to see very often. It is wonderful, but that is also a problem for me because I do not want to sleep when traveling, I find sleeping a waste of time and I do not want to see the signals of my body: I'm tired, hurt, but I just keep going.

The next day I set the phone alarm at five in the morning because I wanted to see the sunrise. I got up silently not to wake up my partners; when I crossed the door there was a lizard, it was dark gray and big, it looked at me and stuck out its long tongue with two black tips, I went back to our little wooden cabin. The beds were covered with tulle to avoid being bitten by insects when sleeping. I stayed there until the lizard left and then watched the sunrise. In such virgin places, there is a lot of life and just as the lizard appeared, a snake or any other animal could show up. At night I stayed up late contemplating the moon, the night, the stars, and the candles on the beach. Can you imagine it? and in the mornings I wanted to see the sunrise and its colors, the soft sound of the sea with very small waves... beauty!

One day we went to visit a beach where nobody used to swim, everyone sunbathed and chatted but there were no people in the water. We got into the water with our snorkels at a very shallow depth and without leaving the coast. We discovered that the beach was full of sea urchins, that was why no one went in to avoid being punctured by their spines or spikes, nature is incredible!

One morning we moved to Koh Lipe Island by boat. When arrived at the coast, we could see that was such a simple and virgin island that there was no dock. To get off, we walk through the water and our suitcases were thrown from the boat to the coast, luckily some of them fell over the sand but others fell into the water. Again, the landscape was repeated with very warm turquoise waters, hot and full of life; they ate very tasty fish and it was a perfect place to dive. I had only practiced baptism type of diving in Las Grutas, Argentina, and in the Cenotes in Mexico and I did not feel experienced enough to go twelve meters deep in the sea of Thailand, but the diving instructor Marc, a Spanish who had his diving school called Pura Vida Koh Lipe invited to go diving. I hesitated, I don't know if because of my lack of confidence or self-esteem or I don't know for what reason but I told him that it would not be possible because I cannot use fins or as they call them "frog legs" to propel myself, also the oxygen tube is very heavy on my back and I did not feel safe. He offered to take me and hold my hand, he could also put me in the water and then put the oxygen tube and ballast so I would not feel the weight; I still do not know why I replied that it might be an unpleasant experience for him to carry me, because most divers do not need so much help but he replied: - On the contrary, for me, it is an honor to know that I am going to take you to live this experience, you will never forget what you will see -. After these words, I could only say yes! I enjoyed two beautiful dives, more than forty-five minutes in those colorful waters full of reefs and beautiful fish. I saw turquoise starfish and fluorine-colored fish, plants with very intense colors that did not they looked real but would have been painted in bright colors. Suddenly we

were in the middle of a shoal and my eyes could not believe so much life, so much beauty. I will always be grateful to have the chance to feel, see and enjoy those unique moments.

Coming out of the sea full of emotion and joy, with a huge smile, I saw that I had an allergic reaction in the knee that days before I had hurt with a reef. I had touched an anemone; in the boat, they gave me vinegar to put on my knee to reduce the reaction because it seemed that acid had fallen on my skin. I still went ahead as if nothing had happened, at that moment the lack of sensitivity in my legs benefited me because I didn't feel any pain.

MALAYSIA AND THE SOLIDARITY OF ITS PEOPLE

Our journey continued without a break and we arrived in Malaysia. I remember that when I arrived, they asked me for the yellow fever vaccine certificate. The body had given signals that I did not want to listen to and one morning I woke up with my right leg very swollen, purple in color, and very hot. I had an infection and I started taking the antibiotics from my travel kit, but they did not make any effect, it was as if I had not taken any of them. I verified if they were expired. Indeed, they had expired a long time ago. I started to feel bad, very tired as if I had a fever. By then we were on a very small island in the middle of the Malaysian Sea called Perhentians, in the middle of nowhere, an earthly paradise but without any hospital or medical center nearby, also far from the pier to take a boat to go to the mainland at least to get antibiotics; To get to the pier, I had to go through a mountain and I was not in a position to climb it. Suddenly, magically, five islanders appeared with a kind of car, two bicycle wheels with a plastic chair tied and they helped me get on and took me slowly. First, the five of us pushed up the hill and then we went down very slowly and I swear that my tears inevitably came out of my eyes. I was deeply touched to see such a good attitude, so much help, and so much solidarity from unknown men. We did not even speak the same language, some of these people have suffered natural catastrophes, such as the tsunami, where they lost their beloved ones and went through difficult times, and who, after managing to survive, have a different perspective on the value of life. When I got to the pier, I wanted to give them all the money I had and they did not take it. The most surprising gesture was that they joined their hands as if they were praying and bowed their heads down as a sign of gratitude for having visited their island. That attitude had an impact on me... Did they thank me? I was the one who was deeply grateful to them for their invaluable help.

