

Karina Fassi

# The power of will

When dreams  
become reality



## INTRODUCTION

“Every person shines with their light among all the others. There are not two fires that look the same. There are big and small fires and different colors. There are people whose fire is serene, who don't even notice the wind, and people with crazy fire, who fill the air with sparks. Some fires, silly fires, they neither illuminate nor burn; but others burn life so eagerly that you cannot look at them without blinking, and that lights up whoever approaches it».

Eduardo Galeano

This is how I would define Kari, as a little fire: not one of the silly ones or the ones that burn, but the ones that illuminate, the ones that burn life, the ones that give warmth.

When I met her, she was just a spark that was determined to participate in a swimming competition: it had been no more than two months since she had touched the water of the pool for the first time, and she was just learning to take her first strokes. The following year we began to share classes and more sparks began to light up within her. It became an uncontrollable flare of desire, energy, and dreams to come true.

And when I got to know her better, I realized that she was always like a red-hot ember: she just needs a wave of fresh air to ignite. That air encouraged her to cross the busiest avenue in the city, to get to Machu Picchu, Lake Aluminé, the South American Lake in Chile, or the World Cup in Italy. That air is nothing more than her dreams. It is enough for Kari to tell me: “I have another dream to fulfill” so that the flame begins to burn and there is nothing to put it out.

I remember when she swam for the first time in a cold-water lake named Aluminé. I accompanied her on her journey, a thousand meters around an island. At one point, considering the cold temperature and how long she had been swimming, I was afraid that she would get tired in the middle of the lake so I asked her how



she felt. Kari stopped, and lay over the surface, she contemplated the blue sky and splendid sun for some minutes and answered: - Happy -. That is Kari. She enjoys every moment that is part of her dreams. I would say so as she is at the bus station buying the tickets to travel wherever her dreams take her.

What will you find in this book? Yes, her story. But also, many moments where its story can be yours. It is the story of a spark that wanted to be a little fire, and today paraphrasing the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, is burning, you can't look at her fire no blinking and whoever gets close, lights up.

May the reading of this book enlighten you, warm you, and turns you on...

THE VALUE OF THE DIFFICULTY

*"I can't do your part in life, but I will try to inspire you with my enthusiasm"*

I WILL DO IT

I cannot do your part in life, but I will try to inspire you with my enthusiasm.

Watch out! I can do it. I will be able to do it. I have to be able to do it... That bus approaches and scares me... I am scared but I have to be able to do it. It will not hit me. No. A few meters separate me from the Universidad Nacional del Sur. I have to cross the avenue. I have to be able to do it. I can do it.

In the blink of an eye, I find myself in front of that mirror where I have looked at myself so many times without actually seeing myself, and doubting myself. Here I am, in this locker room, a few meters from the swimming pool, where I put my suit on every day, and where I began to change. Here I am, supported by those who encourage me, and in that mirror, my eyes ask me not to forget, and to start expressing myself with words as well.

***“I learned this road can be tough, full of obstacles,  
but that makes it more interesting”.***

I think we come to this world for a reason and that all of us have our part to fulfill. Some people miss the opportunity to live and fully enjoy the moments of their lives because they are worried and immersed in the problems, they believe are impossible to solve. I have learned that this path we are on can be difficult, and full of obstacles, but that makes it more interesting.

My mom says that sometimes life is not all roses, but if it were, it would be really boring. She taught me to try to cope with difficulties, to understand that everything has a cause and a meaning, and not to despair when things turn out not the way I wanted. Giving up was never a choice, mum taught me to assume that conflicts and challenges will appear and if we are aware and willing to go ahead, I will find a solution. Problems are not obstacles, but challenges.

## FIRST STEPS

Sometimes I try to put myself in the place of my parents when they found out that their daughter had been born with spina bifida, a problem that could have been prevented during pregnancy with the intake of folic acid. Little was known about it at the time. Spina bifida leaves very severe sequelae depending on where it occurs. If the spinal cord injury occurs in the highest part of the spine, it generates

hydrocephalus. If it is in the middle, it affects the growth and development of the heart and lungs, but if it is in the end, it creates difficulties in movement.

Two years passed and they began to notice the consequences. Camiloni, a man who makes orthopedic devices, recently told me that he cannot forget the day we met and tried to help me to stand up for the first time. An impossible mission.

My legs were very skinny, with no strength, and no muscles. My tiny feet went from side to side on the rehab center's stretcher where my mother was taking me. That same orthopedist manufactured a sort of boots some thin iron tubes on the sides of my legs so that I could try to stand up. And the miracle took place. I will never forget that day when I started to walk. We lived in a little house very close to the Paso de las Piedras dam lake, in Coronel Pringles district, about 55 kilometers from Bahía Blanca on Route 51. My mom laid a blanket on the floor in case I fall. At one end of the blanket, mommy waiting for me with open arms. On the other, Dad, who was unable to understand what was happening to me. And among them my trembling first steps. I never stopped after that.

## RAISED IN NATURE

Childhood was a very happy time in our little house by the lake Paso de las Piedras, a gigantic artificial lake that supplies water to Bahía Blanca. I used to spend plenty of time raising and playing with chicks, partridges, hares, lambs (fed from a baby bottle) chicks, ducks, and my cute and inseparable Merlina: a reddish-brown dachshund. It was my protector, every time I would fall, it stayed still and steady by my side so I could lean on its back to stand up again. One day it had puppies. No one could get close to them except me. I could even take the puppies around in a cart. However, if I fell, it would take the opportunity to take the puppies away from me.

***“Pelú, a wonderful human being,  
used to play with me and bring me pigeons and puppies”***

One day, my brother Pelu brought a sparrow chick and put it in the palm of my hand to take care of it. It was very small and fragile. It had no feathers, the skin was pink and gray, and its yellow beak was huge. Fortunately, I was sensible enough to ask Pelu to return it to its nest. I have always loved animals, taking care of them, giving them warmth and food, but above all I wanted them to be free.



• My brother Hector (Pelu) and me.

Pelu, a wonderful human being, played with me and brought me pigeons and puppies. I felt important taking care of them. Once, we got into a hut where the gas cylinders were kept and found a homeless dog had given birth to a puppy. We used to play there every day until we got covered in dog fleas and mom asked us not to go there anymore, it was dangerous because there may have been snakes, spiders, or scorpions. Near the lake, the flora and fauna were very abundant. Neither PlayStation nor computers existed. Together with our friends, we had fun with sticks, stones, leaves, and earth. From time to time, we traveled with my parents to Bahía Blanca to check my condition. I kept walking with my orthopedic boots and braces, which were heavy and twisted my spine a lot, that's why they were removed.

At that time, I began to exercise assisted by my mom and the rehab center's professionals, although I was never able to get muscle mass in my legs, which continue to be skinny and weak.



My grandparents Maria and Jose with my brother Walter.

## MY GRANDPARENTS

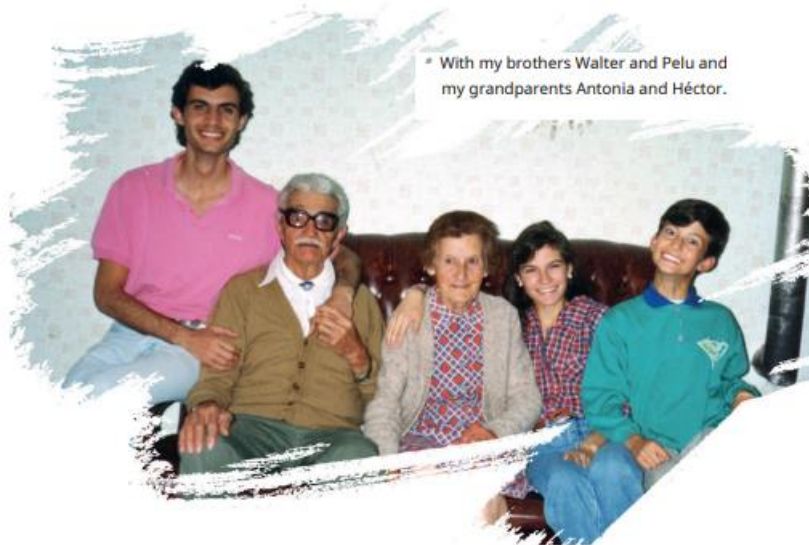
When I was 6 years old, my dad was transferred from his job, and we moved to my grandparents' country house in Cabildo, a small town located 47 kilometers from Bahía Blanca. Leaving the lake house was hard. Strong changes came.

Suddenly I began a new learning stage, a little at school, although the greatest lesson was the lovely experience of living so close to my grandparents. On the farm, there were three little houses. On one side were Héctor and Antonia, my mum's parents. On the other side José and María, my dad's parents were just within walking distance of my new house. It was beautiful and amazing to have the chance to see and enjoy them every day. José's hands were bruised, blistered, and full of working marks. He was the most honest man I have ever met. He used to open furrows with a plow pulled by horses, then spread seeds and watered them. Over time, the miracle of nature and human effort offered us the most delicious vegetables. My grandfather would collect them and sell them around the town in a sulky carried by a mare named Lila. José always worked on those same grooves that I will not forget. He also used to cut firewood for the stove. His kindness to dogs and horses and his sensitivity have forever stayed in my heart. María, a German descendant, with a strong character, was obsessed with cleanliness, so much so that she would get angry with my grandfather if he walked into the house with his canvas shoes. She cooked homemade bread, sweets, and knitted crochet very well. Hector was a muleteer. I cannot imagine how cold it must have been carrying animals from one place to another on his horse helped by his dogs. He was an honorable man, respectful, sincere, kind, with a calm look, humble, very affectionate, and protective of me and his other grandchildren.

With my brother Pelu, the boys from Paso de las Piedra's dam, and my dog Merlina.



Once, for a birthday celebration, he gifted me a can of peaches in syrup, a luxury item for him. Héctor had fourteen brothers and together with David, his twin, they were excellent soccer players. If I have to define my grandmother Antonia with an adjective, I do not hesitate to say: sweet. She was a great, hardworking, and loving woman. When she was young, she would wear very long boots to cross the grasslands, she would pick up my mother and my uncle Héctor and aunt Elsa to milk the cows. She was a wise woman, she taught me to crochet and design paper flowers. Antonia made the most delicious tea in the world, pancakes, and cupcakes from her mouth



only nice words came out. I would visit and accompany her if she was sad and my self-esteem would skyrocket. She took care of me and taught me many things always with a warm smile. For all that I can understand my mother's greatness. I feel her inside me giving me some advice and pampering me. But I still miss her so much... This was our life in the country house with my grannies. Chickens, rabbits, hens, ducks, and dogs were raised there. In the Australian tank, there were goldfish, and when the wind pushed the windmill that Grandpa used to water the vegetables, we heard a very loud noise. Today that tank, the mill, and the three little houses are still there. At night toads and crickets are heard; in the mornings, announced by the roosters, the most diverse birds freely sing. I will never understand those who condemn birds to the torture of confinement in jail.

***"The greatest wisdom was thanks to the experience and love of the grandparents"***

It makes me angry that is why I need to ask you to reflect on this and learn to enjoy the generous thrill of a free bird.



- With my first grade teacher Alba Pérez.

