

MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER**Jackie Pflug**

Interview by **Kimberly Paetzold**, Editor

On Thanksgiving weekend in November of 1985, Jackie Pflug was flying to Cairo, Egypt from Athens where she had attended a volleyball tournament with her husband (a physical education teacher) and his students. Jackie and her husband Scott had only married a few months before, and at the time, Jackie was a special education teacher at the Cairo American School in Egypt. Ten minutes into the flight, three men calling themselves the Egypt Revolution began to wave their guns and proceeded to take control of the airplane.

A gun battle ensued as the terrorists took control of the flight at an altitude of 35,000 feet. The plane was forced to land in Valetta, Malta. The terrorists began to execute one passenger every 15 minutes until their demands for fuel were met. Jackie, an American citizen, was shot at point blank range, execution style, just like four passengers before her. She was thrown from the plane onto the tarmac and left for dead. For five hours, Jackie drifted in and out of consciousness until an airport grounds crew retrieved her body on its way to the morgue.

In total, 59 passengers died by execution, the ensuing gun battle between authorities and the hijackers, or by fire and smoke inhalation when the plane exploded.

Jackie lived.

Over the years, Jackie adapted to the effects of being shot in the head and the resulting brain injury, effects which include severe vision impairment and short-term memory loss. She has developed epilepsy and endured a lengthy rehabilitation process during which she drew on her background in special education to master her learning disabilities.



Hello Jackie – Thank you for interviewing with Rainbow Visions. We usually interview individuals that have incurred a TBI due to an accident. In your case, the injury was purposely inflicted – the result of a hate crime. In reading your book, “Miles to Go Before I Sleep”, it was apparent that this fact had a major impact on your recovery. Can you tell us how you overcame the terror and emotional difficulties attached to being a terrorist victim?

Being a terrorist victim did have a major impact on my recovery. Actually, it changed my life forever. My life took a whole different course: I eventually got divorced and had to let go of my teaching position. It changed who I was inside.

The hate crime aspect of my injury was something I had to work through. A car didn't hit me, and my injury could in no way be considered an accident. At first, I didn't think the emotional part would be a big deal – I thought the physical impairments would be the most difficult part to deal with. But as it turns out, the emotional part was just as hard. I had serious *TRUST* issues, and the emotional trauma of the hijacking dragged me down. I had frequent violent nightmares. Once I began to emotionally deal with what had happened in therapy, the nightmares left.

So the mental health aspect of rehabilitation was helpful in recovering?

Therapy was a tremendous help in my recovery, and I was surprised how important it was. Looking back, I don't know why I was so surprised, because I do have a degree in psychology. But it really was wonderful to talk to someone about the hijacking.

After being shot in the head, I certainly wasn't myself. It seemed people gave me a year to get my act together and then they lost patience. I don't think they understood what they were doing. I kept hearing, “*You are not the person I knew.*” I also added to the problem by saying, “*I know I'll get the old Jackie back – I know I'll be able to keep up again one day.*” You know, one day I was able to keep up, but what I didn't know is that it would be 15 years down the road. Through therapy I learned, “*So what if I can't keep up like before!*” I learned to live with, like, and even love the person I had become.

The physical aspect of recovery was also a big piece. Because of my brain injury, I could not keep up a fast pace. My short-term memory and sight were significantly impaired, and I had a difficult time perceiving what people were saying to me. If someone would say “*Go mow the lawn*” – I heard, “*Go mow the tawn.*”

What type of therapy in addition to mental health did you receive?

I didn't. You know I don't know how that happened. Not receiving therapy for my physical disabilities was a big ball that got dropped. I should have been sent to a rehabilitation center and received more medical help. In the end, I relied on my background and training in special needs education to get me through.