I used that cart to go up and down that hill, I have no idea how I would have left that island in the middle of the Malaysian Sea.

Once we arrived at the pier, we were able to get on a boat and sailed to a more populated area with medical care resources. First, we arrived at a port and from there we took a car to a place where there was an airport to catch a flight that left us in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia.

When I arrived, the first thing I did was to look for a pharmacy and show my antibiotics and ask for something similar. Meanwhile, we were in a place with Wi-Fi so I was able to communicate with my brother Walter, who is a pharmacist, to check if the medicine I was taking was okay. I was shopping and little by little I began to feel better and the next day I was able to put on the valves and go out to see the tallest towers in the world designed by an Argentinian architect. I was struck by the women's clothing and there I had to be careful because the dominant religion is Muslim

and it is complicated for women because they must cover their hair, and not show their skin, although it was hot, I had to wear long pants out of respect for their beliefs. Sometimes you have to adapt to the place you visit and if you do not like those customs, it is better not to go, because you could have an unpleasant time and be mistreated by people who may feel offended if your culture or religion differs from their beliefs.

There were only three days left to return to Argentina and our flight made a stopover in Dubai. With one of my trip partners, we decided to get to know a little about this magnificent city, which is very extravagant, a true oasis in the desert.

LIFE PLACE OBSTACLES, YOU SET THE LIMITS

Life sometimes slams a door in your face and you must use it to wake up, you fall and it is normal, but get up stronger, try to ignore the door that hit you and look to the side, surely there are windows or other alternatives, if you keep worried and thinking about that door, certainly you will not see the windows, do not limit yourself to suffering or pain, there are always ways to find the twist that allows you to go ahead, but you must be aware and ready to get out of the well, to get up a thousand times if necessary.

Finally, and after a month abroad, I got to Argentina and the first thing I did was to contact the doctors because although I felt better, my leg was still swollen and purple. An infectologist urgently recommended doing a Doppler echo because there was a possibility that blood clots might develop in my leg and go to my heart or brain and that would be very serious. I could even lose my life in the face of that possibility, which is why the doctor did not hesitate to ask for the test urgently.

At that very moment, I rushed to a hospital in the city of Bahía Blanca, where to my surprise I was set an appointment in three months. I beg the woman in charge to check carefully that the test was to be done urgently and he replied with a mocking tone: - If it was urgent, you would be hospitalized, your appointment is for three months -. There I understood that I live in a country of laziness, a word that means negligence and lack of interest, where if people do things right or wrong it does not matter at all. They do things wrong because they do not know how, due to ignorance, or also due to inexperience or lack of interest.

Several years ago, a boy I love very much and lives in the United States suffered a stroke (Brain Vascular Accident). Immediately emergency services were called and he was transferred from the place where he was to the hospital in a helicopter in the meantime, they were already assisting him and preparing him for surgery; Thanks to that speed and efficiency, the surgery was ok and he had no sequelae after the serious health problem he had. Unfortunately, I feel that in Argentina we are many years away from having that kind of assistance, between apathy and corruption that is like cancer that has metastasized throughout the territory, I see the possibility of change as very distant as well as prioritizing health, education, work culture and the effort to improve the quality of life.

For these reasons I was motivated to write this second book: when I see the poor conditions of hospitals when they deny me an urgent test, when they close their doors to me, and when I do not

get adequate care from specialists because I do not have social insurance with high prices that are inaccessible to most of the population, you are out of the system and forget about getting well or getting better. That's why I decided to tell it, raise my voice, show it, rebel against injustice, and at this point in my life I do not feel like hearing: - it is better to keep yourself out of it, do not say this or that, shut up -. I know that through my voice sleeping souls can be awakened so they do not give up. I do not want to allow those people who are full of laziness, without desire, without a will, to extinguish our inner flames, our light will keep shining and we must continue fighting to make new dreams come true, always moving forward, for those moments that they keep our hearts vibrating and encourage us to continue overcoming life obstacles day by day.