#### THE SCHOOL AND A NEWBORN BROTHER

Suddenly, the white overalls, the Cabildo school, with many boys who shouted and ran during breaks, and a dark-haired teacher with a loud voice who sent me to the corner for not bringing the colored pencils and the ruler that she had asked for. I cried all the time. One day, my brother Pelu came to the classroom to bring me the rule that he once again had forgotten. I was in penitence and without recess. It took me a long time to understand that the teacher taught us to comply and be responsible. That time I clung so tightly to Pelu that I wanted to leave the school with him. I begged him to get me out of that

dreadful place. The school principal realized how much I was suffering, and moved me to the classroom of Miss Alba, a soft-spoken and caring teacher. I remember

*“It took me a long time to understand that the teacher taught us to comply and be responsible”.*

when she picked me up in her arms and washed my face. In addition, Mónica, the principal's daughter, began to accompany me during the breaks. I began to be part of the group thanks to her help. I always had a hard time being part of large groups, but back then I had a hard time expressing myself, I was very shy, withdrawn, and I missed my lake house and the animals.

Something terrible happened when someone threw poison near the farm to kill homeless dogs. Unfortunately, this is how my faithful Merlina died. It took me a long time to recover, so much so that even today I miss it.

When I was seven years old, my little brother Walter was born, a beautiful baby. He was like a toy to me, and a great companion for Pelu, who was very happy to have another boy in the family.



With Pelu and baby Walter

Mommy gave me a doll, and I had a baby to take care of, play with and make clothes for. In school, I passed all the subjects easily, Monica my teacher was also my friend. Little by little I was getting used to

all the changes thanks to the support of my teachers.

## MY TEENAGE LIFE AND MY LEGS OPERATION

When I started high school at Nuestra Señora del Sur, a religious private school in a little town called Cabildo, I did not experience major physical changes but I did emotionally.

I extended my childhood as long as I could. While my classmates talked about the club and boys, I just wanted to play with the little animals and my toys at the farm.

I guess I decided that the love of a boy would never be for me. The same thing I thought about sports, although many years later I learned that I was wrong because life opens up a huge range of possibilities, and we

just have to be aware and willing to enjoy them.

In those days of high school, with very low self-esteem, I did not use to go out with friends much nor go dancing or celebrate my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Usually, I did not use to participate in the parties I was invited to.

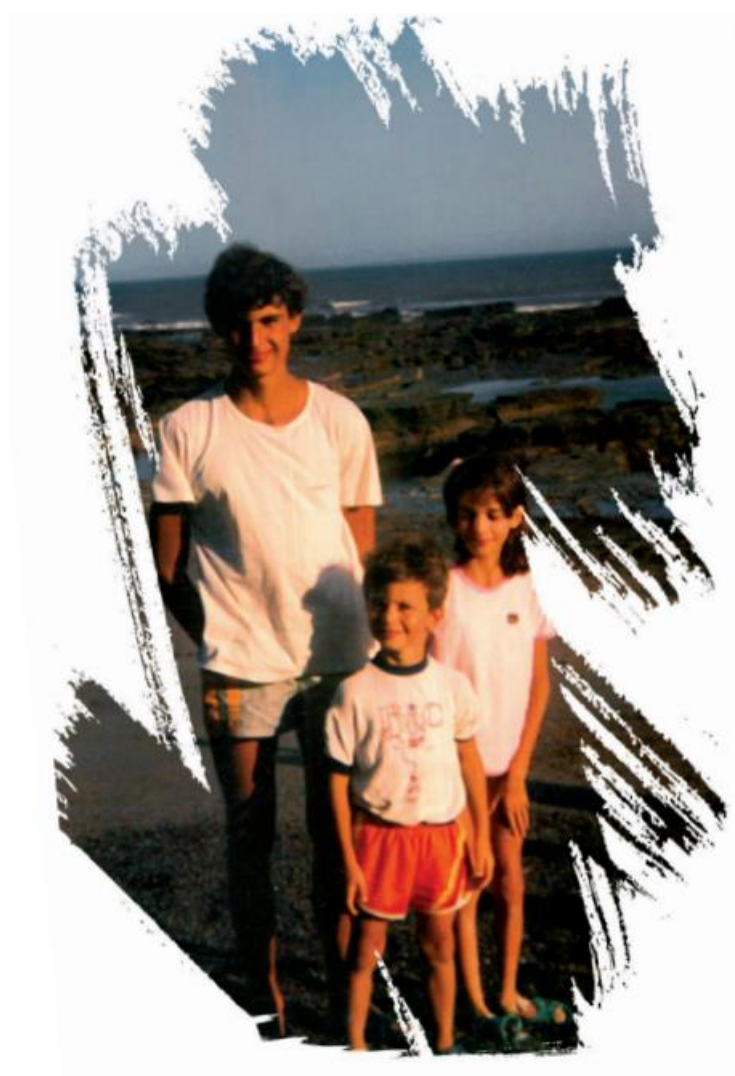
When I agreed to go, I just listened to music and watched my classmates dancing the traditional balls and I wanted to go home early. I was overcome with a feeling of discomfort. On top of that, I was shy and introverted, I did not feel pretty. I used to get very tired when walking, I limped and walked with difficulty, my knees were crooked, I had skinny legs and I was slow.

My parents, in an attempt to improve my quality of life, took me to Bahía Blanca when I turned 17. We went to see a doctor, who is still practicing and has his practice downtown. I was afraid of him, did not trust him, but he was said to have operated on a woman from Cabildo and that he had helped her. Just with that recommendation, my parents decided to operate on my legs. Dad got a bank loan to pay the doctor's fees. I was very scared on the day of the surgery. I had had nightmares and a feeling about the whole thing. Everything went wrong. When I woke up from the anesthesia, I saw that my legs were worse than ever. With my left foot, I supported the inner side of the ankle; with the right foot, I stepped on the heel. On top of it, the doctor's comment was horrible: - I cannot give you what God has not.

***There were only a few meters  
that separated me from the  
The National University of the South. I had  
I had to cross that avenue... I had to be able to do it.***

At that time, I was about to finish high school in Cabildo, my town. I always passed every subject, I went to school with casts on both legs and I tried, despite everything, to keep a smile on my face.

I had to be strong and go on.



A photo with my brothers at the beach, El Cóndor, Río Negro.

A photo with my brothers at the

#### THE STAIRS AND THE PROMISE

One day, in a conversation with Professor Alicia Baglioni, she asked me about my plans after high school. I answered that I wanted to be an accountant and specialize in business administration. She offered me

unconditional support from all the professors, although my main concern was to be able to cross long Alem Avenue to get to the Universidad Nacional del Sur.

The school in Cabildo, which closed several years ago, gave me the appropriate grounding to face the academic challenges of the future. I moved to Bahia Blanca, with the diploma of Bachiller Mercantil ready to become a national public accountant, and convinced, as I had once been advised, that education is the only inheritance that no one can take away from you.

It was only a few meters from Alem Avenue that separated me from the Universidad Nacional del Sur. I had to cross it... I had to be able to do it.

The first day was very intense. The front yard of the university was really crowded and inside finding the classroom where was going to have my lessons was a great challenge. I carried a big smile but actually was a nervous smile. I made a big effort to go up the stairs. And so, I made myself a promise; I promised that would go down those same stairs with my diploma of accountant in my hands.

I spent the first weeks broken down by nerves, but I counted on the company of my brother Pelu. We used to go walking together to the city center, then take the bus to learn the route to the University and back to our apartment. It was in that way I learned to wave the bus to stop, for instance. Pelu taught me how to survive in a big city.

I touched the bottom of my low self-esteem when I offered my brother to walk some meters ahead of me in case, he was ashamed of being seen with me. I walked very slowly and was tired of being observed by the people. My brother made me realize how wrong I was. With his quiet voice, he said: - How come I would be ashamed to accompany you? You are my sister and I want to help you. You have to move on and study -. We lived together in a small downtown apartment and there I started to cook, do the cleaning, and do my everyday tasks on my own. Little by little I got much more confidence in myself.

## I STARTED TO BELIEVE

The first test I took was the placement exam, which I had to pass in order to have access to the career.

Now that I look at my notes, I laugh because my handwriting was terrible. At that time, my pulse trembled a lot so as not to waste time when taking notes, I wrote without turning the page even on the margins.

I used to get very anxious and worried about learning. Sometimes I could not write because my hands were shaking so badly. I would take deep breaths, and try to calm down. I felt that my future depended on that exam: if I passed, it was confirmation that I could do it, otherwise, I had to go back to my town and wait for another chance.

I handed in the sheets of paper to the teacher and went home with the peace of mind that I had done my best.

Days later I went back to the university to get the results, I arrived at the hall where the grades were published on endless lists. I anxiously searched for my last name while my heart seemed to explode and my mind kept telling me that with 40 points I would pass.

Fassi, Karina Elisabet: 76 points.

What a great joy! It was the beginning of a wonderful time. I knew that the road ahead was long and that it would not be easy, but I had already accomplished the first step.

#### A FRIEND, A TRIP, AND A TEAM

The completion of the different subjects was a daily challenge, from crossing streets, catching buses, and getting into the right classroom.

Once I got to the classroom, which was huge and packed with students. Some sat on the floor, others under the windows, and even on the teacher's stool.

I refused to go in, but I knew I had to come an hour earlier so as to get a seat.

At the door, clutching my folder, I was approached by a teacher who came up to me almost running. She asked me if I was going to get in and if I wanted to ask her any questions. I replied that I was not sure if that was the correct classroom for me. She climbed up on the stage and checked with the other students if it was the right classroom so she called me saying, - Come, come, these are your classmates -.

As shy as I was, I had not dared to say a word. I went in hiding my face with the folder and flushed. A boy offered me his seat. I was so embarrassed I did not even thank him and quickly started to take notes.

***It was a worthwhile trip for the first time without the company of my family, and it showed me that I had grown up and was making decisions for myself.***

Later, after leaving the class, I went to the photocopier on the first floor and ran into that same boy. It was only there that I was able to thank him for the gesture. And that is how I met my great friend, Guillermo Pérez Gallinger. He told me that he was a member of the students' center and that they were organizing a trip to the province of Mendoza to attend a business innovation conference hosted by a business graduate whose books were part of our bibliography. The idea sounded very interesting, mainly to start socializing and networking. It was my first study trip, which I shared with an acquaintance from Cabildo. That made me feel safer and gave me peace of mind. It was a worthwhile

trip for the first time without the company of my family, and it showed me that I had grown up and was making decisions for myself.

In Mendoza, I felt comfortable and integrated, and I learned a lot. On the return trip, Guillermo sat next to me, but on the floor of the bus. I told him I was very happy, that trip was a turning point in my life.

Guillermo, enthusiastically told me that he and his group were planning to organize the first Latin American Meeting of Management Science Students, and asked me to join the organization team.

I could not believe it. I said yes. I was going to be able to meet people, go to meetings, learn how to organize an event of that magnitude, evaluate priorities, and feel that I could achieve anything I set my mind to.

The meeting's opening was on my birthday, so I was able to celebrate it with the national and Latin American participants. It was a happy birthday; my partners made some delicious cakes for me.

Academically everything was fine. I would pass my subjects easily but I was still scared every time I crossed the avenue and I was still shy to speak and express myself in public.

