



# Courage to Continue

*Steps for Boldly Surmounting  
Life's Adversities*

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## Dedication

I dedicate this book to my big brother, Ray. Despite being only two years older than me, I have always seen him as a much more mature person. He inspires many of my best decisions, from the coats we wore as children to the careers we pursued as adults. He is the shoulder on which I lean, my guardian angel, and my mentor, and I owe a great deal of my perseverance to him. Countless times he has given me the strength to endure the most difficult moments in my life. Ray has encountered the vicissitudes life throws at you in his own experiences, and witnessing his resilience has empowered me to remain strong and bolstered my ability to overcome my own challenges.



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## Foreword

*by Ray Hernandez*

This book is the story of Ivan's life in his own words—his tribulations and his way of succeeding despite the trials. As Ivan's brother, I have had the privilege of witnessing his life as a journey through struggles and triumphs.

Ivan's story began thirty-nine years ago. We were born two years apart in the 1970s to a young Puerto Rican couple living in the South Bronx. Like many other kids coming up in the Bronx at that time, our family had limited resources. We were disenfranchised and exposed to violence, trauma, and painful domestic issues. Our lives progressed in a wayward motion, and for years we were unaware of what direction we would take. This was our status quo. We embraced the unpredictable nature of life by understanding that good times were measured by having our basic needs met for prolonged periods.

Most times, all Ivan and I had was each other. One of my earliest memories of Ivan

took place when he was three years old. Even as a toddler, Ivan had an innate ability to see the world for what it was and how it could be made better. I can clearly remember Ivan being engrossed in playing with our action hero dolls. We had a collection of twelve-inch figurines that included Superman, Batman and Robin, Shazam, and Spiderman. We played with them for countless hours. On this particular day, one of Ivan's favorite doll's legs was pulled out of its socket. The toy was beyond repair. At least that's what I thought. Ivan, even at such an early age, took that doll with its amputated leg and taped the appendage to its body. Just like that, he restored its function. Ivan saved the superhero and went back to playing without another word.

That story is telling of Ivan's way of approaching dysfunction and integrating simple practical measures to restore, enhance, and promote well-being. No challenge has ever been too great for Ivan to surmount, despite the perils, dilemmas, tragedies, and catastrophic events he's encountered. Ivan has demonstrated throughout his life that through hard work, compassion, and integrity, one can find success, healing, and achievement.

My brother has always been a proponent of balance between the mind, body, and spirit. Ivan understands that these three principles are equally essential in building, restoring, and promoting health and well-being. Although Ivan has succeeded at triumphing in his own battles, he has demonstrated that the good life is not won and sustained on a single front. He believes that through continuous mindful and altruistic living, and through his desire to restore hope, health, and happiness to all those he encounters, he will find the balance and fulfillment toward which he strives.

Ivan loves to live and lives to love. He accepts his fate knowing that the powers of spirituality are connected to his mind and body. These three components are in sync within him, and because of that he owns his destiny. He believes that at every moment in time, he is exactly where he is supposed be.

It never surprises me that people often are in awe of Ivan when they meet him for the first time. He is as beautiful on the inside as he is on the outside—the complete package. As a scholar and a physician, he is devoted to educating future physical therapists and instilling in all his students a desire to always learn

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more about the principles of health and well-being. He is a father committed to the welfare of his two young boys, and he strives daily to impart to them his kindness, compassion, and philosophy of life, love, and happiness.

## Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I began this book without sharing the driving force behind my resilience on this life journey — my two beautiful, intelligent, and caring boys, Ivan Jr. and Henry. They inspire me to go on even when I'm at rock bottom. If it were not for them, you would not be reading this book. Without them in my life, the climb out of the mental abyss that pulled me into its depths would have seemed insurmountable. They have kept me focused, busy, and full of laughter since they were born. They are my rocks, and I love them dearly.

My brother Ray, my guardian angel, has always brought clarity to my life, even during the cloudiest of times. He made sense of chaos and always assured me that even the worst wounds eventually heal. I will never forget his words: "You will develop a scar and will forever remember what caused it, but it will no longer hurt you the way it once did." He taught me that even vicissitudes have a purpose. He motivated me and emboldened me, and when I could not stand, he offered himself as my

crutch. I will forever be indebted to the grace that he has laid upon my life. Ray helped me realize that even during the darkest of hours, there was something much larger at work, even if I could not see it at the time. He inspires me to fulfill every last inch of my potential.

