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exclusive interview

Leeza Gibbons
FEARLESS AND FIT AT 50

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FEARLESS at 50

To TV personality and Alzheimer's advocate Leeza Gibbons, age is just a number.

Hollywood's not kind to the maturing woman. Nobody knows this more than Leeza Gibbons. In her decades of interviewing entertainment celebrities, she must have witnessed countless beautiful starlets who were later pushed aside at the first sign of a sag or wrinkle.

This all-too-common age bias is what makes her turn on "Dancing With the Stars" last year so refreshing and brave. Within days of hitting the big 5-0, the perpetually active media maven chose "not to sit out but to dance"—even if it meant exposing her middle-age milestone to millions of armchair critics.

"My friends called me and said, 'Are you out of your mind? Who announces their 50th birthday, especially on national television?'" recalls the amiable TV and radio host turned entrepreneur and caregiving advocate, who became the reality hit's then-oldest female competitor. "And I went, 'Well, you know, I think that's one thing that's wrong with our culture.'"

And so, as she often does, the former "Entertainment Tonight," "Extra" and daytime talk-show host bared her soul—and her still-taut midriff—to help change an outmoded social stigma. She also faced what she feared most: donning semi-scanty costumes while hoofing her half-century-old heart out on live TV.

"I did want to be fearless at 50," Gibbons says. "And I think we teach the thing that we need to learn. I figured, 'If I need to find peace with and celebrate my forward march through time and space, then I need co-conspirators.' So I decided I'd elicit the support of everyone watching.' Her message: Give everyone permission to decide what it looks like to be 30, 40, 50...you get to decide whether you want to express yourself at any point in your chronological advancement.

And express she did—even in a leather miniskirt and halter-top. But after four weeks of fox-trotting and other rug-cutting, Gibbons was voted out. Even in defeat, though, the gal who's jumped out of planes, wrestled alligators, raced cars, hang-glided and interviewed Hollywood's hottest stars crossed a threshold. "This was my most vulnerable, and yet a really powerful experience for my family to be supportive and see me take my lumps and get knocked down and get back up. And I discovered the answers to lifelong questions that many women out there have: Am I enough? Am I pretty enough? Am I strong enough? Am I brave enough? Am I skinny enough? Am I talented enough? All of these things that we ask ourselves at various intervals. And it truly taught me that, yes, I am enough," she says.

"I had to laugh about it because I'm standing there hearing from these judges how I'm not enough. The judges don't vote for me, America doesn't vote for me, but I leave the show going, 'What a great test in realizing that despite all of that and regardless, I'm enough. It was very cool. I realized how much I could take and how much I had to give.'"

BY CHRIS MANN
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Dancing for a Greater Good

Giving and living actively comes naturally to this devoted mom of three and daughter of a once-robust woman whom friends called “Jean, Jean, the Dancing Machine.”

“My mom had no training as a dancer, but she always wanted to dance and one day decided to take belly dance lessons. You’d think she was part of a big harem, she was so into it,” recalls a chuckling Gibbons, who shares her 72-year-old mother’s birthday and danced in tribute to her spirit and strength.

Sadly, Jean Gibbons is likely unaware her courageous offspring mimicked in mom’s honor. Now in hospice care and unable to walk or speak for years, Jean was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in 1999. Three years later, Gibbons left her high-profile hosting gig to start the nonprofit Leeza Gibbons Memory Foundation and open Leeza’s Place, which offers “an oasis of support, nurturing and comfort” to the newly diagnosed and caregivers for those with memory-loss disorders and other chronic diseases. Now with eight locations nationally, Gibbons hopes one day “to have one in every county in every state,” she says.

“My mother made me promise that I would tell her story and make it count. And so I’ve kept that promise by opening up Leeza’s Place and using my mother’s story to educate and inspire, which is really what she wanted most,” Gibbons says. “We looked at my mother’s courage. She came from a small town in South Carolina, where there’s still a lot of stigma around memory loss, and a lot of misplaced shame. And my mother wanted to shed some light on it. She wanted to let people know that they’re not alone. Memory loss has got to be the most fearful journey anybody can take — it’s death in slow motion. Our job is really to say to the newly diagnosed and caregivers alike, ‘You’re not alone. We’ve put together a team of people, and one day at a time we’re going to help you breathe, and we’re gonna get you through it.’”

Gibbons and her team of professional life coaches give what she calls “family first responders” a community of companionship that helps caregivers take care of themselves as well. “These caregivers never give themselves permission to celebrate. And so it was lovely that after ‘Dancing With the Stars,’ we were able to do a program called I’m Dancing as Fast as I Can.” And it was all a great example to say, ‘Your family members may all be holding up 7’s and judging you and saying you’re not good enough. And you go through your life and you’re dancing your Waltz and you know the steps — 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3 — and then without notice, suddenly your music changes. Because your husband got sick or your wife has a disease or your child has diabetes — whatever it is, suddenly your music changes. And then you’re stumbling through.’”

Gibbons says her transformative reality experience served as a template for her philanthropy. “The huge lesson for us,” she says, “is that you have to be the one to bring yourself to the dance first. And when you forget your music, or when your music changes, there’s a support center out there that will sing it back to you. That’s what a real friend is — someone who, when you forget your
music, will sing it back to you, will sing back the music of your life. Leeza’s Place is all about possibilities and getting back your personal power. It’s all about honoring memories and lasting legacies."

Dancing is more than just a healthy metaphor in the fight against chronic disease. Research shows that exercise not only treats but also helps prevent the progression of Alzheimer’s and other memory disorders. "If it’s good for the heart, it’s good for the brain,” Gibbons says. "And exercise is at the top of the list of how we should be gifting ourselves with the best possible defense against disease. Clearly, eliminating stress and reducing inflammation are two of the most important proactive steps you can ever take for Alzheimer’s disease and a myriad of others. So exercise is the best weapon that we have in stress reduction and oxygenating the brain. And learning new things does help maintain our brain and keep those neurons firing."