I found out years later from a teaching assistant, that Professor Beatriz Ortigosa de Cabrera (we called her Betty) had noticed my shyness. So, she would make me do a presentation in front of my classmates almost every class. That way, I dared to speak in public and my voice was getting louder. The decision of that teacher helped me so much!

As for crossing the street, every day I asked myself the same question: will I be able to cross? But eventually, I dared to talk about my fear of being run over by a bus, because the traffic light would turn green and I would still be in the middle of the avenue. My partners listened to me and I found a great willingness to accompany me. That is how I learned that unity creates strength and we crossed the street together as a group. I became aware of how important it is to speak out and ask for help, which I could not do because I was prey to my shyness.



Pontificia Catholic

University of Ecuador

### THE END OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Guillermo Perez himself told me that since I participated in the organization of that event, I would receive a scholarship to other countries.

It seemed crazy but I began to dream. And since dreams come true not only by wishing for them, I started to work with so much enthusiasm that I forgot about the problems.

I had a goal, a project that kept me awake at night... A dream that I could not get out of my head.

It was amazing to open my mailbox and read that my work on international marketing and trade, based on e-commerce, had been and read that my paper on international marketing and trade, focused on e-commerce, had been approved and that I would

receive a grant to travel to Ecuador. that I would be receiving a scholarship to travel to Ecuador.

I had a mixture of joy, excitement, and nerves. I told the entire family and Pelu, my brother, asked me what I knew about the country. I told him there were Volcanoes. The next question was: "Does it make you happy to go? And I replied "YES!". It was a great opportunity for me to grow and for my resume.

"Don't miss it. If I have to go kick volcano lava to get you out and bring you back home, I'm going to do it. Go and enjoy yourself. You can count on our help, as usual," he told me. And I left quietly. I left Bahía Blanca alone, with a suitcase. I was carrying a little bag with gifts, candies, and cards. When I arrived at Ezeiza airport, I met the other Argentines but it was not until I arrived in Quito that I found out that there were six of us with scholarships.

The guys from the organization were waiting for us, and they took me to the warm home of the Toscano León family, in El Condado neighborhood. I felt very comfortable in a beautiful home and was surprised by so much kindness. We still communicate with Andrea, one of the daughters, from time to time.

***"Don't miss it.***

***If I have to go kick volcano lava to get you out and bring you back home,***

***I'm going to do it. Go and enjoy yourself.***

***You can count on our help, as usual," Pelu told me***

In the afternoon, the opening ceremony of the meeting was held in the impressive hall of the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador. There were representatives from different Latin American countries, students, and political and academic personalities. Suddenly, the presenter said that it would be important to hear the words of a representative of each country.

Argentina in the first place. My five compatriots remained seated. So, I took the lead and began to climb the stairs to the stage to try to speak in front of this qualified audience. I had no speech, no paper, and no message designed for the occasion.

"What do I say now?", I asked myself as I approached the microphone. I simply expressed what came from my heart. I could not believe what was happening to me. I felt fulfilled.

For the first time, I was encouraged to cross borders and I was deeply grateful for that opportunity. I was touched by the applause and the people that approached and offered me their friendship.

We then went to celebrate the beginning of the meeting at a very luxurious Finca on the outskirts of Quito. There was a pool with lights under the water, palm trees, and an impeccable park. Warmth and music reigned there.

As the days went by, I presented my lecture at the university and I got good responses. It was another big step.

In Ecuador, other fantastic surprises awaited, like the point that marks the middle of the world, where the zero-degree parallel is located. I was also able to go to the crater of a volcano in the Pichincha Mountain range.

Another volcano that has been inactive for years, had a crater full of water almost like a lake that could be sailed in a motorboat. The water was completely transparent yet you were unable to see the bottom because it was very deep. You could not swim or drink this water because of its high sulfur content.

I also visited beautiful multicolored rose fields with very long stems and varied perfumes that are exported all over the world. It is amazing the artisanal handmade job to collect carefully the blossoms. It is common to see rose sellers in the parks and squares.

As part of the meeting, we visited companies to learn about their production processes and their insertion into the world through the export of their products. I went to FV, which works with clay and makes ceramic products, which I have always liked.

After the program of activities, I went to some islands near Galapagos, they were paradise. I arrived on a boat and locals were waiting for me with tropical fruits, it was full of small birds that fluttered and ate fruit from my hand. All in the midst of a wonderful landscape: red-breasted birds, and humpback whales that in that month were giving birth. As we moved away from the whales, the tour guide commented that we were passing over a reef full of life.

He stopped the boat and invited us to enjoy it, and even offered snorkels, but I didn't dare to dive, I could not swim at that moment. Among the tourists, there was a lady who was very heavy and when she jumped into the water, she splashed all of the ones who were up there. With most of us in the water, the guide suddenly said seriously: "Be careful. As there are remains of whale placentas and blood from the births, sharks may appear any moment...".

**It was the first time I  
crossed borders and I was deeply grateful  
for this opportunity.**

The overweight lady, could not find a way to get back into the boat, and so could not the rest.

All of a sudden, my desire to go around the reef was over. I never knew if that warning was true or not.

At sunset, on Puerto Lopez shore, where I got one of the best pictures of the sun in the sea, I ate delicious fish and local fruits. I rested in a hotel by the beach. I had breakfast with the sound of the sea and the smell of

fresh bread, butter, latte, and freshly squeezed fruit juice.

Aguas Blancas, another fantastic place, treasures a lot of history and tradition, with aborigines' tombs that rest in a fetal position inside huge pottery vessels. There I learned the importance of the sun, the moon, and the stars to the Manteño tribe.

The name Aguas Blancas is due to a plant's root that gives off a white liquid that dyes all the water of a stream. Very close to that place, there are more beaches of turquoise waters and white sands.

The day to come back home arrived and I left with my memory full of images, and flavors, and with a big smile on my face because I could see that life is full of opportunities, places to visit, people to meet, and sensations to enjoy. Traveling changes the way we see things.

#### THE OUTER PEAK, THE INNER PEAK

I continued my studies. A year later I was awarded a scholarship by the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru, for my work on sustainable development and social responsibility.

Another satisfaction, a new project. I arrived at the Lima airport at three in the morning. I was the only Argentinean invited. I was welcomed by the organizers, a very nice gesture.

I shared a big house, in the center of the city, with Gilda and her daughter. In this type of experience, you also learn to live with families from the host country.

I gave a lecture to Peruvian students, Latin American scholarship recipients, professors, and deans from different universities. I felt confident about my talk and after it, a dean from the University of Callao invited me to repeat my talk with the students in his district. It was very gratifying. Upon my return to Lima, I witnessed an impressive act of faith: the popular procession of the Señor de Los Milagros. Thousands of Peruvian women dress in dark purple in honor of the saint. I was emotionally moved by the weeping of people who touched the image for the first time, whether they thanked or asked for something. There, I got an image that I still keep and lend to those in pain. Once the miracle is fulfilled, they give it back to me so I can give it to someone else who needs it. Legend tells it that a dark-skinned painter reflected Jesus on the cross on a wall.



▪ En Machu Picchu.

Sometime later, the area suffered a devastating earthquake from which only those who refuged next to that wall in the picture. It remained undamaged.

On my birthday, October 3rd, Francisco, a boy from Ecuador, and I were surprised with a delicious cake at the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos.

That evening we went to dinner at a place called Brisas del Titicaca where we learned more about Peruvian culture, its typical dances, and its colorful costumes that honor each of its districts.

In one moment, Francisco took my hand and the dancers showed us how to dance. I was very embarrassed. Later, other students arrived so little by little I overcame my shyness and had a great time.



▪ En Machu Picchu.

During these days in Lima, I had the chance to exchange experiences and conversations with students from Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Ecuador, and Mexico,

They shared their plans and invited me to join them in Cuzco, to explore the iconic Machu Picchu. I jumped on board with almost no time to hesitate.

When I travel, I usually pack a first-aid kit with bandages, sanitizers, antibacterial products and medicines, disinfectants, and antibiotics. In Peru, I needed to use the whole kit because I had a foot injury that took two months to heal. I was well aware that the ideal solution was to take care of myself. I was so happy that I could not stop.

We boarded a plane from Lima to Cuzco. We were offered coca tea to mitigate the effects of the high altitude. The same applied when we reached the airport and the hotel. The high altitude did not affect me and nor did the tea. The fact is that the flavor was not very nice.

**I was well aware that the ideal solution was to  
take care of myself. I was so happy that I could not stop.**

The small group was great. We had chicken, peppers, and rice for lunch. Spices are a must in typical Peruvian dishes but I did not like spices or legumes so I ate white rice.

Very early the next day we went out to explore Cuzco, its perfectly carved stone streets and buildings, its impressive temples, and its imposing churches and museums.

A shuttle bus took us to the Sacred Valley of the Incas. The photographs I took in that place are true postcards.

The next day at five in the morning, we took a train to Machu Picchu. People from all over the world were traveling there. The movement was so intense that we could not even have breakfast.

The best was on the other side of the window: snowcapped peaks, streams running along the railway, Amazonian jungle, local people with goats and corn and legumes crops.

Suddenly the train stopped at a station where the locals would sell food, handcrafts, blankets, rugs, handmade ponchos, and ceramics.

After a short rest, we boarded a small bus that continued on its way through amazing places. Sometimes we could not see the sunlight because of the dense vegetation.

From time to time, small aborigines would come out of the trees and run to the side of the bus throwing stones and shouting at us in Quechua as a way of defending their lands. That made me feel pretty sad.

We passed through deep cliffs. I felt as small as an ant when I realized how narrow the road was and how deep the dark and green canyon was as the fast-flowing Urubamba River crossed the landscape.

From such a great height it seemed as thin and small as a thread.

When the bus stopped, we just had to climb up to get to the citadel. All the effort was worth it. With the help of my companions, from the top, I was able to contemplate that marvelous place full of mysticism.

Once I had not had the courage to cross a road and all of a sudden, I was at the peak of Machu Picchu.

#### CHILE: PEAKS AND DEEPNESS

My self-esteem was boosted, and I was able to stand up for myself, face problems and look for solutions based on the results of the things I had done. From the simple, everyday things that were so difficult for me earlier, to the most challenging ones.

A year later, I was given another scholarship from a university in Chile. I left on my own by bus and crossed the Andes Mountains at night. The scenery gave me snow-capped mountains shining in the light of the full moon. I was glad that I did not fall asleep (although I can never actually sleep while traveling). I felt a bit cold but through the window and enjoyed the breathtaking Andean landscapes.

In Temuco, Solange Bayer, a very gentle girl I had met in Peru, was waiting for me. At her home, her mother treated me to exquisite dishes. The next day we traveled to Concepción, for the Latin American Meeting of Management Students at the Catholic University: another unforgettable adventure.

If you want people to be nice to you, be nice to them. The world is round and it all comes back.

I presented my lecture calmly and during the visits to enterprises that were part of the program, we learned about the production process and handling of steel.

We also visited a coal mine that was only open only to tourists: El Chiflón del Diablo, located under the sea, where the extractions, between 1857 and 1990, took place at 1,800 meters above sea level.

