

Real Kids



Real Stories



Real Challenges

Overcoming Adversity Around the World

Garth Sundem

free spirit
PUBLISHING®

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
---------------------------	---

Chapter 1: Breaking Barriers

Grappling with Greatness (Mongolia)	6
--	---

In Mongolia, wrestling was thought of as a boy's sport. But Sükheegiin Tserenchimed proved that girls could wrestle too.

Living Intensely on His Board (Brazil)	11
---	----

Italo Romano lost his legs in a train accident, but he refused to be limited by what other people thought he couldn't do—and showed his determination by becoming a pro skateboarder.

Mic Drop (Afghanistan)	15
-------------------------------------	----

Soosan Firooz is Afghanistan's first female rapper. She sings about the hardships and oppression Afghan women face.

I'm a Boy (USA)	20
------------------------------	----

Ryland Whittington was a boy born in a girl's body. It took many tries over many years to find a way to help people see his true gender.

Soccer on Water (Thailand)	24
---	----

The boys of Koh Panyee loved watching soccer. But in a village built on stilts over the ocean, there was no place to play . . . until they built their own floating field.

The Firebird (USA) 28

Misty Copeland didn't take her first ballet lesson until she was 13. Despite her late start and difficult childhood, she became the first African American principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre.

Slithering to Understanding (Australia) 33

Some Aboriginal teens felt harassed by the transit authority guards in Australia. Jane Pompey helped the two groups understand each other—with snakes!

Chapter 2: Handling Hardship 38

Big Man (USA) 40

By the time he was 15 years old, Caron Butler had been arrested 15 times. But he committed himself to basketball, and it led him to a better life.

DJ Focus (Sierra Leone) 45

To become a DJ, Kelvin Doe had to build his own FM radio transmitter. He needed a generator to power his equipment. Could he build that too?

BugsR4Girls (Canada) 49

What would you think if someone wore bugs on his or her shoulder? Sophia Spencer wore bugs, and the kids at her school thought it was strange, until . . .

A Good Day (Kenya) 53

David Omondi lives in an abandoned dirt lot. He wears all the clothes he owns and shares a soccer ball with his friends. For David, it takes bravery just to make it through each day.

Tinogona (Zimbabwe) 57

At age 11, Tererai Trent was forced to marry. She dreamed of a better life, including getting an education. Would her dreams ever come true?

Dead or Alive (Philippines) 61

Living with a gang in a cemetery, Crisanto felt trapped between life and death. It took courage to move to a shelter and start school.

Prodigy in the Rough (India) 66

Where Sushma Verma lives, many girls drop out of school to help with work around the house. But Sushma's genius was impossible to overlook—not only did she stay in school, but by the time she was 13, she had started college!

Out of the Frying Pan (Serbia). 70

Ahmed is one of many refugees who escaped conflict in Afghanistan. Now he lives alone in a warehouse in Serbia, waiting for a country to take him in.

Chapter 3: Conquering Conditions 74

Basketball Girl (China) 76

At age three, Qian Hongyan lost her legs in a car accident. Her grandfather cut open a basketball and wrapped it around her lower body to protect it as she scooted forward on her hands. Then she found swimming.

Blind to Blindness (Ireland) 81

Growing up, Caroline Casey's parents kept a secret from her—she is nearly blind. Can you imagine how much the world changed for her once she found out?

Lonely Highway (USA) 85

Andy Kwiatkowski has autism and struggled to make friends, until he found a way to connect with people by making movies.

So, I Need to Tell You Something . . . (USA) 90

When Christina Peña was nine years old, she learned that she had been born HIV positive. At first, she didn't tell anyone. Then she had to.

Depression Confession (Canada) 95

Kevin Breel got good grades and was the captain of his high school basketball team. So why wasn't he one of the happiest kids at school?

Conall Strong (USA) 99

After losing his legs below the knee to complications from leukemia, six-year-old Conall Harvey had to relearn how to walk on what he calls "helper feet."