Along the way, there are barriers, bumps, and falls, but at the same time, it is an incredible path that fulfills your soul, where you train and learn in every step that the most important thing is to be able to follow our dreams and see how far they take us.

I was finally able to get tested and take the right medication and after being taken care of and rested, I fully recovered from the injuries and the infection that I had during the trip.

In addition to laziness, I was mistreated. Sometimes we assume it is normal that people insult us, offend us, do not give importance to urgent things, or simply ignore us just because it is the way there are treated or because they think that we will not be able to defend ourselves, but if we are okay, strong, we will not allow it. I remember when I was bullied; I am sure that if I had been emotionally stronger and had high self-esteem, I would not have gone through all those unpleasant moments. I do not blame those who treated me badly or hurt me, I blame myself for not having stopped them in time and getting to the point to show up at my house injured, with a bruised and swollen eye, unable to remove my contact lens due to the inflammation after a punch.

Bullying begins with a simple joke: — Kari, look how you walk, look at the glasses you have, look how ugly you are -.

Little by little abusers increase the level of verbal violence soon the physical violence begins; first I found my folder with its pages glued and being spitted. I just threw it away and photocopied a friend's folder, but I did not say anything, I remained silent, I thought maybe I deserved it, then those spits were to my face until I got my first punch.

Getting insulted, nicknamed, and mistreated becomes a habit and seems normal, but no, it is not normal and you should not allow it or remain silent, you have to report it, stop it, and mainly receive psychological help to improve your self-esteem.

Nobody deserves abuse, we should never allow it, I hope that if someone suffers from bullying and reads these words, I can assure you can move on and improve.

And if someone mistreats or hurts another person or a living being, they should know that you can live a beautiful life, without screwing up anyone's life.

THERE IS NO BETTER TEACHER THAN LIFE IN MOTION

I try to keep active and alert, willing to learn every day and I think that if I can walk and extend the life of my legs as long as possible, I want to go as far as possible.

A new dream began to spin in my head: the idea of uniting Europe and Asia by swimming across the mighty Bosphorus Strait where the waters of the Marmara and the Black Sea meet, a new journey, a new challenge, a new destination, and much to learn in this beautiful school called life.

Thanks to my desire to improve myself day by day, I started taking English classes, because I like to travel alone and it is a great tool to be able to communicate and learn one of the most used languages in the world.

In addition, the idea of traveling alone inspires me to prepare the logistics and arrange things, without depending on anyone, without explaining, being responsible for the decisions I make, and achieve what I always wanted: to be independent, not to be a burden to anyone, not even to my family, nor for my friends, grooming myself is a privilege and a great fortune that gives me the freedom that I have achieved.

The world is smaller than many people think and if people would look beyond their world that is limited to just their house and surroundings, they would realize that the world is actually our home and perhaps they would learn to take care of it, to look at other beings differently and understand that after a few hours flight you go to the other extreme of the world and if you want you can go back to the same place or turn around to take another way. But our territory ends there, that is the limit of our land, it is smaller than it seems. I think that having a vision like that, changes your perspective and suddenly you realize that every bit that is damaged is destroying our house, the place where we live, the land, the air, or the water that surrounds us.

After a long time of planning, working, training in swimming, studying English, arranging logistics, and even getting a loan from the bank to make my dream come true, I know that some would question the need to get a loan to travel. To begin with, it is not the first time I do it. Besides, the bank will never lend you more than what you can pay back. Then, my friend Andy Tapia, who suffered from cancer, got bank loans at a very high-interest rate to afford his chemotherapy since his health insurance did not pay for it. This situation encouraged me to ask for a loan to travel.

Unfortunately, my friend died but I learned a lesson: life must be enjoyed and what makes you happy today should not be postponed. That is why I believe that a trip is an investment even if you have to get a loan at a bank.