What was I doing under there? We put on helmets with lanterns and started to go down, initially in some wooden carts on rails, then on some ropes, and after that down small passageways, on all fours, until we reached a place where the walls were made of coal.

**If you want people to be nice to you, be nice to them.**

**The world is round and it all comes back.**

Suddenly we were silent, our flashlights off and it seemed as if I had snails in my ears! I could really feel that I was under many meters of land and sea. At that moment I thought of the frequent earthquakes in Chile and I swear that I got out faster than I could have imagined.

When I reached the surface again, I stared at a splendid Pacific beach, with my clothes completely covered by mud. Sometime later I learned from the miners, that women should never enter a mine because it would bring misfortune. There were many of us down there that day. Believe it or not, currently, there are no longer tours to the El Chiflón del Diablo mine. It was very badly affected by the 2010 earthquake.



In the truck of a car celebrating, I graduated!

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTANT

After so many years of effort and study, of getting anxious at every examination, one early morning of March 2002 I sat for my last final exam at the National University of the South. It was a written test and I had to wait a week for the results.

A dear friend of mine, Natalia Boschetti, had already graduated. We met at the university and shared many hours of study. At that time, she was living in the south of Argentina but traveled specifically to be with me on the day of my last test. Even though I had not seen the mark, I knew that I had passed and I did not hesitate to say so. That night we gathered to celebrate: my college classmates, friends, and family at a pizzeria. After a toast, they made me change my very nice clothes in the restroom because there was a tradition to follow: they took me to a typical place in Bahía Blanca, the park. There they threw me:

eggs, flour, earth, various condiments, vinegar, weeds, plant leaves, and sticky substances. I was so happy that I did not mind putting up with it, even in the rain. The ritual went on in the trunk of a car through the downtown streets until late at night, with a caravan behind me honking for me. Dirty, wet, cold, shivering... happy. Very happy.

## DOORS OPEN

A few days later we organized a trip to the Iguazu Falls with mommy and my brother Walter. It was my graduation trip and a way to start the new chapter with good vibes. The place was enchanting. We went on tours, admired the beauty of the landscape, walked through the jungle among millions of butterflies, and spent a day in the life of the Guarani tribe, who taught us how they obtained their food, grew vegetable gardens, and manufactured handcrafts. We also toured an area where injured animals and animals that had been taken away from their natural environment and were sold in the illegal market are rehabilitated.

The Falls, both on the Argentine and Brazilian sides, are testimony to the overwhelming majesty of nature.

The hard task of getting a job then began. I had previously sold clothes and babysat small children in order to afford my trips but trying to work as an accountant was quite frustrating.

If there are difficulties in employing those who have no physical disabilities, these difficulties multiplied for those who do have limitations.

I tried to put myself in the place of an employer and understand that he might probably think I would be absent many times and unable to perform certain tasks.

I would also usually go to interviews that far from checking my résumé or listening to my enthusiasm would look at my walking. I knew as I walked in that they were not going to hire me.

### ***Doors opened little by little***

If I was not applying to be a dancer, why would my walking difficulties matter so much?

In Argentina, there is a law that, in order to improve disabled people's life quality, determines a minimum percentage, of their integration into in-state companies. It also grants tax benefits to private companies that do the same.

It still does not work. I got tired of knocking on doors and being told that the quota for disabled personnel was already covered. Actually, the law proposes a minimum but does not set a maximum.

I traveled to Buenos Aires to hand in my résumé to the executives of prominent government agencies and to ask to be considered for future vacancies. It never worked either. I have never seen a disabled person in a high position.

Many times, I found myself explaining things that I now feel ashamed of, like "I just have problems walking but my head is fine".

In search of new prospects, I translated my résumé into Portuguese and submitted it online to various Brazilian corporations. I also handed in some CVs personally in the south of the country, on a trip we made with mom.

I was convinced and sure that I was worthy of a dignified opportunity. Doors gradually opened. First, it was the people from Cabildo, the village where I grew up, that trusted in me. I began to get some clients, which I still have today, as a freelance bookkeeper. Then I had the chance to start working in an electronics store as an employee, and I have been working there for more than ten years.

***I persevered, convinced and sure that***

***I deserved a worthy opportunity.***

I also began to collaborate with the municipal delegation of Cabildo (my hometown) in 2005, as an accounting advisor for businesses, which was a professional challenge and a way to contribute a grain of sand to the creation of new jobs in my town. I was not able to stay for long because I was hired as an intern with a salary of 400 pesos per month, which was not enough to afford the bus. I asked to be transferred to Bahía Blanca, but the situation got worse: the number of tasks to do were more and more, I was never considered an accountant, and my salary as an intern came to a standstill.

I remember a young man who presented business projects and who, fed up with the bureaucracy of the system and so many closed doors, threatened to commit suicide. As I was working at the Secretary of Production and Development, felt overwhelmed every single day, assisting unemployed people who needed a solution and someone who would listen and understand them. I received families with sick children. I could not stand so much injustice and the politicians who looked the other way.

I tried to put up with it. I felt that my role was important but it was unsustainable. At the beginning of May 2010, I resigned from the Municipality of Bahía Blanca.

I ended up devastated by so much disrespect to the people and to myself.

I continued working as an employee in the company I still work for and with my own clients. Gradually I achieved economic stability, living debt-free, and projecting changes, I got a mortgage loan and bought my own apartment. At the same time, I continued to train professionally.

## DESTINY BEACH

I was at a time when contrasts were accentuated. While my professional life was becoming more and more stable, my body was getting worse. My ankle was moving inward, touching the floor and hurting me. The same with my knee. My wounds would not heal, I suffered from infections and had to rest in order to heal. At the same time, I was getting weaker.

Without any physical activity, I lost muscle mass. I broke my left leg tibia just because of a silly trip. And the solution was always more and more rest.

Then came the phrase I would have never wanted to hear: "Life goes on Karina, in a wheelchair, but it goes on" my traumatologist in Bahia Blanca told me.

I was not willing to accept it or give up. To keep my spirits up during the 30 days of rest due to the fracture, I imagined traveling to a beautiful beach with soft sands, clear waters, palm trees, warm air...

When I could, I invited mommy, my great companion, and we went for a week to a beach in Brazil called Bombas e Bombiñas. Due to a mistake at the travel agency, we ended up at another beach, Mariscal, with big waves quite different from what I had imagined. I was very fragile, my legs had no muscle mass, it was very difficult for me to enter the water because of the big waves. I sat on the sand and slid a little at a time, pushing myself with my hands, toward the water, but I could not get through the breaker. In one of those attempts, Mirta and Ricardo Martino, two Argentinians who were on vacation there, held out their hands to me and together we went to the sea. Slowly and carefully, I could pass the breaking waves and the sea became calmer and smoother.

***I was not willing to give up.***

Very grateful, I began to chat with the couple. In that scenario, destiny had one of the biggest surprises for me: Mirta told me about a clinic in Buenos Aires that specializes in problems like mine. She told me that they could help me there and that it was the best place in the country to treat my case. No doctor in Bahía Blanca had ever suggested the Foundation for the Fight against Neurological Diseases of Childhood (fleni).

My life was on the threshold of a big change.



Brazil.

With my mom in

## **CROSSING BORDERS**

**Life is a permanent challenge.**

## **NEW HORIZONS**

I came back from Brazil full of energy and hope. On the Internet, I found the telephone number, e-mail, and address of Fleni Clinic. I called, asked for an appointment, and traveled to Buenos Aires.

We always get a NO at first, but we have to fight for a YES.

"Yes, I can", I repeated to myself and arrived at the first appointment, accompanied by my mom. After several attempts to get my medical history from my traumatologist in Bahia

Blanca, he finally told me that he would not give it to me not even for the Fleni Clinic and that I should go to do handcrafts and exercise.

I was only trying to improve my quality of life; I thought the medical service should not be a business. I wasted a lot of time and suffered because of that selfish attitude. The Fleni doctors listened to me, reassured me, and told me that they would take care of my medical history, for which they had to do several studies.

A new sun was rising on my horizon.

In September 2008, with the support of the rest of the family, and by then with the support of my employers and social security, I started a key stage.

"The sparkle in your eyes tells me that you are going to go and that everything is going to be fine," one of my bosses told me.

I knew the road was not easy, but my train was already on the way. On each trip to Buenos Aires, I was driven by an impressive strength, although I must admit that there was also anguish.

Walking the corridors of the clinic filled me with sorrow. The elevator detonated emotions. When the door opened my eyes filled with tears. I could not help it. I was moved by the suffering of adults and children. All this made me think: why do not we invest in preventing some of the diseases that are so hard to cure?

If the water is contaminated, if the food is transgenic and if the air is dirtier every day, it is obvious that we will get sick.

Eventually, I tried to arrive at the right time for each appointment so that I would not have to stay too long in the corridors and waiting rooms.

Finally, after a series of studies, the doctors considered that there was a possibility of improving my quality of life, but they had to operate again on my left ankle so that it would not tilt so much toward the floor. I also heard that they would try to fix the "glue" that had been done to me in Bahía Blanca, as the doctors called that clear case of malpractice I had suffered.

I was examined on September 25. Mommy accompanied me. The anesthesiologist of the team of doctors called me by phone and gave me peace of mind and reassurance.

***I knew the road was not an easy one,  
but my train was already on its way.***

Mirta and Ricardo also appeared, as on that Brazilian beach.

I was operated on just a day later by the doctors Juan Carlos Couto, head of the team, and María Pía Gotter Campo. I woke up from the anesthesia feeling very cold, but no longer with a crooked cast, nor the disappointment, nor that doctor telling me that he could not give me what God had not given me.

“Karina, wake up. I am happy with how well turned out your leg” Juan Carlos Couto told me.

And with the humility of the great ones, he thanked me for having trusted him.

### **ANOTHER THERAPY: POTTERY**

Two days later we went to a hotel to avoid hospital viruses since my defenses were very low. The following week we returned to Bahia Blanca on a non-stop flight under strict health safety regulations. An ambulance was waiting for me at the airport. I entered my apartment in a wheelchair, but I knew it was temporary.

As I needed to keep my head busy, I began to enjoy the art of ceramics.

When I go back to my years at the Cabildo school, the indelible images of the little ornaments I made with creatine, a material that did not need to be cooked, come to mind.

Since I was very young, I liked to model and knead materials to shape them and express myself. Today I can spend the whole day, and many hours at night, making ceramic handicrafts. It is an efficient therapy.



Ceramics.

What better ground wire than clay? It is pure soil, it is the main raw material for ceramics, and it is where my creativity flows.

That is how I started making small sculptures. I learned some techniques: how to prepare the dough, how to model and hollow the pieces, how to cook, and how to get different shades and colors using natural elements.

I find it hard to understand those who are bored or feel they cannot do anything in life. And much more those who feel lonely and get depressed without looking for alternatives that mobilize them and awaken in them the desire to better themselves every day.

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset said that man is himself and his circumstances. That is why I believe that if you set your mind to it, you can overcome adversity and enjoy a better life.

**What better ground wire than clay? It's pure soil, it's the main raw material for ceramics, and it is where you can let your creativity flow.**

Since then, I continued making pots, mates, fountains, flowerpots, and sculptures and I really want to have my own workshop and kiln. I participated in some fairs and sold my pots, and I took a course on entrepreneurship at the Universidad Nacional del Sur.