In addition to my initial physical limitations, a few years after the hijacking I developed epilepsy. I was very angry I had to deal with this. For a period of time the seizures were frequent but after receiving the right medication, I was seizure free for a year but still lived in fear that they would

reoccur. Finally, someone said to me *“If you look at your epilepsy as something to be frightened of all the time, you’re letting it wreak havoc in your life and it will run you. But if you find some way to come to terms with it, the epilepsy won’t be so important”*. So I started to look at it differently. I approached it more logically and thought, *“OK, if I have a seizure, I’m going to talk to my doctor and tell him the medication is not working the way it should. We can work on something new”*. Since I always had physical warnings about 2 or 3 minutes before a seizure, I had time to put myself in a safe position. Also, it gave me time to give directions to someone so they could help. It made me strong. Now I don’t even think about it, but there was a time when it scared me to death.

You used several compensatory strategies to help you deal with your impaired vision and loss of short-term memory. Could you elaborate on these strategies?

One example I wrote about in my book was my morning orange juice routine. Because of my short-term memory loss, (my recall was really bad) I had a hard time remembering what I did just moments before. I love orange juice; so every morning I would fix myself a glass. After pouring it I would put the pitcher back into the fridge and would study it trying to remember how full or empty it was. The next day I would test myself. How full or empty was my orange juice pitcher?

Also, I could no longer read. After my accident I knew the alphabet and the sounds of each letter, but I couldn’t read words or sentences. Due to vision damage, my eyes always wanted to go to the right side of a word or page. To teach myself to read again, every morning I would take the newspaper and a red felt tip pen (because red stood out and I could focus on it) and I would start at the beginning of a sentence. I circled the first letter of each word without lifting my pen and kept doing that throughout the sentence. Take the word **BAT**. Initially I would only see the **T** but by circling the **B** in red, I could see the left side of the word. This method is called tracking, and I used to do it with my special education children. I did this every single morning for years and never let up.

Eventually I was able to read from left to right and see the words in their entirety.

Not long after your hospital stay, you tried to get back to work full-time but found it enormously taxing. Your doctor said it was too early to attempt so much. What advice do you have for others going through the same situation?

How do you know you can’t do something unless you try? Nevertheless, I knew deep down inside it was too soon to go back to work full-time. I did it because of external AND internal pressures to get back to where I was. That pressure to get going and get back on track pushed me to reach too far. My husband pushed because he wanted everything to be OK. It wasn’t a bad motivation on his part, he just wanted everything to be back to normal, and he wanted so badly for his wife to be all right. It’s difficult, but taking it slow and being conscious and aware of your limitations is important. Take baby steps. You know, even in my darkest days somehow I knew it would be OK again some day. I also knew that as the days went by, everything was getting better, even though I didn’t always see or feel the progress.

You were asked to go back to Malta soon after the hijacking to identify the man who shot you. Can you tell us about this experience?

The first trial was in Malta in 1986 (the hijacking took place in 1985). I was set to fly there, but in my gut I knew I couldn’t go. I wasn’t ready to deal with it yet. Three months after the hijacking, the FBI and Malta police were requesting that I attend the trial and testify and I was so nervous. I wanted to help put him away but I also wanted it to be over. I feared that if I testified, one of his friends would find me and retaliate. Finally, I asked to help without going to Malta. I felt dumb at the time, but the FBI said they could take a deposition here. That was the first trial.

I was proud of myself that I didn’t go. Individuals with brain injury need to be their own cheerleaders and realize it’s OK when they are not ready for something. Standing up for yourself and your limitations is good.

The second trial was ten years later. The

first trial put the hijacker away for 25 years in a Malta prison, but he was released after 8 years because of good behavior and pressure from Libya. The US got wind of this, reopened the case and began a second trial in Washington. I went several times to Washington to prepare for the trial, one time in particular to identify the man who shot me in a line-up. That lineup was a very good thing for me. At the time, I was upset I had to do it, because I had identified him in photos several times. The reason it was good, is because I knew I had forgiven him when I looked at him face to face. That freedom felt good – it was the forgiveness that really set me free.