Life Is a Flower Among Thorns (Nepal) 103

Jhamak Ghimire was born with cerebral palsy and struggles to control her arms and hands. She learned to write by holding a pen with her toes, and now her poems are a voice for people with disabilities.

Chapter 4: Creating Change 108

Not Even a Bullet Can Silence (Pakistan) 110

Because Malala Yousafzai told girls to go to school, a man climbed aboard her school bus and shot her in the head. Luckily, she survived! Today, her voice is heard all around the world.

Books and Togetherness (Brazil) 115

Could building a library bring her friends back together? Maria Clara wanted to find out. So she began collecting books.

Freedom Is More Than a Mirage (South Sudan) 119

Salva Dut escaped the Sudanese Civil War on foot when he was 11. Along the way, he nearly died of thirst. Now, he is back in Sudan, making sure people in need have water.

I Am No Slave (Brazil) 124

Creuzza Oliveira was forced to be a maid—at no pay—when she was only 10 years old. She found a way out and began fighting for workers' rights in Brazil.

Dancing Eyes (Canada) 129

When Molly Burke lost her eyesight, she also lost her friends. They didn't understand what she was going through. Today, Molly helps people understand what it means to be blind.

Back Where I Started (USA) 134

US Border Patrol officers chased and arrested workers in the field where Vito de la Cruz was picking tomatoes as a kid. Vito knew then that he wanted to help people feel safe, so he became a lawyer.

Well, Why Not? (India) 138

Every day after work, Pavan Kumar's mother had to walk a long way to get water. That is, until Pavan decided to dig them a well of their own . . . with only a shovel.

Born to Save the Planet (USA) 142

Many people say they care about the environment, but few take action. Xiuhtezcatl Roske-Martinez is suing the United States government for its role in climate change!

Bibliography 147

Index 156

About the Author 160

Introduction

We all face challenges. The 30 young people in this book have faced very serious challenges. Some have had to deal with discrimination. Others have faced poverty, a tough family life, physical challenges, or a combination of these difficulties. Some were able to overcome these challenges to do great things. For others, simply surviving is a triumph.

The thing is, the size of their success isn't what's important. What really matters is the *decision* to overcome. The young people in this book made the important choice to continue *despite* their challenges. For some, that meant changing how people think about them. For others, it was persevering despite great odds. And for still others, it was the decision to survive and, when they could, fight for a better life.

This book is about heroes. And the reason these young people are heroes is because they made the heroic choice to struggle against the easy path that many people take in the face of these challenges. It's easier to give up—to say, “I can't” or “What difference will it make?”—than it is to try and try again in the face of difficulties. And it's much easier to act in the stereotypical ways that people expect than it is to prove people wrong.

You may or may not face the same challenges or the same degree of challenge as the young people in this book have. But you have the opportunity to make the same heroic choices. We *all* have challenges. For you, maybe it's a math test, a tryout for a sports team, a difficult situation at home or with your friends, or something much more challenging for you.

You have the choice to continue toward your goals despite these challenges. It's not easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is! But the heroic struggle to overcome your challenges, big or small, is the only way to make change—for yourself, the people you love, and the world.

Garth Sundem

Chapter 1

Breaking Barriers

The Firebird,
p. 28

I'm a Boy, p. 20

Living Intensely on
His Board, p. 11



Grappling with
Greatness, p. 6

Mic Drop, p. 15

Soccer on
Water, p. 24

A locked door is one kind of barrier. An idea can also be a barrier. You may not be able to see it or touch it, but an idea someone has about you—especially a negative one—can keep you from moving forward just as forcefully as a locked door. The young people in this chapter pushed through the ideas people had formed about them. They fought against misunderstandings, discrimination, and even laws that were holding them back.

Slithering to
Understanding,
p. 33



Grappling with Greatness

Sükheegiin Tserenchimed

Wrestling is an important part of Mongolia's history. Cave paintings more than 8,000 years old in Mongolia show drawings of wrestlers. Genghis Khan, the great Mongolian warrior of the 13th century, chose his generals in part by how well they wrestled. And one modern-day wrestler went on to become a presidential candidate. When a child is born in Mongolia, often the family prays that the child will grow up to be a wrestler.