Bringing awareness to her mother’s story on “Dancing” gave viewers a hopeful new outlook on a disease that has left many feeling paralyzed. “We know that ballroom dancing, of all forms of exercise, has been shown to be the most effective at building a defense against memory loss,” Gibbons adds. "And they think it’s because of the socialization aspect, because of the physical contact with another person and because of the complexity of the steps. Isn’t that cool?"

**Transformational Energy**

In sharing her mother’s journey, Gibbons took important steps in finding her own empowering new pathways. Starting her foundation “was also a shield for me,” she says. “It was a way to get busy
Clockwise from top: Leeza with daughter, Lexi, and sons Troy and Nathan; bringing the good news through the airwaves; hosting a Lifetime production; showing off her moves on "Dancing with the Stars."

and try not to stay in that victim energy. So, selfishly, that was very helpful for me. I knew that I couldn’t continue on my career path and pace, and also create something that had far greater purpose for me personally.”

Her interest in health and helping has opened new doors for the self-described “social entrepreneur.” Last December, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Gibbons as an Alzheimer’s advocate to the Independent Citizens Oversight Committee, which oversees the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine, the state’s stem-cell research agency. In this layperson capacity, she’ll help oversee grant applications and be a voice for her cause. “It’s a tremendous opportunity to effect change and influence the future,” she says.

Gibbons also hosts the syndicated weekly radio show “Hollywood Confidential” (for which she interviews celebs ranging from Barbara Streisand to Brad Pitt) as well as the Sunday-morning Lifetime TV series “Health Corner.”
stepping up to fitness

Leeza Gibbons' daily workouts need to be both compact and effective to fit into her busy schedule. And it helps that she's made her fitness activities a matter of habit.

"I have particular things that I do that have become routine for me," she says. "In the morning, right after I brush my teeth, I do my arm bands. I get my reps in for my arms without fail because I have my arm bands hanging right there on the bathroom door. Throughout the day, by my phone I have my free weights, my 3-pound dumbbells. When I'm on the phone, I'll be doing those. I put reminders of fitness in my path, so I definitely get my workout."

Also, she confides, "I'm a freak for exercise gear. I have a Pilates ring and I put it in the kitchen so if I'm chopping vegetables - and I know this sounds sick - I can be exercising my thighs. That's awesome. And I just got the Red Exerciser, that swivel chair, and I put that in my bedroom. So right before I go to bed, I feel like, Wow, I'm really doing something."

And when she has an uninterrupted half-hour or more, she takes full advantage of her home gym. "I have everything - a treadmill, an elliptical, Pilates Performer, a Spinning bike, a punching bag. So it's easy for me to find time in my day because it's very convenient. And it works out great. But my favorite thing to do - and I think it's a good example for my kids because they really do what they see their parents doing - is hiking. I've found that it really grounds me; it's more of a spiritual retreat."

These physical boosts give Gibbons a psychological and soulful lift over life's obstacles and challenges. "When we change our physical states, our emotional states get stronger," she says. And in fearless words that would no doubt make her mother's spirit dance, Gibbons promises to keep putting her energy to good use.

"Women are the change agents of the world," she observes. "I always talk about mothers and shakers, and women really being the people who get it done. So I love working with women, especially moms, because I understand what that's all about. And the power of momentum in anything can't be overstated. Once you begin a process, once the first step happens, you can just run. And I love seeing that because it never fails."

another outgrowth of her care-giving cause. Additionally, her award-winning and star-studded infomercials for her mineral-based makeup line, Sheer Cover, make her a trusted face of natural health and beauty for both day and night.

But her desire to inspire goes well beyond skin-deep. Sheer Inspiration, another Gibbons venture, is a Web-based life-coaching business that "really reflects my life-mission statement of adding value to the lives of women and their families. The idea is that we have three Web coaches from coast to coast, and you connect with your coach personally via e-mail and phone, so you're getting specific answers to your questions the moment they arise."

So where does she find the energy - let alone the time - to balance her projects with raising daughter Lexi, 18, and sons Troy and Nathan, 15 and 9 respectively, all of whom help with foundation fundraisers and have their own service-oriented causes? "My kids are actually more likely to be coaching me than vice versa," Gibbons says with a laugh. "But I've always had an entrepreneurial spirit and a high tolerance for multiple spinning plates. I used to kind of fight that. But somewhere along the line I realized that that's my gift and my joy. So I've always loved business. I love 'the deal' - I think deals are very seductive. Because what you're really talking about is a promise. You're talking about expectations and possibilities and promises, and that's transformational energy. At the core of everything I do is that transformational energy - really speaking to this whole notion that you can have custody of your life, and you can co-create your reality."

In fact, Promise, the maker of heart-healthy butter spreads, liked her message so much that they joined forces with the Leezia brand in their recent Heart Coach Program.

"The Promise people called me and said, 'We really like what you say about keeping a promise to yourself.' They built a coaching platform with this nutritional coach, fitness coach and me. We're giving information online, but we're also personally involved with four contest winners who are getting us in their faces and in their ears all the time. It's making changes to their body, changes to their cholesterol, more heart health and more stress-free living."

One of Gibbons' favorite life coach tips: Own your own life. "And I always think owning your life means you have to reinvent it constantly. If you're not fluid, you're going to tend to be rigid in the current of life. You have to stretch and bend, or you will break."

"If it's good for the heart, it's good for the brain," Gibbons says. "And exercise is at the top of the list of how we should be gifting ourselves with the best possible defense against disease."

Chris Mann is a writer and art director based in Santa Barbara, Calif.