Forgiving is not saying, *“What you did to me was OK”*. It’s not that at all. People say to me all the time *“How can you forgive someone who did that to you?”* Well it’s not about letting him off; it’s about doing it for you. Somebody recently said to me *“You forgive to set yourself free”*. And really, that’s the truth. Now this type of forgiveness is not in your head, it’s something that comes from deep inside. I got there through therapy and let me tell you it took many years. Some people can do it right away and I don’t know how they do that. But if you still have a lot of anger, you’re not there yet. It doesn’t happen just because you say it – you must actually feel it. Forgiveness is being free and it’s a wonderful feeling.

How did your mental health therapy help you achieve this?

By recreating the hijacking. I said all the things I wanted to say and did all the things I wanted to do, but couldn’t because I had a gun to my head. When I left those sessions, I felt like a new woman. For the first time I was in control and not somebody else. I was empowered to go outside without feeling like I was going to get shot in the head again. I was empowered to go to bed at night and not anticipate a horrible nightmare.

A lot of individuals get stuck with *Why did someone do this to me?* You know what? The person who wronged you or your loved one will never give you a satisfactory answer. The thing survivors need to concentrate on is not the perpetrator – your survival and recovery

is not about them – It's about you. Why a hate crime or accident happens has nothing to do with recovery. Finding peace and moving through is what's important. The key is forgiveness, acceptance, moving on, loving yourself and finding happiness.

Jackie, you're now a motivational speaker and try to inspire others on the road to recovery. Do you have some additional advice for survivors and their families?

Take one step at a time. Even though it feels like you are getting nowhere, you are getting better. Survivors can thrive – not just exist. There are a lot of people out there with brain injuries who are doing better than before their injuries. Just because I got shot in the head and lost some of my vision and short-term memory doesn't mean I can't succeed in moving forward.

The first four years after my brain injury

were dark days. Even though I didn't want to get out of bed, brush my teeth, put my makeup on and go outside and talk to people – I did it anyway. I knew if I didn't do it I would get lost. One day I heard on a talk show "You need to behave your way to success." I realized that's exactly what I had been doing. Put one foot in front of the other and get the help you need. Brain Injury is a hard road and I don't wish it on anyone, but I'm happy that I endured the turmoil. To look back and see how strong I've become is wonderful. If you keep at it, you become a different person because of the strength that comes from the endurance.

Live with no regrets. Appreciate what you have and those who love you. ♦

NOTE: The hijacker who shot Jackie is now serving a life sentence in Colorado.

Jackie's Bio

Jackie & Scott divorced 3 years after the hijacking. She stayed single for 7 years and then married her current husband – Jim. They have been married for 10 years and have an eight-year-old son.

Hobbies:

Jackie loves to workout and spend time with her family.

Work:

Jackie speaks throughout the country on the topic "The Courage to Succeed." She also authored the book "Miles to go before I Sleep" with Peter J. Kizilos, a freelance writer.



M Magazine published an article recounting the events of November 23, 1985 on Egypt Flight 737. To download your PDF copy of the article, log on to: www.rainbowrehab.com & select "What's News"

MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP

A Survivor's Story of Life After a Terrorist Hijacking. Jackie's message of faith and forgiveness is timeless. Miles to Go Before I Sleep reminds us that tragedy and suffering always contain the seeds of new growth and learning. It contains a message about weathering adversity, about going for dreams and goals and about not giving up. Though we are powerless over many of the forces that shape our lives, Jackie believes we have power over our responses and power in the choices we make.

Jackie's healing journey began when she realized she had two options. She could slip into self-pity and blame, and see herself as a victim for the rest of her life; or she could reclaim her life and dreams despite the slow, painful years it would take to recover. In her book, Jackie shares her story and the lessons she learned during her recovery and rehabilitation.

"Be good to yourself. Take care of yourself. Be true to yourself, and above all - love yourself. That's where it all begins." – Jackie Pflug

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