THE ROBIN HOOD FOUNDATION: MEDIEVAL SOLUTIONS TO POVERTY

8 Indulgences in Luxury

DINA MATOS McGREEEVEY: ON LIFE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

No thought of failure
Leeza Gibbons is ready for any challenge
The lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein II’s song “A Cockeyed Optimist” could have been written about Leeza Gibbons, one of television’s most recognizable faces. At the end of the day, she always comes back to faith, hope, and a very strong belief in herself.

BY RACHEL MANSKEY
She credits her parents with giving her the support and solid foundation she's now passing on to her three children. "As a young girl, my mother's advice was always golden," says Gibbons. "She loved me enough to let me fail, and that's where we really grow." Proof positive of that advice came when Gibbons joined the cast of Dancing with the Stars. Despite the fact that she was a TV veteran, she was suddenly a stranger in a strange land. "It was an incredible opportunity to stretch and grow way outside my comfort zone," she reveals. What was important to Gibbons was that her children witnessed her ability to forge ahead even when the judges gave her low marks. They learned that it was not about winning, but rather about showing up, trying, learning, and being open. Gibbons jokes, "I'd love to say that I learned the difference between the foxtrot, the mambo, and the pasodoble, but anybody who saw the show could tell you that I have no clue!"

Perseverance is evident in every facet of Gibbons' life. Her years at Entertainment Tonight were "transformational." Close-up and on a personal level, she witnessed the humanity in "celebrity"; she came to understand that people, no matter how rich or famous, are more alike than they are different. Grabbing sound bites also forced her to think on her feet—according to Gibbons, "to be tougher than I thought I could be." Entertainment Tonight provided incredible access to a world and a lifestyle that she had only dreamed about while growing up in Irmo, South Carolina.

The small-town Southern girl relishes the strong sense of community she enjoyed as a child. She explains, "We rode bikes every afternoon, hung out at each other's houses, and waited for mom to yell, 'Dinner!'" Children were under the watchful eyes of every neighbor. She tries to instill the same sort of moral code in her own kids. "I hope I'm passing on a sense of giving back and the belief that thoughts do become things, and that you can play a part in changing the world just by changing who you are in it," says Gibbons.

Along with her brother and sister, Gibbons created the Leeza Gibbons Memory Foundation in honor of their mother who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. The foundation addresses the needs of families who are in a health crisis. Co-founder and Executive Director Dr. Jamie Huysman knew Gibbons could, and should, use her family's experiences to educate and empower others. Gibbons explains, "It's what my mom asked me to do when she was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's, shortly before she buried her own mother, who battled the same disease. She told me to tell her story and make it count."
Regarding her mother’s Alzheimer’s—
“My mother told me to tell her story and make it count.”
There's a lot of misplaced shame and a stigma surrounding memory disorders. The Memory Foundation's mission is to help families connect the dots in their own neighborhoods so that they can find the resources and services that will help them gather strength for their difficult 'caregiving' journey. Gibbons, her family, and the Foundation not only work with other Alzheimer's nonprofits but with numerous charities, social-service agencies, faith-based groups, and community resources that are on the front lines when it comes to this ever-growing thief of memories.

Even with a successful career, Gibbons is always looking for new mountains to climb—literally and figuratively. In addition to her television work, she's an entrepreneur with her own beauty company, Sheer Cover. "None of us has perfect skin, and we all have little insecurities about the way we look," she admits. Sheer Cover is a mineral makeup that helps women be themselves with a little extra support. Gibbons is very hands-on, from approving new products to corresponding with customers about their ideas and concerns. She's incredibly proud of Sheer Cover's success and adds, "Yes, I do wear Sheer Cover every day!"

The Great Wall of China is not a mountain, but Gibbons did join Olivia Newton-John and her international team of trekkers, scaling the landmark to raise money and awareness for Newton-John's Cancer and Wellness Center in Melbourne, Australia. Even though the experience was physically exhausting, it was spiritually rewarding. Gibbons recalls, "I was amazed at the open spirits and endless hopefulness of the cancer survivors who were walking with us."

Gibbons is a full-fledged member of the technology revolution. "We're always giving something away at LeezaGibbons.com," she says. It's the easiest way to stay connected to the people and companies that support the Memory Foundation, find out the latest on Sheer Cover, and exchange emails. Soon Gibbons also plans to launch a 24-hour Leeza Internet radio channel.

It may seem like Gibbons is highly disciplined—which she is—but like all of us, she has her little indulgences. Anything chocolatey or cheesy has her name all over it. And a frozen Snickers bar is, according to her, "pretty darned close to heaven!"

Life moves at a breakneck speed, and Leeza Gibbons is going the distance, just like the steps the 'cockeyed optimist' took with the cancer survivors on the Great Wall. Even with all her hard work, Gibbons' philosophy is simple: "I believe that the secret to life is showing up, doing the best you can, then letting go."
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