I also delivered some free classes in a sheltered workshop for children with disabilities, they are full of love and joy, and this makes them special. I learned a lot from them, not only to value great achievements but also the little things in life.

And I have a dream: to generate jobs in this way.

## **START ALL OVER AGAIN**

After a few months in a wheelchair, Dr. Susana Olivetto removed the cast and I walked again, first with crutches, then without them. There was a proposal for me to use canes, but I did not accept it. I preferred to lean on the wall, on a parked car, on a lamppost, or on a traffic light to go down or up the curb.

The cane or the wheelchair made me go backward.

The circumstance demanded I start again.

How do I do it?

How do I step without feeling my whole-body tremble?

How do I feel stronger when stepping if I feel like I am walking over jelly?

My legs are skinny and shaky; my feet are unstable and fragile.

I was suggested rehabilitation that included exercises for strength, security, and balance.

Daniel Sosa, an excellent kinesiologist from Bahía Blanca, helped me at that stage. He was professionally and humanely committed. He assured me that I could count on him and he immediately showed me that this was really the case.

In the afternoons, when I left work, I went to the kinesiology center and stayed for hours. Each improvement was a new incentive to keep up a strenuous routine. Sports have always had a key place in my emotional life.

## **THE WONDERFUL SWIMMING**

On the road to my recovery, swimming also proved to be another piece of wise medical advice.

At first, I went to a therapeutic pool with very warm water. I arrived with my crutches and once inside I tried to walk. It also helped me to relax.

Sometime later, in August 2009, while I continued with kinesiology, I started going to the Uno Bahía Club pool where many swimmers train. I loved the place, approached a teacher, and told him I wanted to learn to swim. He looked at me with an astonished look on his face because I, who did not have good balance to walk, reached the pool holding on to the walls.

"Look how they all swim. If they do it, I'm going to try" I told him.

He told me to stay into the not-so-deep end. I had no idea how to swim and breathe at the same time,



At Uno Bahia Club Swimming

pool

but if he had taught so many people, he was going to be able to teach me too.

Daniel Gonzalez, nicknamed the Russian, was in charge of teaching me to swim. He was very patient.

First, I held on to a rubber board, then I tried the floats and the pool's railing. I let go little by little.

Our body contains a lot of air in our lungs. If we are relaxed, we float naturally. Otherwise, the tension pushes us to sink like lead.

A month after joining the club, and already having minimal notions, I decided to participate in my first swimming tournament. It seems crazy to want to compete if you barely know how to swim, but the Master Spring Tournament was held on September 26, 2009, and at that time it was a year after the operation. It was the most vital way to celebrate and show my loved ones how good I felt.

***“Look at how they all swim they do.***

***If they do it, I'm going to try,” I said.***

In addition, simple participation was rewarded with a medal that I could then give to the doctors who helped me improve my quality of life.

And the day came. All my family and friends were present. Also, Daniel Sosa, my kinesiologist.

At the moment of starting that 50m freestyle competition, I was very, very excited. The same thing happened to my relatives. My brother Pelu, the one in charge of filming, was not able to do it.

Mommy and my little nephews, Maximo, Martino, and Gianella, kept encouraging me. So did Viviana, my sister-in-law.

“Let's go, Aunt Kari... Let's go...”

I swam quite well the first 25 meters but then it was almost impossible: my little nephews were running to the edge of the pool, Pelu, mommy and the people kept cheering me on. I could not breathe because I was so happy but I kept going anyway.

“Kari, I'm taking you out of the pool... Shall I help you? “ the teacher shouted at me, very worried.

I felt I could. I completed the 50 meters although it took me three and a half minutes. The most thrilling of my life.

When I reached the finish line, I received a standing ovation. My family was happy. The one who suffered the most was my teacher. I told him that I wanted to continue participating in tournaments and also to swim in open water. Obviously, he said no.

"You can die and I do not want to be responsible" he explained. And I accepted it. I owe him much of my recovery.

## OPEN AND DEEP WATERS

Once I learned to swim, I wanted to take on new challenges. My desire arose because I heard a group of swimmers talking about their adventures in lakes, rivers, and seas... Suddenly new dreams flourished.

I repeat. I understand Professor Gonzalez, he did not want to be an accomplice of my madness. He warned me about a series of problems to take into account, such as the low temperature of the water, the swell, the wind, and the depth.

In the search for someone to help me follow this new dream, I met Luciana Canova, "Luchita".

"I will take you wherever you want to go," she said, looking me in the eyes. So, I started training.

I started by wearing the neoprene suit to protect me from the cold and the wounds that the logs could cause me, branches, sediments, glass, wires, or garbage that many people throw into the rivers.

The suit helps me to float. It's like wearing a life jacket: you do not sink easily. In order to dive, divers put on a lead belt.

With my brothers, we dived in Las Grutas, one of the beaches in Río Negro Province, and it was fascinating. The diversity and beauty of life underwater are incredible. That other world left me in awe.

I also felt that there are many more risks and issues to consider: I needed more sophisticated equipment and an oxygen tube, to learn how to breathe, compensate for my ears, and adapt to the water pressure at depth. I learned that I had to go down slowly to the bottom and come up slower than the bubbles formed by breathing so that the pressure would not affect me.

In spite of that, I went back to dive in the Cenotes of Mexico. La Salada lagoon, in the Villarino district, province of Buenos Aires, was my first open water challenge. I swam a thousand unforgettable meters: I enjoyed every stroke with total tranquility. My brother Pelu, who accompanied me in a kayak, was a witness and guardian of that first step on this path of adventure.

In one of the later challenges, I not only participated but also made ceramic trophies that were awarded as prizes. I already felt totally protagonist.

## SOUTHERN LAKES

We traveled to Lake Aluminé on a bus with mommy. After several hours we arrived at Villa Pehuenia, in Neuquén Province, where we rented a cabin very close to the lake. That same night we met all the swimmers and organizers of the challenge, shared dinner, and watched a video of the route we had to follow according to the distance we had signed up for. In my case, I had to get to an island, go around it and return to the starting point.

The water is very clear and cold, so much so that when swimming, you can see the stones at the bottom, logs, aquatic plants, and the trout that swim away.

Among the group of swimmers was Luchita, my teacher, who took part in a three-and-a-half-kilometer race, but when I had to start, she decided to join me.

***More adventures in waters as cold as transparent and,  
on a human level, more links for the chain of favors.***

We swam together while enjoying the scenery. She would show me how to guide myself.

The arrival was magical because of the enthusiasm the other competitors transmitted, and because of that warm hug with Luchita.

The following year I lived another beautiful experience, without my teacher, swimming with five companions at the same time. The cabin where we stayed in Villa Pehuenia was one of my first sponsors.

Lake Chocón, also in Neuquén, was another event shared with a group of swimmers from Bahía Blanca. I felt very comfortable and safe because of the support of the Prefecture's boats, which had doctors and professional assistance. New friendships, anecdotes, and much joy increased my motivation to continue training for new achievements.



• Nadando en el lago Aluminé,  
en Villa Pehuenia.

Villa Pehuenia.

Swimming in Aluminé Lake,

In the summer of 2014, the possibilities came one after the other in an impressive way. On my vacation, I got my backpack and bus tickets. I organized the trip, evaluated priorities, and made decisions. I traveled alone. Then I went back to the Lácar and in 2 hours and 12 minutes, I covered the 3,200 meters of the Nonthué challenge.

Then I went to Lake Gutierrez, in the majestic city of Bariloche, and then to the intense challenge of Lake Correntoso, in Villa La Angostura.

More adventures in waters as cold as transparent and, on a human level, more links for the chain of favors.

In Bariloche, my friend Guillermo Pérez Gallinger even gave me the keys to his house. There were swimmers and spectators who gave me their constant collaboration. The next challenge? Life is a permanent challenge.



Dolphins in the

Dominican Republic

#### THE DOLPHIN'S CARESS

Swimming with the sensitive and intelligent dolphins and feeling with my own senses what I had read about them, took me to the Dominican Republic. Mommy accompanied me.

It was not easy at first. I arrived at the tour point and the security guard did not want to let me in, claiming it could be dangerous for me.

"Have you ever seen a dolphin? It is more than two meters long, weighs more than 150 kilos and you could get hurt," he said when he saw me walking.

I tried to explain to him that this was a big dream, that I wanted to meet the dolphins and interact with them. But given the circumstances, I limited myself to asking him to let me in the place to see them from outside the water. Once inside, who was going to stop me? I was able to convince the security manager, but I overheard him asking the dolphin trainer for an update.

In the park, I approached the huge pools that were built on the beach and there were the dolphins.



Dominican Republic.

The dolphins in The

“Are you the girl he just mentioned?” the trainer tried to warn me.

I insisted “I traveled all the way from Argentina for this. I beg you to let me in, even if it is only on the side. I will stay still. I promise. I just want to see them up close, please, it is very important to me. Please”

But to my surprise the trainer said: “Please let me talk. Did you hear what the security guard said? Well, forget it. I know dolphins very well and you would never get hurt. On the contrary. Do not waste your time. Enjoy your dream”. The hardest thing is to put into words the feeling of that moment. I think only God knows.

**The trainer told me that the dolphins  
had noticed that my legs were not strong.**

Suddenly two dolphins approached me: one on each side of my body, next to my arms. The trainer indicated that they were waiting for me to hold on to their fins. When I finally did, they took me around the place very carefully, very slowly. It was incredible and even funny because I had taken a breath and had prepared myself to be taken quickly, like the rest of the people.

The most surprising thing was to feel their skin, like that of a baby, and the gentleness with which they treated me without touching my feet or legs. The trainer told me that the dolphins had noticed that my legs were not strong, so they only gently touched the upper part of my body. When I kissed them, they closed their little eyes. Mommy was astonished.

Destiny had led me to them and to identify with them. Like the dolphins, I jump over obstacles and dance in the sea of change too.

After so much excitement, I understood that dolphins must be free. To avoid stress, they need to swim at least 64 kilometers a day. As humans, we must be aware of this, of the immense value of these beings, and commit ourselves to fight for their freedom. They do not deserve that we impose such captivity on them.

When all the dolphins return to the sea, another of my dreams will be fulfilled.

## THE RIVER FEELS

Shortly after, I faced a new challenge in the Negro River, connecting the cities of Viedma and Patagones, 3,750 meters in very fast-flowing waters. I repeated it six times among hundreds of swimmers, kayaks, jet skis, and boats of the Prefecture. I was accompanied by my brother Walter, his wife Veronica, and my nephews Tiziana and Valentino in this experience.

Each lake has an incomparable charm. The test in the Lácar is called Nonthué and the first time it made me feel something that I had never experienced before. It was 1,600 meters and I had to reach an island with lots of vegetation. The same thing happened underwater. At times I had to move away because I bumped into plants and algae. I ended up swimming a longer distance.

On the way back, one of the times I took my head out of the water to get my bearings and breathe, I found myself in the middle of the immensity of the lake and in front of an imposing mountain with a white summit.



With Natalia Stefanazzi

going out of the Lacar Lake.

“Look where you are” I told myself.

Inevitably I thought of those who want to do what I do and cannot.

