Leeza Gibbons Finds Her Place

by Tim Saunders, Feature Editor from Looktothestars.org

Through a 25-year television career including Entertainment Tonight and her own talk show, Leeza Gibbons has become a household name, while highlighting her intelligence, sensitivity and compassion.

The presenter, producer and businesswoman exudes positivity—she celebrated her 50th birthday while performing on ABC’s Dancing With The Stars. She launched her Fearless campaign to motivate women to live fearlessly at any age, developed a life coaching business, and recently took part in Olivia Newton-John’s Great Walk To Beijing to raise money for cancer treatment.

In 2003, Leeza Gibbons left her high-profile television career to form the Leeza Gibbons Memory Foundation—an endeavor she dedicated to her mother, who had recently been diagnosed with a debilitating memory disorder.

“I promised my mother I would take her diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease and use it to educate and inspire,” she said. “We’re doing that through Leeza’s Place; intimate settings in cities across the country where the newly diagnosed with any memory disorder and their caregivers can get education, empowerment, and energy free of charge as they prepare for the journey ahead.”

Leeza’s Place sounds interesting and helpful. What does it offer caregivers and those who suffer from memory disorders?

We offer a way for families to get connected, get coached, and get confident about their new reality.
after diagnosis. It’s not just memory disorders (even though that was our portal into the non-profit world). We have found that the challenges of caregiving is universal. Our approach is to take away the clinical setting and the fear and put together a team of support and create a strategy for coping. Our goal is to replace the feeling of helplessness with hopefulness and empowerment. Our programs are really popular, with everything from support groups to scrap-booking, to exercise, to Reiki to drum circles…but where we really succeed is in creating a sense of family and safety.

You were inspired by your mother to start the Leeza Gibbons Memory Foundation, but what inspired you to incorporate care for caregivers as well?

Whenever there is a diagnosis within a family, the disease or condition doesn’t affect just the individual with the health crisis, it creates a crisis for the entire family and loved ones. Many times caregivers decline at a rate faster than the diagnosed individual…often suffering from a myriad of stress related conditions that affect their own health and their ability to offer care. We have found that the better we can care for the caregivers, the better the outcomes are for those with the disease and the more likely it is we can help prevent families from unraveling…spiritually, emotionally and financially. We believe that no one should be left behind and no caregiver should ever feel alone.

Why is it important for caregivers to reach out and get help?

Everyone feels isolated and almost paralyzed by fear when a health crisis breaks into the domestic bliss of a family. Depression is a common by-product of caregivers and those diagnosed. Reaching out, getting support, and getting coached makes life better for everyone.

Do you have a message for those caring or dealing with loved ones living with a memory disorder?

This is not a disease that is going to wait for you to be ready. My message is to be flexible and forgiving…both of yourself and your loved one. Some days you will get those “kisses from the angels” and some days you will wonder if you can do anything right. It’s important to realize that while you are in an intimate relationship, you can’t take the behaviors of your loved one personally. I remember when my mom told me, “When I kick and scream and call you names, know that is the disease talking and not me.” It was so helpful to recall as she progressed through the disease. Mom saw her own mother disappear behind the veil of Alzheimer’s disease. She knew where she was heading and what her fate would be. She has shown amazing courage and grace.

Where did you find the courage to step away from the world of TV and work to help others? Do you have any advice for others who want to help, but find it hard to start?

I have always found that the happiest people in the world are those who have found something bigger than themselves to place their energy and enthusiasm. Destiny? Sense of purpose? I’m not sure about any of that, but what I do know is the stronger your connections to other people, the deeper your sense of contentment. It’s my way of living fearlessly because I am around such profound examples of courage.

What have you gained as a person from your work with Leeza’s Place?

It would be impossible to explain how deeply I feel about our work at Leeza’s Place. To know that we are of service is a great gift. To see the communities we have helped facilitate is a blessing. To know that my family’s legacy has found such fertile soil is deeply humbling. Every time I see the relief on the faces of families who find their way to us and hear the sighs of understanding, I know I am exactly where I am supposed to be. My co-founder, Dr. Jamie Huysman, is also our executive director and the greatest friend a person could ever have. Jamie has taught me to believe in listening to the universe and having faith. He helps me everyday step forward in my purpose and passion with the quiet confidence of knowing that I will find or be shown a way to make a difference.

To learn more about the Leeza Gibbons Memory Foundation and Leeza’s Place, visit www.leezagibbons.com and www.leezasplace.org