That is, if the child is a boy.

Chimdee, whose full name is Sükheegiin Tserenchimed, is not a boy. To many people in Mongolia, that means she should not be a wrestler. But wrestling is in her blood.

Chimdee's father was a herdsman, tending camels, sheep, goats, cows, and horses. He was also a champion wrestler in the traditional Mongolian style, called

Bökh. Before a match, as Mongolian wrestlers had done for centuries, Chimdee's father would dance into the ring imitating a falcon, a phoenix, or a lion. He'd set himself in place and then deliver three huge slaps to his legs before attacking his opponent.

In Mongolia, wrestling is passed down from father to son, not to daughters. But even if Chimdee's father had been willing to teach Chimdee how to wrestle, he didn't get the chance. He died when Chimdee was just seven years old.

After her father's death, Chimdee moved with her mother to an apartment in Ulaanbaatar, the coldest capital city of any country in the world. On mornings when the temperature was far below zero, pollution from the simple wood-burning stoves that people used for cooking and heating mixed with pollution

MONGOLIA

population: 3 million

Sükheegiin's home: Ulaanbaatar



from the factories—wrapping the city in a choking fog. Maybe because of the pollution, Chimdee's mother often was sick.

Sometimes, Chimdee's mother was too sick to look after her. But letting Chimdee roam the city by

FAST FACTS

In traditional Mongolian culture, wrestling, horsemanship, and archery are considered the "Three Manly Skills."

herself offered too many opportunities to get in trouble. Instead, Chimdee's mother signed her up for classes at a nearby wrestling gym. It was one of the few gyms that accepted girls. Soon, the gym became like Chimdee's second home.

She wanted to be like her father. She worked hard, adding strength to her natural sense of balance. And the harder she worked, the stronger her determination grew to become a wrestler.

At age 19, Chimdee brought her skills and mindset to the 2014 World Freestyle Wrestling Championships in Uzbekistan. Her final match was against 2012 Olympic bronze medalist, Yuliya Ratkevich. Yuliya was from Azerbaijan—a country with a rich tradition of women's wrestling.

Chimdee and Yuliya circled each other for only a few seconds before Yuliya grabbed Chimdee's left knee and drove her out of the circles painted on the mat. Was everyone right about Mongolian female wrestlers? In Mongolia, was wrestling a sport better

left to men? The wrestlers started again. Instead of being intimidated by her opponent's skill, Chimdee attacked, shooting underneath Yuliya to grab her by the legs and take her down to the mat! But Yuliya scrambled away.

Now the wrestlers knew each other. They danced in a careful counterclockwise circle, both pawing at each other's heads, both faking toward their opponent's legs. Then, quick as a snake strike, Yuliya had Chimdee around the waist and took her down to the mat! Chimdee struggled to escape. Luckily the round ended before Yuliya could end the match with a pin.

During the break, the crowd cheered for Chimdee's opponent. Who did Chimdee think she was, this *girl* from a country where women didn't wrestle, daring to step into the ring with a trained athlete?

At the start of the second round, Chimdee was behind on points and looked hard for an opening. She was able to grab Yuliya's foot but couldn't get the takedown as her opponent scrambled out of bounds. That's how it went, back and forth, with Chimdee's balance and quickness versus Yuliya's training and the crowd's belief that Chimdee was bound to fail. The wrestlers crashed into each other again and again.

At the end of the match, the judge took both wrestlers by their hands . . . and then held up Chimdee's arm as the winner! At 19 years old, Chimdee became the youngest wrestler ever—male or female—to win a World Championship. With her mother's

encouragement and in her father's memory, Chimdee had showed her country that women could wrestle. And she had showed the world that great wrestlers still came from Mongolia.

Take Action

Help make it easier for girls to play sports.
Go to **ngwsd.org** to learn how.