While I was enjoying that unique moment, my great friend Naty Stefanazzi swam up to me.

"How are you?" She asked.

"Happy. Look where we are...!" I replied.

When I reached the finish line, someone with a microphone asked me the same question. When I tried to answer I realized that my jaw was frozen.

"hhhappy," was all I could say. I swear to my heart I was totally happy but my face was still frozen. Then the organizers handed out medals and gave me the chance to talk about my beautiful experience at Lake Lácar.

***I'm not going to compete I'm not going to  
compete or win medals; I need self-improvement.***

Since 2009 I try to participate in winter and spring competitions. I do not compete to win medals; I go for the need to improve myself, for the vitality I feel, and for attitudes that deeply move me and fill my soul.

In October 2012 I dared to participate in the Argentine Masters Swimming Championship, at the National High-Performance Center, based in Buenos Aires.

In April 2013 I came third in the 50-meter backstroke at the Argentine Masters Swimming Championship held at the Olimpo Club in Bahía Blanca. That same year, but in October, I went to Rosario, for the same tournament.

Among the awards was "Swimming with the heart" given by the open water swimmers group Tiburones de Bahía. I just wanted to be part of it and ended up as team captain. Also, the "Sporting Achievements" 2009, 2013, 2014, and 2015, and "Perseverance and Sporting Values", from the South American Confederation South American Swimming Confederation, and the Chilean Federation of Aquatic Sports, awarded at the end of 2013, in the South American Masters of Chile.

Just a few years ago I did not know how to swim and I was convinced that sports were not for me. Beyond the sporting arena, I received the Junior Chamber International's "Personal Achievement and Overcoming" award. On December 18, 2014, the Honorable Concejo Deliberante in Bahía Blanca gave me a Citizen Recognition, for being an example of life and personal improvement.

Each award helps me to know that I am on the right path and pushes me forward. In each of them, the names of the people who helped me get here are on.

#### MY HEART IN EVERY STROKE

At the end of 2013, I had the wonderful opportunity to participate in the South American Masters Swimming Championship in Santiago de Chile. I traveled on November 26 and returned on December 3.

The prologue was very exciting, from the very moment I tried on the blue and white leotard with which I represented my country and on which a friend from Cabildo embroidered the sun, a handicraft she offered me to wish me luck. Luciana Canova, (Luchita my swimming teacher and friend), lent me light blue and white t-shirts and jackets.

I had just been in Chile shortly before graduating, thanks to a scholarship from the Catholic University, to give a lecture on sustainable development and social responsibility. When I heard about the South American Championship, I contacted some friends I met during that visit.

The warm responses came immediately, among them the surprising invitation to stay at Eliezer Nahuelñir Toloza's house.

In no suite of the most luxurious hotel would I have felt better. I had the most spacious room so that I could rest and be in optimal conditions for the competition.

The welcome, the reunion with friends, and the walks through Valparaíso, Santiago, or Pomaire were unforgettable.

"In Chile, you have a family," -was Eliezer's response every time I tried to express my gratitude.

I also enjoyed every moment of the tournament. I was able to admire highly trained swimmers, huge backs, great professionalism, and camaraderie.

There were four other swimmers from Bahia Blanca (Mariano Vidal, Marión Valdez Vidal, Carlos Tartaglia, and Mercedes Marani), all of them excellent, and all of them won medals.

***I wish that everything I am given  
becomes happiness and opportunity.***

As always, I put my heart into every stroke. I competed against myself and shared with everyone.

Life gave me the opportunity to be in that 50 meters Olympic pool with 10 lanes, crystal clear walls, and an illuminated roof by the sunlight.

Everything was beautiful and smelled brand new, and the surprise of being treated as an "elite athlete", as an "Argentine athlete" among more than 1,200 swimmers.

At the end of the first competition, I was recognized by the competitors who were swimming in the other 9 lanes.

"Hey girl, whatever you need, I am at your service. An honor to swim with you," one of the Venezuelan girls told me.

In the 50-meter backstroke, I finished in the eighteenth position, and in the 100-meter crawl, I was eleventh.

"Karina Fassi. Argentinian athlete, please introduce yourself, "I heard over the speakers of the National Stadium.

I thought I had been disqualified and wondered what was wrong. I got there full of uncertainty only to find a crystal trophy with my name on it. It was the "Perseverance and Sportsmanship" award.

But there was still much more to come, because Noelia Petti, an Argentinian swimming role model who in 2012 was world champion, gave me her gold medal won in that South American tournament.

***I always feel that what I am thankful for is not enough***

***I am grateful, that words are not enough because I receive so much.***

Noelia is not only an outstanding athlete, but she is also a sweet person and super humble. When she gave me the medal, I thought it was just for the photo.

"If one day you are tired or feel bad, look at this medal, it will give you strength," she told me.

I have always felt that I am not thankful enough, that words are not enough because I receive so much.

My great friend, the swimmer Natalia Stefanazzi, argues that since the world is round, everything comes back.

I wish that everything I am given becomes happiness and opportunity.

In another Argentine Championship, Natalia also gave me her medal.

Reality has already exceeded my dreams.



Together with Pope

Francisco

### **THE NO THAT TURNED INTO A YES**

"Dear Pope Francis: I wrote a book and I want to give it to you. My name is Karina Fassi, I live in Bahia Blanca and I grew up in Cabildo, the town where the olive tree you planted in the Garden of Gethsemane is from".

The letter, one of the more than 6,000 that the Argentine Pope receives every day, was another sign of the faith that sustains me.

In February 2014, I had given a draft of this book to the doctors of the Foundation for the Fight against Childhood Neurological Diseases (fleni) in Buenos Aires. When the head of the

team that has been assisting me for years, Dr. Juan Carlos Couto, told me that it was a caress for his soul, I felt I could pass it on to the Pope, for me the most important man in the world.

Why? Because in this book I highlight that effort and responsibility are worthy, and dreams can be a beautiful reality.

So, I began my journey with obstacles. In the curia of Bahia Blanca, I was told that a personal meeting with the Pope was impossible, and maximum I would be able to attend an audience on Wednesdays, but that I could only see him through a small window, from afar, and thus participate in his mass. But I could not go near him, because the Swiss guards would use their swords and prevent me from doing so. They also suggested that I send the book by mail.

I did not despair.

In 2013, during the crossing Puente a Puente Viedma-Patagones, I learned about the existence of the International Swimming Federation, organizer of the World Championships.

***I gave him the book and told him we love him,  
and that we want to see him strong and happy.***

So, I decided to send a letter to Francisco. I attached photos and clippings of my tests in lakes Lácar, Aluminé, Chocón, Gutiérrez, Correntoso, in the Negro river, and also in Mar del Plata. From the Fleni, Dr. Couto stated that I am fit to practice swimming.

One morning in May, I received an e-mail confirming the invitation to participate in the Open Water World Championship in Naples and the Vatican appeared again in my path.

The first thing I did was go to the bank. It had been only a month since I had canceled the loan for the purchase of my apartment and I asked for a five-year personal loan to pay for the ticket. I thought about taking Mommy with me. Then I tried to take my pending vacations at work.

The World Cup was close to the Vatican, I had the loan and important discounts on the tickets and everything was in place to take Mom. Then I felt that it would no longer be necessary to send the book to the Pope by mail, that I could put it in his own hands. And I sent a letter again.

On the evening of August 23, a woman called me on the phone and told me what I had been waiting for: that the Pope would see me and my mother in Santa Marta on Thursday, September 4, at 6:00 a.m.

On Monday night, September 1, we went to Buenos Aires by bus, and the next day we flew to Rome. After a stopover in Madrid, we arrived on Tuesday at 7.30 p.m. and at 5 a.m. the next day we left for the Vatican. Upon arrival, one of the guards of the Swiss Guard informed

me in writing (since it was impossible for me to understand what he was saying) that we would be received at 6:30 am. Suddenly the door opened and together with twenty other visitors, along a long path, we arrived at a small, austere chapel with a wooden cross.

***One morning in May, I received the e-mail confirming the invitation to participate in the Open Water World Championship in Naples and the Vatican appeared again in my path.***

We all sat and waited in silence. A few minutes later, the Pope began his mass.

With a voice that transmitted peace, Francisco spoke to us about the strength we have within us to face what life has in mind for us. Then he sat down on the side and prayed humbly with us. In the end, at the door of the chapel, he welcomed us. I was impressed by the softness of his hands as he took mine. He looked into my eyes the whole time and smiled. I gave him the book and told him that we love him and that we want to see him strong and happy. He touched my head and blessed me. He also blessed mommy, who kept repeating "be strong, Francisco; be strong Francisco...!"

Moved by so many emotions, we went to Naples by train. We stayed at the Montespina Park Hotel, where Damian Blaum and Pilar Geijo, from the Argentinean swimming team, were waiting for us.

On Sunday, September 7, along with the 30 best swimmers in the world, I had the privilege of opening the Capri-Naples, World Open Water Championship.

When I returned home, after 35 days, I found an envelope. I opened it anxiously. It was Francisco's reply. And also, a request: that we pray for him.

#### OPEN WATER WORLD CUP

On September 5, the organizers of the Capri-Naples competition took us by ferry to the island of Capri, which is a beautiful place. There, the official presentation of the event took place. The leaders of the International Swimming Federation (FINA) spoke, and then we were taken to eat typical Mediterranean dishes at a very nice outdoor restaurant.

That day I was introduced to the other swimmers. I told them all my life stories so they could get to know me better. Maria Rosaria Marmolino was in charge of translating simultaneously in English and Italian, so everyone knew that I had been invited to open and close the World Cup. It was gratifying to feel that I was immediately integrated into the group as if I were another champion. Even more, some of them thanked me for being there and wished me all the best and there were even some swimmers who even told me it was an honor to meet me and thanked me for sharing my life story

***... I realized that I had to enjoy this unique moment I was living.***

They told me that I had motivated them, which was wonderful. My idols in the sport I am passionate about were saying "thank you" to me.

The dream was being fulfilled perfectly. It had been worth all the effort.

And the day came. On September 7, very early in the morning, when I arrived on the island of Capri, I changed, put on my wetsuit, and was about to leave when I was told that they had prepared something special for me. The most exciting moment was about to come.

When I got out, I saw that from where I was up to the water they had laid out a green carpet that looked like grass with rocks around it. On the edges of the carpet, standing on their feet, several little boys dressed as swimmers, wearing tights and swimming caps and goggles, were waiting to accompany me to the water.



• Con Pilar Geijo en el Mundial de Italia.

Together with Pilar Geijo, at the Italian World cup

They took my hands and I began to walk along the carpet. The children followed me as I passed as if they were ducklings, and so they escorted me to the water.

During the days leading up to the World Cup, my sisters-in-law had sent me messages saying "we are with you!", and honestly, as I held the little hands of those little ones, I felt that they were my nephews and nieces by my side. And my tears of emotion began to appear.

I got to the water and the countdown started: ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, and they shot a flare. I began to swim in that blue water, with a transparency that allowed me to clearly see the bottom of the Tyrrhenian Sea, at that moment, in that World Cup. Between strokes and tears, I knew that I had to swim to the huge boat with the Italian flag, located 1000 meters from the Italian flag, located 1000 meters from the coast so that the world championship would start. When I got to the boat, the thirty swimmers who were competing in the 2014 Open Water Cup started.