Thus, my journey to Istanbul in Turkey began. I left on my own with my backpack and a small suitcase that I checked in at the airport. Sometime before I contacted a group of English who wanted to do the same challenge and when they asked me how many partners I was traveling with, I told them that it was just me, nobody else from Argentina would participate in the event so they offered me to join them and stay at their hotel. They were about two hundred swimmers from the UK and we could go swimming together at the Intercontinental Crossing of the Bosphorus Strait. On one side is the shore of European Istanbul and on the other side of the strait is the shore of Asian Istanbul; the challenge was to swim six and a half kilometers.

My arrival in Turkey was quite complicated, given that I was exhausted after many hours of flying my legs were swollen and the orthopedic valves were embedded in my legs; Aware of this, I requested assistance. Supposedly airlines have assistance personnel who use a wheelchair to help you get to the airport exit, but unfortunately, that person was not there when I arrived and I saw that the plane was getting empty and assistance was not coming. So, I decided to get off the plane and try to leave by myself. Suddenly, in the airport hall, I saw a man coming with a wheelchair and he told me to get on, which was a mistake I regret and learned that I will never ask for assistance at the airport again. When I got into the wheelchair, I saw the man to a break to eat, he opened a package of biscuits and finished it, only after that he did not take me towards the baggage area but he walked around long corridors and took me to a place full of policemen who emptied my backpack in a very rude way, they wore gloves and were looking if I had any drugs, at one point I got scared and worried, what if they had put drugs in my stuff? Among the things scattered on the floor, because they opened my backpack from a height of approximately one meter, they emptied it, letting all my items fall to the floor. There it was my book "El Poder de Querer" and I tried to explain to them in English that that was my book, that I was a writer.

Finally, they let me in, but the odyssey did not finish there, because the man who was taking me in the wheelchair kept walking through the airport corridors and suddenly, I said to him in English: Where is the exit? To which he replied that He would not take me out if I did not pay him first. That was my arrival in Istanbul, I had to pay the man who had the wheelchair or he would not take me to the exit and look for my bag. The airport is huge and very luxurious, but the reception was a disaster, at times I thought that I could be prey to a macho system that does not support a woman traveling alone around the world and they made me notice that what I do is not right for them. Despite everything, I got to the exit where a transfer I had hired was waiting for me to take me to the hotel where I would stay with the English group until the day of the challenge. Upon arrival at the hotel, I met the British swimmers, they were very warm and treat me very well.

The next day the whole group did the check-in at the event. Later, the International Olympic Committee and the Turkish organizers took us on a boat on the Bosphorus Strait where we were going to swim.

The day has finally come, it was an ambitious dream to join Euro and Asia swimming. I had no doubt, I knew I could do it but some issues arose. First, the organizers wanted me not to wear a wetsuit they recommended I do not participate. They ask me to watch how the other swimmers do and analyze the situation. I responded that I had made a huge effort and sacrifice to be there and would not resign without even an attempt. I registered number 1649th among 2400 participants from all over the world and was the only Argentinian, I was not willing to give up and neither quit before I started, but the organization decided to disqualify me and they took away the chip that would measure my competition time.

They left me out of the competition. At that moment I thought and tried to focus on the main objective, which was to swim the six and a half kilometers, join Europe and Asia swimming, no more, no less than fulfilling my dream and the important thing was to make it come true. That is why despite being disqualified I got on the cruiser anyways together with the other swimmers. I promised myself that I was going to do it, several times in my life I made promises to myself, I think it is a way to make sure that I am not going to give up.

I admit that I was very nervous, and trembling, and my hands did not stop shaking, but the cruise started to move and I was already on it, ready to give everything, despite all the obstacles I was not going to give up without a fight. I am already used to "paddling in dulce de leche" as we say in my country referring to having to deal with tough problems. This time was no exception, the greater the dream, the greater the difficulties, that is how I understood it at that moment. I took a deep breath and visualized myself reaching the intercontinental bridge that connects Europe and Asia, thus fulfilling my great dream. That was my dream, my challenge, no matter whether I was disqualified, or I did not have the chip - keep it to yourself! - I thought. It was my moment, I wanted to enjoy it and I do not worry about the Turkish and their rules, nor did I want trophies, medals, or recognition. I do not care about material things; I just enjoy the moment and live emotions.

