





Strength

from Adversity

Robin Roberts

learned to embrace challenges—a philosophy that anchored her during personal crises.

by Sandra Bienkowski

Fewer than 12 hours after Hurricane Katrina obliterated towns along the Gulf Coast, *Good Morning America* co-host Robin Roberts was on a plane with her ABC crew bound for the region. It wasn't a typical news assignment; it was her home.

Before the storm, Roberts was unable to persuade her mother and sister to evacuate with her two nieces, and she hadn't been able to contact them since.

Driving 200 miles through the night from the closest open airport, Roberts and crew made their way toward her mother's home in Biloxi, Miss.—through downed power lines, rubble, uprooted trees and smashed cars. Even as they got close, the well-known landmarks from her childhood were in ruin, and Roberts was lost.

Unstoppable Courage

Roberts had always been strong, confident and certain of her path. An honor student and star athlete growing up in 1960s Mississippi, her parents taught her not to let race and gender get in the way of her dreams.

Her mother and father were her role models. Lawrence Roberts, her late father, had served as a member of the famed Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, defying those who said it was crazy to think a black man could fly. Her mother, Lucimarian Tolliver Roberts, received a \$100 scholarship to Howard University and was the first in her family to attend college. Later, she became the first woman to chair the Mississippi State Board of Education.

Encouraged by her parents, Robin Roberts eagerly took on challenges as she excelled as a basketball star at Southeastern Louisiana University. She then worked her way up from a television anchor earning \$5.50 per hour to a 15-year stretch as an ESPN *SportsCenter* anchor. In 2005, she became co-anchor of *Good Morning America*. Roberts saw adversity as a necessary learning experience to reaching her goals.

But in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on that sweltering morning in August 2005, she was overwhelmed by the destruction. Unable even to find her way home, Roberts enlisted help from a police officer to guide them.

Her mother's darkened house was still standing but showed roof damage. Roberts raced to the door and held her breath as she opened it and found everyone safe inside. "I knew you would find me," her mother whispered, hugging her close.

Roberts wanted to stay and help her family rebuild. But her mother insisted she return to New York, where she would have the most influence. "Be the voice of the Gulf Coast," she said.

An hour later, live on the air, *Good Morning America* co-host Charlie Gibson asked, "Is your mom OK, your sisters?" Roberts, a seasoned broadcast journalist, choked back tears to speak.

"We are all a little bit stronger than we think we are."

—Robin Roberts

Returning to New York, she learned the show would adopt her hometown of Pass Christian, Miss. Roberts' on-screen emotion resonated with millions of viewers. She had given context to the tragedy, and donations started pouring in.

Inspiring Woman
The WNBA honors Robin Roberts in 2008 for her success amid her struggle with breast cancer.



She learned many things from that experience, she says. Among them: "Make my mess my message."

A Personal Battle

Today, Roberts faces new challenges. Fighting a battle with breast cancer, diagnosed last year, she returned to work two weeks after surgery, worked through her treatments and went on-air without her wig. Though millions of viewers thought she fought with grace and dignity, the decision to make her personal battle public wasn't easy.

"I was embarrassed," she says. "I thought, I've talked about how you need to work out, be healthy, eat the right things... but when I got cancer, I wondered if people were going to think I did something wrong." Instead, the response she received was both encouraging and appreciative.

“People said, ‘Boy if you are doing all the right things and it is happening to you, it can happen to anyone,’” Roberts says. Her openness has given voice to breast cancer patients. Those who have gone through similar experiences have reached out to encourage her with kind words, prayers and gifts. “I am absolutely humbled by the outpouring of love,” she says. Some of the most meaningful notes she’s received have been from women who told her they went for their first mammogram because of her candidness. “They saw me and said, ‘I need to get myself checked out,’” she says. “And that was the highest compliment.”

Reaching New Heights

A spirit of optimism has empowered Roberts to fight through difficult times. And whether through the loss of her father, the heartbreak of Hurricane Katrina, her battle with

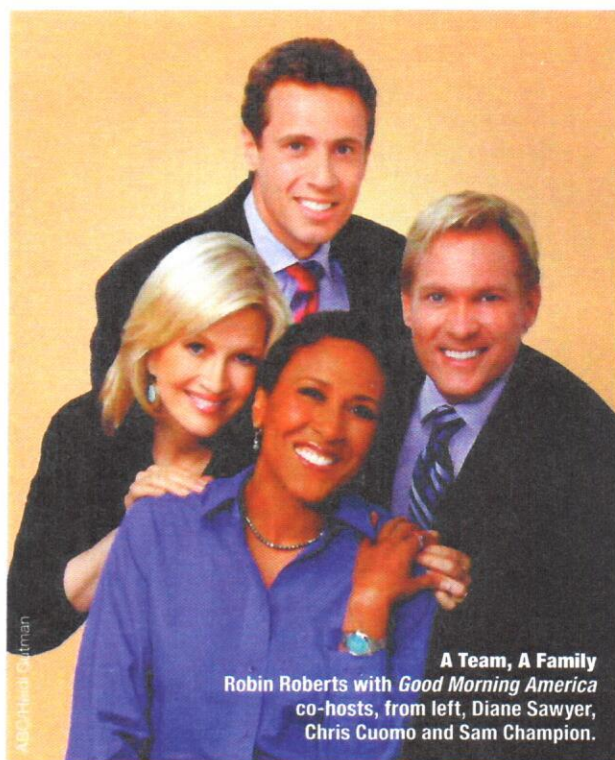
Anchor Words

Messages of Strength from Robin Roberts

“You can find a message in anything—good or bad—that is placed before you.”

“I believe ‘this too shall pass.’ I remember some advice my mom taught me long ago: If you are having a bad day, go to bed. Why stay up and keep a bad thing going? Things always seem a little better the next day.”

“If your knees are knocking, it’s OK. There are so many people who think that those of us who have achieved a certain level of success, that we don’t have fear, that we have never failed—and it’s totally unrealistic. If you are waiting for utopia, it ain’t going to happen. As women, sometimes we’re waiting for the perfect moment and we say, ‘Today isn’t a good time,’ but you have to get over that and you have to realize... even if you are afraid, do it anyway.”



A Team, A Family
Robin Roberts with *Good Morning America* co-hosts, from left, Diane Sawyer, Chris Cuomo and Sam Champion.

breast cancer or whatever challenge presents itself next, she says her philosophy is to focus not on the problem, but on the solution.

“Things happen along the way in our path, and instead of looking at it as a wall that’s being put up in front of us, look at it as an opportunity to scale new heights and to climb that wall—to see and do things you didn’t think you were capable of,” she says. “We are all a little bit stronger than we think we are.”

In her recently re-released book, *From the Heart: Eight Rules to Live By*, Roberts writes, “One of my favorite stories tells of a butterfly’s cocoon. Someone sees the movement of the butterfly pressing against the wall of the cocoon and they think they’ll help it along and just cut a little hole in the cocoon so the butterfly can come on out with ease. But the butterfly dies soon after. There’s a reason why it’s beating its wings against the wall of the cocoon—to make it stronger. That’s the way I like to think about the trials we go through. They’re meant to make us stronger.” **SFW**