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# ONE LIFELINE

*Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity,  
it is an act of justice.*

—NELSON MANDELA

**I LOVE A GREAT STORY**, don't you? Of course, it's wonderful if it's a tale of singular heroism and valor, but I've found that sometimes it's even better when it's an epic tale that involves several stories woven together like a tapestry, the thread of connection only clear after the fact. That's the way this one happened.

I knew that if our Wellspring Living graduates and those coming through the Empowered Living Academy, i.e., women who had survived trafficking and/or who were teetering on the edge of great risk, couldn't find sustainable, living-wage career employment after having completed intensive life skills training and counseling, then they might soon find themselves back in a tragic situation. It broke our hearts to think that those who had made so much progress could slip back into allowing someone else to control their destinies again or giving away their power to make their own choices.

When I think of Hire Hope and the way it all came together, I'm convinced that if just one of the key people in the story had ignored the tug on their heartstrings, it wouldn't exist. In fact, little

did I know that one of the key players felt a call on her life long before she intersected with me.

When I met Amy Henderson, it was easy to think that the beautiful blonde with crystal clear eyes flecked with green and blue had lived something of a charmed life. What I soon learned was that her heart had been broken in so many ways that her life's story was just a bit tough enough to give her a unique window into the lives and hearts of our women at Wellspring. You see, Amy had experienced true pain, true rejection, and true vulnerability. So I'd like to introduce you to Amy herself and let her tell you her story. Trust me: it's a really good one!

### *Amy's Story:*

I grew up in a normal-looking, all-American family in the northern suburbs of Atlanta, the second of four siblings, with parents who were still married, which seemed a rarity among my peers. From the outside looking in, life was good and it looked like we were living the dream. But when you peeled back the layers, you saw a lot of pain.

While we lived in a relatively affluent area, we struggled intensely to make ends meet. Both my parents were in and out of jobs, so it always felt like we were one financial emergency away from disaster. While my parents did the best they knew how, they couldn't shield us from the strain financial struggles bring. All my siblings and I faced intense anxiety over how we would be taken care of, have food to eat, have reliable transportation to and from school,

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and such. Would the lights be turned off yet again? The scariest part wasn't going without, it was anticipating the ensuing arguments we'd lie awake listening to, after our parents thought we were asleep.

My mother struggled with the highs and lows that come with mental illness, and as a result, my life was full of uncertainty and often felt like one big, death-defying emotional roller coaster. Her depression led her to dark places that ultimately landed her in and out of jail and eventually prison for financial reasons while she was trying to help our family escape bankruptcy.

My entire world was rocked. I was in high school and like so many teens, desperate to cover up the turmoil at home by making things look "normal." Some of my closest friends didn't even know that Mom was incarcerated. Trying to pick up the financial slack, my dad retreated into his work and was rarely home. To call this "trauma" seems like a gross understatement. Since my older sister was away at college, I tried to care for my younger siblings and provide some of the stability I lacked. It was entirely too much for my still-developing high school self to bear.

Fast-forward to college: I went to a big, Southern university one state over and began to see some very real cracks in my identity. The pain I worked so hard to hide began to slowly seep out. I vacillated between trying to maintain a perfect image and acting out with all sorts of desperate behavior. I used

relationships to validate my broken identity, with no idea how to honor myself. Honestly, I didn't know if there was anything in me worth honoring. I spiraled out of control with breakup after breakup, hoping to find a relationship that would validate me and allow me to feel protected. As you can imagine, it was a fruitless pursuit that yielded nothing but deeper devastation.

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**“Your life is so perfect.  
How could you possibly  
relate to me?”**

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Soon after college, the tide seemed to turn. I met and fell in love with someone I believed would be the perfect man to help me put the finishing touches on the portrait of perfection I desperately wanted. He was everything I had ever dreamed of. He wore his faith on his sleeve, he was Southern, athletic, smart, and model-good-looking. At just twenty-three, he pursued me well, with the kind of respect I always knew was right. Without a dime to our names, we married quickly, and while not perfect, we spent the first year in what I wholeheartedly believed was wedded bliss. I had fallen so deeply in love with this man, for everything he was and honestly, for all the things he wasn't. What I did know was that he was my very best friend and I was

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his. I had loved prior to him, but no one had stolen my heart as he did. I finally felt like I'd found my safe place.