My mother has always epitomized love and care in my eyes. As the mother of two young boys growing up in the sometimes rough world of the Bronx, she taught me the value of hard work and embodied endurance and mental toughness. She cared for Ray and me while working full-time and volunteering in the community, driven by her singular desire to create a good life and a promising future for her two sons. When I look back, I see the impression her unconditional love and perseverance made on me, even at a young age. Her example guides me now that I am a parent myself and understand what it is to want the world for my own two sons. Her comforting ways enabled me to stay strong throughout my life, especially during the journey I share in this book. I am the person I am today because of my mother's love, devotion, and inspirational character.

On paper, Cecilia Clement is my office manager. But she has really been a second

mother to me. While proficient as a bookkeeper and adept with managing multiple business egos, her best qualities are bringing people together and offering a firm and reassuring presence. When I think about her impact on my life and the many uplifting words that she has shared with me, nothing has resonated more than “Calm heads will always prevail.” She has provided perspective and optimism as I weathered personal storms, and I will forever be indebted to her.

Many other people have played instrumental roles in guiding me out of the depths of adversity. From close friends to professional colleagues and team members, you know who you are and that you have become part of my family and my journey. I thank all of you, and I am eternally grateful for your tireless work on my behalf.

Last but certainly not least, I would be downright neglectful if I did not mention the person who made me face my fears for all the world to see, the person who saw something in me and promised to stand by my side as I worked toward the greatness she envisioned for me. She is meticulous, earnest, optimistic, caring, funny, and an all-around terrific person. In the past, I would have said that I met



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her coincidentally. I was in the market for an entertainment agent such as herself when she became a patient in my office. But I believe it was divine intervention that caused our paths to cross. For all she has done in my life, I vehemently exclaim my gratitude to Dr. Sylecia Thompson. Thank you for believing in me. I look forward to all our future prospects in the entertainment world.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

*"Optimal wellness is more than skin deep because what you see is not always what you are."*

– Dr. Ivan Hernandez

I still remember exiting the ambulance on a gurney, clutching my chest in utter shock. I glimpsed my brother Ray making his way toward me as the medic rushed me through the doors of the ER. Ray was always there for me when I needed him the most. He's been my guardian angel throughout my life. Here he was again, his face full of concern, his body language suggesting that this was much more than the indigestion we had originally suspected. I had been sure the discomfort hardly merited attention until a cardiologist in the ER decided to do an echocardiogram. The test had immediately suggested a larger issue with my heart. There on the screen was the proof — part of my heart was damaged. The ER doctor

turned to me and said, “You’re having a heart attack.”

It was all so surreal, and everything happened so quickly. I had barely registered the doctor’s words before I was forced to make a fast decision: Did I want to be transferred to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City or stay locally at Lawrence Hospital in Bronxville, New York, to be treated? My thoughts ran wild. I wasn’t prepared to have a heart attack. In fact, I woke up that morning anticipating a physically active day. What had gone wrong? How was this possible? I was young, active, and healthy. I ate well and exercised. To the outside observer, I was in top physical condition. However, I was also experiencing a great deal of stress, both personally and professionally. At first it rained, and then it poured, and now here I was lying on a gurney. The roof had collapsed and water had begun to flood the building.

*Can it get any worse?* I wondered. In a matter of months, I had been bombarded with problems that spiraled out of my control. In college, I studied psychology, and Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs concept always resonated with me. The basic premise is that to reach our full potential, we first must meet

our basic needs. Things like sleep, a healthy diet, and love are critical to our survival. I followed this theory in all areas of my life because I knew that if I didn't take care of myself, it would be only a matter of time before my body succumbed to stress. To my mind, I did everything right. I practiced daily intermittent fasting, followed a modified Bulletproof diet, and incorporated a variety of lifting exercises in my workout regimen. Despite all of those efforts, my body succumbed anyway. I realized in the aftermath of my heart attack that I had neglected one of Maslow's most important needs — love.

My heart attack produced a pain I had never before experienced. It was deep and it was real. My body had been stricken with disease, but I didn't notice until it was almost too late because my emotional health was in even worse condition. A billow of dark clouds had settled over me when I woke the morning of my heart attack, and an indescribable solemnness settled in my soul. Years of suppressed pain exploded into this catastrophic event, sending me teetering on the edge between life and death. My ego had prevented me from registering the emotional pain I had experienced in early adulthood, and I pushed it deep down

inside myself, thinking I could will it away. In the years immediately prior to my heart attack, I had become a walking zombie, going through the motions as a shell of my former self. On the surface, I lived an ideal existence. In reality, I wore a veil that concealed all that I wished to hide from the world.