While I was swimming in the boat, I was approached by the boat where my mom and a man named Jorge Villegas, "Coco", one of the best coaches in Mexico, were. Coco, seeing that I had no team of companions, no trainer, no coach, and was only with my mom (who cannot swim and is afraid of deep water), offered to accompany her in the safety boat. And I really believe that God sent him to me because when the boat approached me, I felt the taste of fuel coming out of the engine and I raised my head to cough. There Coco saw that I was very moved and started to tell me jokes.

***I had no team, no coach, no sponsor, nothing;***

***I only had my mum and my enthusiasm.***

"Come on, if you drink all the water, where are you going to swim?". And so, he made me laugh and I realized that I had to enjoy this unique moment I was living, without tears of emotion, just enjoy and smile.

When the president of the Capri-Naples organizing committee, Luciano Cotena, contacted me to confirm my attendance at the event, he asked me how many rooms I needed for me and my team. I answered that I had no team, no coach, no sponsor, nothing; I only had my desire and my enthusiasm. I told him that I would only take my mom as a companion so that she could see the place and enjoy the experience with me. That's why Coco's collaboration was very important. She helped me emotionally and guided me to touch the boat with the Italian flag as quickly as possible.

Then, upon arriving at the huge boat, the world cup immediately started. The swimmers sped past me, like motorboats. I would almost say they were not swimming, but flying through the water. I think that is why they did not let me swim more kilometers, a matter of time: the champions would have reached Naples and would have had to wait a long time for me to reach the finish line.

They put me on the boat with mommy, who never stopped encouraging me as if I was a champion. Mommy, a genius. She took off a cap that she was given as a coach and waved it loudly and shouted "gooooooooo, Kari!"

Later we passed the competitors and stopped near the finish line in Naples. For me to have the honor of closing the World Cup. Minutes before the rest of the swimmers arrived, I was told I could get in the water and swim the last meters of the competition.

***There are people who say "how lucky you are"***

***but I believe that luck has to be generated.***

Among those waiting for me, there were children with spina bifida accompanied by their families. One of the girls reminded me a lot of me when I was a child. The girl was skinny and could not stand up. The father came up to me and told me that he had brought her because he wanted her to see how she will look like me when she grew up. These incredible moments, the ovation upon arrival, and the warm welcome were unforgettable.

Argentina's Pilar Geijo was crowned world open water champion for the third time. The presentation of trophies on the podium was very nice. I received a diploma and a trophy that says "Maratona del Golfo Capri Napoli, September 7, 2014. To Karina Fassi, for her strength and energy, congratulations".

There was also an attitude that I liked and made me learn a lot. In one of the competitions prior to the world championships, the Spanish champion Esther Nuñez Morera felt sick and decompensated in the middle of the race. Brazilian swimmer Samir Botelho Barel saw what had happened and immediately without hesitating left the competition to assist her. What a great gesture! His gesture was highlighted by all the swimmers and I loved his attitude.

One can be the best in the world, but the most important thing is to be a better person.

There are people who say "how lucky you are", but I believe that luck has to be generated. Others tell me "How nice that you closed a world championship: a way to close all you have achieved in swimming".

However, I am convinced that I do not close anything, on the contrary, I feel that everything begins every day. My head never stops dreaming.

The effort is not negotiable. We have to fight to get what we want, regardless of the difficulties.



- México, con Coco y Tanya luego de nadar diez kilómetros, de Cancún a Isla Mujeres.

It is not easy, or impossible.

Together with Coco and Tanya after swimming

10km from Cancún to Isla Mujeres in México.

## MEXICO. A LONG CHAIN OF FAVORS

I thought it would take me five hours to swim the 10 kilometers between Cancun and Islas Mujeres. In the end, I did it in 4 hours, 16 minutes, and 4 seconds according to the chip on my ankle.

I enjoyed every stroke and also did my best time: 2 kilometers per hour because I only use my arms. I still need to regain strength in my legs, which I am trying to do at the Fleni clinic.

Also participating in the race held on May 30, 2015, were Argentine Valeria Corinaldesi (lifeguard in Cancun), Daniela Ciccone, and Marcia Gallego.

As if that was not enough, I had the true honor of having Jorge Villegas, the best coach in Mexico, swimming next to me for 10 kilometers. I had met him at the 2014 Capri-Naples and he had promised me that he would take care of me. His wife, Tanya Salazar, from the Mexican Olympic Committee, accompanied me at the end of the race.

Sea turtles, rays, and colorful fish in the coral reefs, 26 degrees water, and temperatures between 36 and 40 degrees framed this new challenge. The scenery is incomparable.

Throughout the tour, I could appreciate the bottom of the sea. In that scenery full of life, I felt full of vitality.

At that time, I was still paying the loan that allowed me to participate in the Open Water World Championship in Italy, after being received by Pope Francis at his residence in Santa Marta. That is why it was very difficult to get to Mexico. To achieve this, many institutions and people from Bahía Blanca and Cabildo got involved. There is an anecdote that summarizes the effort of all those who collaborated so that I could travel. The garbage collectors of Cabildo surprised my mother in the street, gave her an envelope, and told her: "We all put together a little money because we want Kari to fulfill her dream".

These are things that motivate me and give me the strength to continue. Also, Julio César Cárdenas accommodated me in Mexico and my friend Natalia Bonotti surprised me by buying the round-trip tickets with her credit card. When I asked Nati why she was getting into debt knowing how hard she works and struggles to make ends meet with her little boy, she told me that she had complete confidence in me and that she wanted me to fulfill another dream.

#### I GOT STRONG BECAUSE OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES

"Every day we have the opportunity to prove to ourselves, the people we love, and the whole world what we are capable of"

#### THE "COMBO"

I call the combo the set of sequels that spina bifida left in my life. This spinal cord injury was generated during my gestation when, apparently, when a vertebra did not close in the correct way, it injured the spinal cord and imposed a series of limits on me.

In my case, I feel paralysis from the knees down. I do not have sensitivity. I can stand on a sharp glass and be unaware of it. Once, for example, I bought shoes, walked a little, and, when I took them off, I found blood in my socks but I had not noticed the pain.

Because my thin legs lack muscle mass and have thin skin, doctors have suggested taking care of myself, resting, using a wheelchair for long distances, or at least resorting to Canadian crutches to try to prolong the life of my legs.

It is possible that by not having the muscle mass that fulfills the function of cushioning my steps, with time my own bones will hurt my skin.

Another aftereffect is the trembling of my hands, sometimes stronger, sometimes softer, but constant. If I am nervous, my voice also becomes shaky.

In the "combo" are added sequelae in my bladder. I tend to be very prone to infections due to this congenital malformation. Since I was born, I have been assisted by the physician Eduardo de Lasa, also my kind of psychologist and counselor in very difficult moments. He gets me quickly and controls my evolution.

In 2004, while working in the city of Necochea, I suddenly felt very ill, with a high fever, headache, tiredness, and cold even though it was summer, due to a strong infection in my right leg caused by an injury.

***One day I bought shoes, walked around a bit, and when I took them off,  
I found blood on my socks, but I hadn't noticed the pain.***

A colleague, Alejandro Inchausti, offered to take me to the hospital, and Betiana, his wife, accompanied us. When we arrived, my right leg had increased in size, so much so that the skin was tight and began to open up. I could not walk, it felt heavy and was covered with large liquid blisters that soon burst. The doctors immediately gave me antibiotics and anticoagulants.

Eventually, I learned that these clots could have gone to my heart or brain and the consequences could have been worse.

It took me several months to recover. At work, I was asked to sign a waiver. I agreed. Without health, I could do nothing I could aspire to.

In the worst moments you know the best and the worst in people.

Five months later, when the doctors assured me that my leg was not in danger and I was discharged, the company hired me again.

No matter what happens to me, I always keep in mind my brother Pelu's wise phrase: "Nobody is going to live your life for you".

And so, I get up and move on the best way I can, treasuring each of the good moments life gives me and learning from the bad ones.

They say it's the comfort of fools, but sometimes I feel that I would be very ungrateful if I complained while there are people who have to face worse conditions.

I met a quadriplegic boy who needed help with everything. He told me that he feels that his soul and mind are like a butterfly and he can fly with his imagination.

I admire him deeply.

Sometimes I dream of the cure.

I dream that they can walk again, to move normally and I see the wheelchairs as museum pieces...

I dream that sensitivity, muscles... "electricity" will be reactivated.

When science advances further, perhaps with stem cell treatments, all these dreams will be possible.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

A while ago I met a guy who has a spinal cord injury and gets around in a wheelchair. I was very surprised because I had seen him walking. His mother told me that he had stopped training about two years ago and that he no longer went to kinesiology or swimming. He was 17 years old and did not receive support from his schoolmates. She received discriminatory and hurtful messages.

I told her that it is normal that in the society we live in, there are some people who take advantage of others as if they were those inflatable dolls that get beaten up and then get hit and stand up only to get hit again.

When I was that boy's age, the same thing happened to me. I had to prove that I was stronger than many people thought. And prove it to myself.

In high school, I suffered some difficult moments because of people who bothered me, in front of the rest of the kids with whom I got along very well.

At that age, the rest of the body grows faster than the head, changes occur and it is not easy to accommodate that. I had a hard time integrating.

"Kari, you get all the holes!" one said to me because of my wobbly walk.

"Kari, do not you have a boyfriend? Hurry up! or you will never get one.

They also made fun of me for my glasses with high magnification, for being skinny, for being short, and for the way I used to dress in loose clothes to hide my body.

My self-esteem was going down a little bit more every day. That makes the aggressors feel better because they think that by making the other person feel bad, they would feel better.

***I had to prove that I was stronger than many people thought.***

***And prove it to myself.***

The aggressor hits harder if you stand up and if you keep on without setting borders. If you do not stand up to him, he will insist and it will be worse.

Despite my trembling, I always tried to be neat and to write as clearly as possible.

One day, when I returned to the classroom after a break, I found the pages of my folder stuck together with spittle. I threw them away. I only managed to write it all down again. That attitude led to the aggressor spitting in my face.

It didn't end there. When I rode my bike to school, he would slash my tires and cut my brakes so I ended up leaving my bike at the house of a lady who lived nearby.

Soon after, in an attempt to feel a little prettier, I started wearing contact lenses. It wasn't long before I was hit hard right in the eye. The same assailant threw an apple at me during a dinner party my schoolmates had organized.

***I learned that I had to defend myself and that my brother could not always live by my side to take care of me.***

When I got home, I could not take out my lens because of the swelling and the blackness of my eye. Pelu, my brother, was furious and went to look for the hitter at his house. He did not have the courage to face him. Pelu talked to his mother and told her what was happening.

I learned that I had to defend myself and that my brother could not always live by my side to take care of me. I must be strong and fight alone for what I want and... what I do not want.

If I can, I stay away from those people. In school or at work, you either change or quit... but it is not that easy.

The truth is that I decided to keep the glass half full, because at school I met beautiful people who even today are still my great friends and friends that I love very much, such as Andrea, Natalia, Anabel, Verónica, and many others.

I have become aware that strength and greatness do not lie in physical strength, and that one can be strong with intelligence, wisdom, and experience.