In the early months of marriage, one of my best friends (who had been a bridesmaid in my wedding) deliberately fell out of touch. After six months of her not returning phone calls, I finally reached her and she agreed to meet. Over coffee I asked why she'd become so distant, and she replied, "Amy, your life is so perfect. How could you possibly relate to me?" And considering the childhood family secrets I still kept purposefully tucked away, she was disturbingly right. I had worked hard to cover up the pain with the perfect shades of paint, putting the finishing touches on my attempt at perfection. I was happily married, had a great job and a cute home on the outskirts of Atlanta. What more could a young woman ask, right?

That dream was shattered when my husband came home one day and told me that he had never loved me and was leaving. Over the next few months, I uncovered some of the worst kinds of emotional betrayal within a marriage, the kinds that can shatter a wife's confidence and wound in places that last. Here it is again, I thought, trying to manage the panic rising up inside of me. This is what trauma really feels like.

I grieved the end of my marriage intensely. I still loved my husband so much and felt like my life had turned into a bad dream from which I hoped to

one day wake up. My recent conversation with that friend rang in my ears, and I thought, “No one will ever say that my life is too perfect or charmed again.”

Yet through it all, I had a sense through my faith in God that this particular part of my story would really be used in some bigger way. I heard God say, “Grieve this trauma well, because I’m going to use it to accomplish something you can’t even imagine.”

In the aftermath of my divorce, I lost my job and found myself facing financial battles that felt all too familiar. When I finally landed a new job at Randstad, a national staffing and recruiting firm, I had a huge heart for and interest in the vulnerable and unemployed, particularly young women at risk as I essentially had been.

In the spring of 2013, I was invited to attend a vision lunch. A group of twenty women met at an idyllic farm and, seated around a huge wooden table piled with Southern food, Mary Frances spoke. “How can we live in the heart of the South—the Bible Belt—and be such a huge hub of human trafficking and the atrocities that go with it?” one woman asked.

I was intrigued. That day was the introduction to my heart breaking for these women.

I kept seeking ways to be involved with the issue, something “big” as I felt I’d heard God promising me, but nothing seemed to be happening. *Did I hear wrong?* I wondered. I felt almost embarrassed to tell people my dream of making a difference, because it

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seemed that my life, though I'd continued to thrive and be promoted at my job, had stalled out.

Meanwhile, I made a new friend, Chandelle Fairley, who had moved back to town to manage another Atlanta branch of Randstad. We bonded over holding similar positions within the company, and in an effort to help her meet others in town, I invited her to volunteer with me at the Passion conference in January 2014. [You can read the inspiring story of Passion later in the book at "One Spark Can Set the World on Fire."] That year, one of the big focuses of the gathering of twenty thousand college students was ending human trafficking around the world. As Chandelle and I leaned against the doors of Philips Arena (we were door holders and greeters), we turned to each other in the dark and said, "This year, we're going to do something tangible about this issue." How could we know that these horrors were happening in our own city and not do something? Again, I felt a little ridiculous voicing my interest in the issue with no defined plan, but I still felt so stirred up about it that I couldn't help myself.

The very next Monday, I got a call from Chandelle asking if I could represent her in the office for an impromptu meeting that Thursday. You could have knocked me over with a feather. The meeting would include Mary Frances, whom I'd heard speak more than a year before, Gemma Filliben, an executive with Randstad, and Tom Miller, the then-CIO of Coca-Cola.



Little did I know that Mary Frances and her team had been working on a new initiative called Empowered Living Academy and they were wrestling with the issue of helping at-risk women find sustainable, career-oriented employment. She gave a local TED talk about the issue. Tom saw it and forwarded it to just about every influential person he knew, including Gemma, who was high ranking at Randstad. She was flying to Atlanta, and we were going to meet to see how my company could be involved. Chantelle would be traveling for work and therefore unavailable, so I was the one asked to represent Atlanta Randstad offices and host the meeting.