The cruise with the 2,400 swimmers left from the coast of European Istanbul and went up the six and a half kilometers against the current and parked on the side of the Asian coast from Istanbul, then opened some floodgates and from there the competitors were thrown, another obstacle that I had to overcome because from the boat to the water there was a considerable height that should be minimized as much as possible so as not to hit me and suffer the impact when falling, that is why I sat up and then slowly slid down until I was hanging with my hands from the edge of the boat and just from there I jumped and I fell into the water. First, I sank a few meters and then I went up to the surface, I saw the Turkish prefecture on a rubber boat next to me, but I could not see them as security taking care of me, I saw them as my enemies, that they would have loved to pull me out of the water I'm sure they thought I was not to be able to do it, but they did not know me, they did not know my strength, my struggle or my enthusiasm and desire to improve myself, so I started swimming and headed to the middle of a bridge, I knew that in the middle the current was in favor while on the banks the current was against. The Bosphorus is the merge of the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara waters, I had also been told that the middle current in my favor was colder and, on the shores, warmer, that is the difference between the two seas.

Suddenly I passed right through the middle, under one of the bridges and I felt the cold current and I saw how much I had achieved with each stroke because of the huge houses, mansions, and yachts parked on the shore I passed them quickly and at times I had to say to myself: Calm down little queen! (That is how Nidia Burgos calls me affectionately, the director of EDIUNS editorial that helped me to publish my first book). I adopted that nickname to talk to me because I felt that I was going to die from the overwhelming emotion, I felt my heart beating very fast as if my heart was going to come out of the body, I was very euphoric, excited, happy, I swear that I will never forget that moment and little by little, I calmed down and began to enjoy, to see the different blue tones of the water. Suddenly a shoal of jellyfish, thousands were swimming with me. Then they went deeper, several meters deeper, they did not go up the surface, luckily, I was wearing a neoprene suit to protect myself. Meanwhile, I felt I was embracing the water, life, and the world. Swimming and enjoying myself, I reached the finishing line, the challenge was about to finish, but the arrival was just on the shore and to reach it I had to swim several meters against the stream and climb a metal ladder that without my shells was impossible for me, so I decided to continue swimming up the current and make my challenge to fulfill my dream passing under the intercontinental bridge that connects Europe and Asia, only 500 meters more could make it happen, right in the middle of the enormous bridge they had hung two enormous Turkish flags, a red one with the moon and the white star and another white flag with the moon and the red star.

I speeded up, and I continued with the current in favor and I felt the prefecture boat very close to me, it never left my side, until I saw the Turkish flags overshadowing me, and suddenly the darkness of passing under this enormous bridge. There I realized where I was and I felt like whipping, I could not help it. Some meters after the sun was bright again, I had left the bridge behind. The prefecture boat stopped in front of me, I stop swimming and lean on the boat, I had accomplished my dream! I started laughing and crying at the same time, it is very difficult to explain using words. I had never had such a feeling. If the boat had not stopped me, I would have swum until the Marmara Sea, I was so happy, enjoying an experience I did not want to be over.

The prefecture man took my hands and helped me to get on the boat and with his thumbs up he asked me if I was okay: - Good? Good? - and I replied: - I am very happy... I am very happy. He said: - Congratulations! - and took me to a bigger boat and then to the shore. Upon arrival, I asked for an organizer for my backpack that was in a locker to store personal objects. Both the backpack and my swim cap had my registration number 1649. So, I gave him my swimming cap so he could find and bring me the backpack and valves for me to get up and walk away. That created a little misunderstanding because when they saw that I reached the shore and I did not stand up they got scared and thought I felt bad. A swimmer from India handed me a bottle of water and a swimmer from Spain some sweets, they thought my blood pressure had dropped or something like that, but actually, I was fine, waiting for my valves so I could put them on and walk away.

After spending a long time on the shore, I heard the two-hour horn, the challenge lasted two hours and if you had not finished in that time, they would take you out of the water because of the maritime traffic on the strait that had been interrupted to do the competition was reopened. I could figure out that I finished the challenge and what is more because I finally swam seven kilometers, well before the two hours and I also saw that many people finished after me that despite being disqualified my time was very good and I have the peace of mind that I did my best.