### **The Day Before**

I sat in my office dutifully typing my clinical notes, fatigued from a full day of seeing patients. It had been a busy but unremarkable day. No difficult patients, no conflicts, and no personal issues were bringing me down—at least no more than usual. Life had become challenging in recent months, but focusing on patients had given me a reprieve from my personal woes and even invigorated me for a time. I've always been one to consider the day a good one if I remained unscathed by the typical stress-provoking events that occur when working with a wide range of personalities, as one does in the medical field. The only thoughts on my mind that evening were of the mundane chores that awaited me at my apartment: cooking, cleaning, and preparing for the next day. I planned to finish my patients' charts, go home

and marinate the chicken I had defrosted that morning, and then meet up with my neighbor, who happened to be my workout partner and a good friend. Both of us had taken to exercise as a way of bettering ourselves and a means to unload our daily stresses. We often pushed ourselves hard, incrementally adding weight to our squats and deadlifts. On that evening, I felt energetic enough to deadlift 500 pounds. The plan was to perform this lift for five sets of five. Although I'd lifted that much before without any adverse effects, I experienced some shortness of breath that evening. But I saw no reason for alarm. We were in a hot gym, working out under glaring lights. I dismissed the shortness of breath as a symptom of dehydration or a side effect of lifting so much weight. I shook off the subtle discomfort and continued working out.

But the feeling persisted once I got home. Perhaps it was indigestion, I reasoned. I took an antacid and prepared for bed, still unfazed by the pain, which now radiated beneath my breastbone. Although I woke several times throughout the night, I still didn't think anything was amiss. I get up two to three times a night to use the bathroom, so I chalked it up to an active bladder.

But as soon as I woke the next morning, I went into survival mode. The pain below my breast had grown more pronounced, and I knew something was wrong. I threw on some jeans, grabbed my keys, and headed to the store to buy more antacids. Anxiety grew within me as I got into my car and drove down the steep hill on which I live. This was the beginning of a series of pivotal decisions that led me to the ER. I had to make a logistical decision as I drove, one that I now realize was a life or death choice. Upon reaching the bottom of the hill, I could have made a right onto Main Street and continued to a local grocery store to pick up antacids. But I didn't make that right turn; instead, I veered left, following an instinct I couldn't explain at the time. I made the left with the intention of going to CVS, which was about a mile away, as opposed to the grocery store, which was a block away in the other direction.

While driving, I called Ray. As a nurse practitioner, Ray was well-versed in what might be causing chest pain and what to do in emergency situations. He told me to immediately go to the emergency room. Despite my brother's advice to go to the ER, I walked into CVS in search of a liquid ant-

acid. By then, the symptoms had escalated. I entered the store hunched over, unable to remain upright. My distress became apparent to others in the store, especially the cashier, who asked if I was okay. I held up my right hand to signal that I was, but I said nothing as I searched for the antacid. I drank it while standing in the aisle, still not realizing how grave my situation was.

As I walked out of CVS, I noticed the urgent care facility across the street. I had gone in two days earlier to meet the owner, who was looking for a partner for his physical therapy practice. Again I was at a crossroads. Should I drive home and rest or go to the clinic? My symptoms seemed to worsen by the minute and I was starting to doubt my self-diagnosed indigestion. I decided to drive across the street. When I exited my car again, I clutched my chest while bent over at the waist. The possibility of imminent death sparked a fear that overwhelmed my discomfort. The clinic secretary immediately recognized the severity of my condition. She called the doctor, the same one I met two days prior, as he hadn't arrived yet. I would be his first patient of the day, and this meeting would be rather different than our initial conversation.



To this day, I marvel at the timing of the escalation of my symptoms. Had they peaked an hour earlier, I might have gone home after stopping into CVS. The urgent care clinic wouldn't have been open yet, and I likely would have died in my home.

But the stars aligned for me that morning. About five minutes after the secretary placed the call, the doctor arrived. He ran an EKG on me, which showed an obvious abnormality in the electrical circuitry of my heart. Seeing the abnormality and my discomfort, he gave me some aspirin. While sitting in triage, I called Ray again and told him what was happening. He immediately went into big brother mode, comforting me and assuring me that he was on his way.

In the meantime, the doctor called an ambulance that arrived about two minutes after he hung up the phone. Lying in the ambulance and speaking with the medic, I was afraid. I thought I was going to die. Upon entering the emergency room, I looked up and there was my brother, hurriedly walking in with an expression of concern. I was relieved at the sight of him. The ER doctor did blood work that showed some abnormalities indicating that there was heart damage. The pain in