

2017 Best Self Atlanta Magazine Courage Award Finalist

JACQUELINE SANCHEZ

BEFORE



AFTER



Maya Angelou once famously commented that courage is by far the most important virtue, as it is necessary to consistently apply the rest of your virtues to every part of your life. What's inspiring about courage is that every athlete offers a different story of what this word means to them and their journey to the stage.

My story of courage started over two decades ago when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. As a teenager, I was shouldered with the awesome responsibility of raising my two younger brothers, all while giving my father the time and space necessary to grieve. As a way to cope with my mother's passing, I turned to running, which was my own escape from the pain, fear, confusion, and sadness I experienced during this tumultuous time. After running my first marathon in 2009, I eventually completed dozens more in the following years (including several Boston Marathons), and even paced hundreds of other runners to their marathon completions across the country (as Pacer Jacque via marathonpacing.com). Up until the beginning of this year, I had the waif-like physique of an endurance athlete, and I began to realize that I no longer enjoyed running. I was ready for a monumental shift.

The decision to compete in a bikini competition lit a fire in my soul. I've always wanted a strong, muscular physique, similar to the women I look up to. Running marathons was unlikely to help me accomplish this goal. Having experiences in both endurance sports and pageantry (I was Ms. Georgia United States 2015) I have had a head start in strengthening my mental discipline, my stage presence, and my threshold

for pain and discomfort in my journey to the stage. However, unlike every other sport in which I have competed, the true courage of bodybuilding lies not in the exercise itself, but in all of the other activities and sacrifices that occur outside of the gym.

To me, courage is the barbell that holds all of life's plates together into one contiguous body. It takes courage to have a brutally honest self-assessment of how far you have to go in order to be "competition-ready". Courage is diligently tracking every calorie and macro-nutrient in your smartphone to objectively measure progress toward your goals. Perhaps most painfully, it takes a determined courage to leave behind (running) peer groups, to decline social events and gatherings, and to sacrifice time away from doing things you enjoy with people you love. Courage means explaining to your younger brothers and other children who have lost a parent, that grieving is a process that never ends. Honesty, diligence, sacrifice, and determination: these are the virtues which have forged me into the novice bodybuilder I am today and will guide me toward becoming a better person and athlete for my competitions tomorrow. As Maya Angelou suggests, none of them would be possible without the steadfast courage to apply them to everything I do, every day of my life, bodybuilding included.

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