The important thing is that I realized in this challenge what is it that I am looking for in my life. I found the answer: I look for emotions! and I realized that everything, absolutely everything that happened was worth it if the result was to feel like this, those images will never disappear from my memory, nor the retina of my eyes, and it is addictive because I want more, I want to continue feeling this way.

At the end of the challenge, I took photos with swimmers from different parts of the world, I had a huge smile, but at the same time my eyes were red and you could tell that I had cried a lot because when I had begun to imagine crossing the Bosphorus, I always saw myself swimming and passing under that bridge that the Turks show in all their series and movies, it is like the obelisk for Argentina, it is a symbol, a huge construction that identifies them and proudly shows them to the world. That is the reason for my tears, when I realized where I was and how hard was it to get there, all the obstacles I had had to overcome to live that moment.

Then I went back to the hotel with the English group and needed to rest to recover physically and emotionally.

The next day I began touring around attractive spots in Turkey and as I was touring and learning about the country, I realized that it is a beautiful country that I strongly recommend visiting. There were things that I liked a lot, for instance, they told me that children's education is compulsory,

here in Argentina we decide that it is a right, but it is not enough, there is a lot of poverty and ignorance, many children cannot read or write. There, it is an obligation and if a child does not go to school, if necessary, they take him out of the family and he stays in a school living so that he can receive an education. In addition, they have a work culture deeply rooted so people begin to earn a living from a very young age, but their education is more important, that is why it is the parents' obligation that their children attend school and get trained.

But another thing that caught my attention is the great gender inequality. For example, Turkey has statistics on femicides, women are often mistreated and there are no laws to protect them. Passing through the typical good-quality rug factories, I saw women weavers sitting on the floor or kneeling and weaving; the silk thread had hurt their hands. Also, many of them suffer from serious vision problems and even blindness due to their craft work which is an important part of the exportation economy.

I realized most of these women practiced their Muslim religion in mosques, they were very submissive and I could not understand why they had to cover their face, hair, and skin. In a restaurant, I could see a woman putting food in her mouth quickly and chewing behind the piece of cloth that covered his face. It shocked me and I felt sorry for her and angry with her husband who forced her to act that way while he ate freely with his face fully exposed and comfortable. I realized that Muslims are very sexist and treat women badly.

As I continue with my journey, I arrived in Cappadocia with the idea of taking a balloon ride over the rock constructions. The landscape is really impressive, but again I ran into the problem that they would not let me do that activity. They told me that it was not because I was disabled and when I tried to explain that I could do it, they refused to listen and told me that they did not know what to do with me. I could speak and what is more, they told me that if I insisted, they were even going to call the police and I could be imprisoned for not accepting their rules. That was the straw that broke my camel's back and I went to the airport and took a flight to leave that place.

I always respect the culture, customs, beliefs, and religion of the places I visit and I adapt to be able to walk, know and learn, but when I don't feel safe or I see my freedom in danger, I leave, I travel to another place where I do feel safer, more respected, valued. All women deserve it! Unfortunately, women from other countries do not have the same rights.

At one in the morning, a flight to Athens left and I went to visit Greece. I arrived after three in the morning at the Athens airport and there I met two Argentine women, a Brazilian woman and a Brazilian man who wanted to take a tour and get to know the paradisiacal islands of Greece. I joined that group to continue my way to Meteoras, Mykonos, and Santorini, my god what a beauty those beaches were! What a fantastic destination to visit! I am grateful to be able to walk around those latitudes and get to know those landscapes, a new sea to swim in. Suddenly I found myself enjoying the transparent and turquoise waters of the Aegean Sea, eating delicious food, walking a lot, and learning new things. One afternoon while walking through the most picturesque and touristic part of Mykonos I saw a dress and wanted to buy it, while I was trying it on and I asked the Argentine girls if it fitted me well and if my orthopedic shells could be seen when the Brazilian girl told me: - And what is the problem if they can be seen? Take them proudly! Those devices allow you to walk! Look where you are right now! –

My God! Where I had to come to abolish my prejudice and shame once and for all! To show me, to wear the little dresses I like so much, I have always liked them and I never dared to wear them. Since then, I no longer question whether they fit me or not and I enjoy wearing the clothes that I want and like and if my shells can be seen, then I take them proudly.