## EFFORT AND PERSEVERANCE

“You are fucked up like all disabled people. This was the answer I received in one of my attempts to get a bus ticket to travel to the south”.

“Fucked up”.

I know that the law states that all people with physical disabilities can travel free of charge on buses. Of course, enforcing laws is often a complex task and one in which you have many chances of losing your mind.

Before each trip, I search for tickets in advance. I show up with all the required documentation and I have had several resounding "no's" and requests on my part for the seller to inquire at the Ente Regulador de Transportes.

In the cases where the law is complied with, most of the time they give you tickets in the least requested buses, with the most uncomfortable schedules and the longest routes. Thus, a trip that normally takes eight hours, can take you up to fourteen hours, which is very painful for someone who has a disability like being in a wheelchair.

"You are fucked up like all disabled people" ...

When I got home, I looked up the dictionary to confirm the meaning of fucked up. One meaning defines it as a person who is unwell from some cause, such as illness, discomfort, trouble, or difficulty; or who is downhearted or demoralized. Another defines it as a thing that causes annoyance, discomfort, or annoyance, or that is unpleasant.

I don't feel identified with these definitions at all.

I have a voice, I can express myself politely, and I have the strength to live each day to the fullest and without bothering anyone, but I want to get the laws enforced by all those who have no voice or strength.

***For years, I have been trying to get the law on the system of integral protection of the disabled.***

That the laws for people with disabilities are not respected, not only I say it, but also those who are specialists in law.

For years, I have personally tried to enforce Law 22431, which establishes that all companies and agencies must employ disabled people who meet the conditions of suitability for the position a proportion of no less than four percent (4%) of the totality of their staff and to establish job reserves to be filled by them.

I am convinced that disabled people can achieve almost everything, even if it costs us much more.

## THE EFFECT OF AFFECTION

I used to model clay in my little pottery workshop in Cabildo, where on weekends I enjoy the company of birds in the morning and crickets in the evenings. It is the best music I can feel.

I made myself comfortable, I was in my shorts when my youngest nephew, Valentino, two and a half years old, approached me. He started to look at my valves, he bent down and his eyes searched for mine. With his little hand he, caressed the valve, a kind of orthopedic boot that covers from the knee up to and including the foot. They are like the "bones" of the legs. If I don't have the valve, I can't walk, because I trip over my own feet. It took me a while to find the words to explain to him what I saw differently about my legs.

-You see! They're the little shoes that aunt wears...

-They're cute," she replied in a voice that was as sweet as it was touching.



Together  
friends:  
Bonotti  
Andrea Scoppa in a cycle car

with my  
Natalia  
and

-My love. So small and so tender. So wise, so beautiful... Life is beautiful for you and it should be beautiful for all the little children in the world.

I learn so much from my nephews. They are respectful, and sensitive and surprise me with their attitudes.

I admire my brothers and sisters-in-law, who are like sisters. sisters. They always show me that they are present.

When I told Viviana that I wanted to swim in open water and that I needed a wetsuit the next day I got her message. "You already have your mermaid suit". That's the wetsuit I use, purple and black with flowers. It's the first thing I put in my backpack before every trip.

I always remember my first challenge in La Salada lagoon. I would stick my head out to breathe and see my brother Pelu accompanying me in his kayak, as excited as when we

went to the Universidad Nacional del Sur for the first time and he helped me cross Alem Avenue and take the bus.

***I always felt unconditional encouragement, and the freedom to do everything that makes me happy.***

***I feel it every time I pack my backpack.***

I will never forget how hard it was to swim the four kilometers of the Black River challenge. I was celebrating on the shore with other participants but I couldn't find my brother Walter. After a while, I saw him crying in the trees.

The only person who has not been part of these adventures in my life is my dad, Carlos José. He could not accept or understand me and when I left Cabildo he made me feel very afraid of failure.

Today, far from my past, I believe that everyone thinks and does what they can and how they can. I insist. I prefer to stay away from people who hurt me and live without hurting.

The one who supported me the most, and at the same time gave me the freedom to choose my path toward the pursuit of happiness, was always mommy. She says her greatest learning experience was a day at the Bahia Blanca Rehabilitation Institute for the Crippled.



Together  
swimmers  
the first  
the sea, in Mar del Plata.

with  
going out of  
challenge in

Two girls, Marita and Heidi, were helping me with some exercises. I was walking with great difficulty. I was wearing orthopedic boots with little irons on the sides of my legs to support me and suddenly the little ball I was playing with slipped out of my hands. Mommy ran out to get it. One of the girls asked her not to do it, that I should do it myself. She told her that the little ball represented my happiness, that it could accompany me and help me stand up

if I fell, but that I had to make the greatest effort. So, they threw it again. When I managed to pick it up, the smile on my face was huge and I learned that the ultimate satisfaction was to achieve things on my own.

I have always felt my mother's unconditional encouragement, and the freedom to do whatever makes me happy. I remember all that every time I pack my backpack.

***I learned that the ultimate satisfaction  
was to get things on my own.***

From that beginning in La Salada lagoon to the Aluminé, El Chocón, Lácar, Correntoso, Espejo, Nahuel Huapi, Gutiérrez lakes, Negro, Colorado, and Quequén rivers; from the Mediterranean at Capri Island to Naples and the Caribbean in Mexico, I feel that I embrace life in every stroke.



Adapted surf in Miramar.

#### APPRECIATING AND LEARNING

Every time I go swimming in the Colorado River, I am welcome with great warmth at the Foundation for Integration and Sports (fuinde). I am hosted by the great family of Sandra and Paulo Fabián Villagra and their daughters, who make me feel at home. When we swim, we are accompanied in kayaks by members of fuinde and children with disabilities.

On January 27, 2016, on the beaches of Miramar, I was able to participate in the country's first clinic on adapted surfing organized by the Integrar Surf group, where I was able to share my experiences. The president of that entity, Martín Passeri -five times Argentinean surfing champion- wanted to generate this factory of smiles together with a nice team of surfers, lifeguards, and collaborators, among them Nicolás Gallegos, a young man who moves around in a wheelchair.

Beyond the joy of enjoying the game and the dance of the waves, I corroborated that no matter what happens you can enjoy and be happy. It is enough to see those photos in Miramar to understand it. The world needs these things that make the disabled come out of their pain and see that they can be happy. We can all help to achieve this.

At the end of the day, waiting for me on the beach was my lifelong friend, Andrea Scoppa, and her children were waiting for me on the beach. Also, Natalia Bonotti and her little son Ivo. I was with all the adrenaline of surfing for the first time, of meeting very humble and kind-hearted people. Suddenly I remembered when I had been operated on at the Fleni clinic in Buenos Aires. The next day, on September 26, 2008, I received a phone call from these two friends. They asked me how I was. I told them I was fine. Suddenly I felt a knock on the door: when it opened, they appeared.

***In spite of physical distances or different paths, genuine affection endures over time and makes us feel complete.***

Friends are the family I have chosen. Despite physical distances or different paths, genuine affection endures over time and makes us feel complete. Of the good people I treasure beautiful memories, of those who have not been able to be, I keep learning. Many times, I feel that words are insufficient.

I have so much to thank that the pages of this book would not be enough to name all those who help me to be happy.

I WANT, I CAN AND I DESERVE IT

In an ideal world, it should be normal and common for people to show solidarity. But unfortunately, this is not the case.

There are those who think that the laws that protect the disabled are perks for abuse and that in the end the disabled benefit from exceptions that others cannot access. Even some social insurance companies, when the coverage is very onerous, try to evade benefits, replace them, or delay them until the intervention of the justice system. The same happens with the law on free tickets for the disabled. If they fulfill it, some companies, having the possibility of providing a more comfortable trip, in vehicles with direct routes, give them the cheapest tickets and, therefore, with the longest routes, those that enter all the towns,

with more stops, without thinking that for people with disabilities this is a real odyssey, having to endure a long trip with difficult trips to the bathroom and other inconveniences.

***The option of giving up is present every day.***

***The option to move forward, too.***

Why do we have to fight so hard and litigate to receive the benefits acquired by already established laws?

The social labor and sports inclusion of people with disabilities should generate companionship, respect, and mutual help. Integration helps us to learn from each other, allows us to balance differences, and value the effort to reach the same or better results, but do the work differently. All this requires openness, growth, and a real interest in achieving integration.

Throughout my professional life, I suffered many episodes of mistreatment, contempt, mockery, and discrimination, but I learned that even though everything is very difficult, I must keep smiling no matter what happens, and fight to preserve the dreams that motivate me to live.



My family

at the

University Ceremony

I learned to be happy with little things. I learned that effort is not negotiable. I learned to always tell the truth looking for a way not to hurt anyone, although sometimes, if you are very sincere, you become "... fucked up, like all disabled people". That is why it is better to tell the good things, the bad things make people isolate you, because "they are not to

blame" or because "they can't do anything to help you". The option to give up is present every day. The option to move on, too. And that's the one I'm sticking with.

I could have chosen to ask for a miserable disability pension, but I always choose the more difficult path, because, in the long run, it is the one that gives me the most satisfaction.

I could have chosen to stay in Cabildo but I came to study in Bahía Blanca.

I could have chosen to abandon my career when a final exam did not go the way I thought it would.

I could have chosen not to go to Buenos Aires to look for better doctors.

I could have ignored and not done the rehabilitation because it is exhausting and slow.

I could not go to the pool when I was too embarrassed to show my skinny, ugly legs.

I was able to because I want to and I can. Because I feel I deserve to live in the best way possible and because how my story continues depends on me.

COME ON, WE CAN DO IT!

I did not choose to be born with spina bifida, but I was able to find the inner strength to get through it. I did not give up and I was attentive to the different alternatives that life offers to be happy.

It was not easy.

It is necessary to leave the painful memories in the past and not to look back, to continue with my eyes set on the future, and to occupy my mind with solutions.

Getting depressed, anguished, and worried is the easiest thing to do. I prefer to fight, face my actions responsibly, and take charge of the consequences.

I am the owner of a deep inner peace. I have never done anything to harm.

And we are going for more.

And I say we are going because I have family and friends who encourage me to keep improving myself day by day. I thank life for the people it has put in my path.

***In these pages, I have tried to convey a message of hope,  
certain that whatever happens to us in life, we can try to be well.***

In these pages, I have tried to convey a message of hope, convinced that whatever happens to us in life could be overcome.

I wanted to share what I feel in my soul: a force like lava from the volcano that helped to heal my body. Sometimes I say that my life is like a train that I set in motion, and that it has wagons that are difficult to carry because they are off the track, because the tracks are broken or because someone put stones or sticks in the way. The important thing is not to stop. Do not give up.

Every day we have the opportunity to show ourselves, the people who love us, and the whole world what we are capable of.

Let's go!

We can do it!

Let's not waste time. It is a question of desire, of being able to wish.

Setting goals, objectives, and projects. I always want them and then I have to work in order to achieve them. And I go towards them enthusiastically, meanwhile, I enjoy the way.

On my journey through Machu Picchu I felt the pleasure of every meter I moved on. Each obstacle helped me to learn, to stop, to rest, to think, to recover my energy, and then to go on.

That is what my life is all about, a life that I live convinced that will is power.