After several days of getting to know that beautiful place and sharing very good moments with that group of warm people, I took a plane and went to Berlin, Germany in search of new learning and I loved it, I realized that we are very far from that country and I am not talking precisely about distances, I am talking about culture, education, welfare, security, infrastructure, cleanliness and I can continue listing reasons that distance us from the first world.

I learned that after the Second World War Berlin was left with a mountain of thousands of tons of rubble and as proof of this, they keep a cathedral that was bombed and you can see the tremendous impact of the bomb that destroyed much of its dome, but everything else is new, they rebuilt everything in a few years, everything looks clean, neat and perfect, everything very tidy, what turning Berlin into a beautiful city.

Just in Berlin, there are 250 very good educational institutions, which explains the cultural difference we have compared to Argentina.

The reason I went to that city was that sometime before I learned that the world's leading orthopedics brand was in Germany and I wanted to research personally different options in terms of shells. The firm is called Otto Bock and we got in contact by email, the day I went to the store they were waiting for me and to my surprise when I opened the door they spoke in Spanish, this confirms my theory that the world is much smaller than we think. We were talking and, at one point one of the orthopedic technicians said something very nice: - We will try to help you because the world needs more people like you Karina -. I was speechless, thinking that everything, absolutely everything I did and do in life was worth it, the effort was worth it and I renewed my desire and energy to continue with everything I am doing. I know that beautiful moments are coming and I will continue trying to fulfill these dreams that sometimes when I talk about them, seem crazy to many people, but the good thing is that I do not doubt that I can make them come true and that is why I fight with all my strength to achieve them despite the obstacles.

I hope that this book and the message that I try to convey will get you and help you to enjoy yourself a little more and try to be a better person every day and remember that the world needs you.

FINAL MESSAGE

The heart is the temple of the soul and the eyes its reflection, may your eyes not stop shining and illuminate the world with your light...

Finally, and to conclude this second book I ask you to shine and illuminate the world. Over time I learned that due to what happened to me, being born with spina bifida, I am who I am, with the strength I have, with the attitude, personality, values, enthusiasm, and desire to live and enjoy, feel with all our heart, to believe that everything is possible if we want it and we intend to achieve it and with time everything flows, everything changes and everything heals.

That is useless to deny or live worried about what would have been, we must accept what we have to do and learn to go on beyond obstacles, that each fall is an experience that will make us stronger and for sure we will not stumble again.

Always look up, look at the horizon and think about the good times that will come and prepare to enjoy and value them, but remember that nothing happens by itself, everything we want must be created. Many times, without anyone's help, I say it with pride, not regret because at the end of the day we know that our achievements were the result of our effort and that is worth a lot.

Life is now! you have to take risks, do it, be happy, enjoy and thank every new day with a smile. Do not forget that within each being there is a light that is seen in the eyes' brightness, illuminates the world, and be a better person every day.

Hug life!

Hug the world and fill it with light

Good life!

Karina Fassi was born in Bahia Blanca, Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has a bone marrow injury called myelomeningocele spina bifida. Despite its sequels and the obstacles, she faces every day, she enjoys a fulfilling life full of accomplishments.

The neurological sequels affected mainly her walking, involving injuries, infections, long periods of rest to heal wounds, fractures in her legs, and even the use of a wheelchair.

Currently, to be able to walk she uses valves, an orthopedic device that supports her feet, ankles, and legs. After several attempts to improve her lifestyle quality including surgery at FLENI clinic* she began rehab in the water.

Time passed and rehab turned into training and currently, she swims in the open waters. She got meritorious positions competing with non-disabled people in different lakes, rivers, and oceans of the world.

Karina graduated as a public accountant at the National University of the South. Her degree allows her to work, live and travel on her own, apart from running her own home.

In 2006 she published her first book: "The power of will. When reality wakes dreams". Ediuns. Now she launches her second book: "Hug life" where she expresses her emotions and feelings spreading her love for life and freedom. She shows that despite everything she has come through bullying, discrimination, and mistreatment, she is still strong and enthusiastic having an intense desire to improve every day.

Currently, Karina delivers motivational talks about overcoming obstacles and spreads a hopeful message.