At 7:30 in the morning, we all gathered in a ninth-floor conference room with the sun rising behind the glass windows. I listened as Mary Frances spoke about the barriers to this population of women finding employment beyond working in strip clubs, at low-paying fast-food restaurants, and/or in minimum wage retail. The idea behind the meeting was that perhaps Randstad could supply professional women to mentor those ladies who were on the career readiness track in the Empowered Living Academy.

I heard myself blurting out, “We can do way more than mentor them. We can find them jobs!” After all, we were one of the world’s largest staffing agencies. I felt three pairs of widened eyes turn to me. It was unanimous: we were going to figure out a way to do it.

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Looking back, I still can't believe how it all came together and turned into something far bigger than any one individual. Chandelle and I began downloading curriculum from the Internet, spending our after-work hours researching activities and exercises we could do with the participants to help shepherd them on their way to a real career that could support not only themselves, but their families as well.

As we prepared to launch the still-unnamed program, we met with the first seven women in a conference room on loan at Coca-Cola. The nervous, excited energy was palpable. We went around the table and introduced ourselves, sharing just a bit about our lives. When it was my turn, I found my story tumbling out—the trauma of my family's financial struggles and Mom's prison time, my divorce, the tailspin that followed, and the struggle in the aftermath to land on my feet financially and careerwise.

It was a pretty unbelievable moment: I felt an instant connection with each of them as, in their eyes, I went from someone who might look like an authoritative professional with my corporate position and the clothes that went with it to someone they could relate to. No, I hadn't lived through the horrors of being on the streets, but one tragic twist or turn in my life and my story could have looked a lot more like theirs. A flood of gratefulness washed over me for the path that I'd walked, through all of the hard moments—yes, and trauma—I'd

experienced and for the opportunity for a window and connection with these young women, each of whom had so much potential.

We launched our program the end of February, just six weeks after Chandelle and I stood in that darkened stadium, promising to be involved in this issue. We determined we would start with seven weeks of classroom work. The women were already doing their Empowered Living Academy curriculum Monday through Thursday, and on Fridays they spent the day at Randstad, learning about office etiquette, scheduling meetings, social media skills, business writing, and more. Then, the next step was to give them a paid apprenticeship within Randstad for ten weeks. During these two and a half months, the women's pay was commensurate with an entry-level office job, i.e., well above minimum wage, and they had the opportunity to gain experience that would be a true resume builder. Finally, each of the women would be placed in a career-track job.

We were thrilled with the progress of the first "class" and had a small ceremony to commemorate their accomplishments, following the apprenticeship. One executive caught wind of it and alerted Linda Galipeau, CEO of all of Randstad, North America about what we were up to. She asked us to prepare a presentation and share our vision and plan. To say we were nervous is an enormous understatement. Linda is accomplished, decisive, and powerful.

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Chandelle, Gemma, and I laid out our ideas for training and getting these young women jobs. Linda listened stoically, nodding some, pointing to a slide and asking a question, here and there. Then, silence.

We all held our breath, knowing she had the power to kill the program with one word.

Instead, she smiled and said, “You had me at *hello*.” We let out the air we’d been holding, breathed a collective sigh of relief and, to our astonishment, she went on to say that she wanted to put resources behind our simple ragtag program to formalize it, create a logo and a name that would resonate, help with any legal obstacles to getting these women sustainable employment, and help with marketing. That was how Hire Hope was officially born.

Since then, we’ve placed our graduates in positions within Randstad, with Coca-Cola and other Fortune 500 companies, and they’re thriving in jobs in diversity and inclusion departments, IT and data fields, and administrative roles.

Our pilot program has been repeated, refined, and replicated, so that now we’re having an even larger quarterly class of women come through Hire Hope. Our plan is to continue refining it in Atlanta and then to look for cities with high at-risk populations for trafficking that also have a strong Randstad presence, so this creative and groundbreaking approach can touch even more communities around the United States.

**We meet them where they are, hold their hands and say, “Kick hard! Look—swim like this! Keep breathing; you’re almost there.”**

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The “getting them a job” part is central, of course, but the program is so much more than that. It provides someone to believe in and with these women, so that they can see that there’s a hope and a future full of possibilities. When someone is in the depths of poverty, there is often a pileup of defeat over time; hopeless days have turned into months, months into years, and perhaps even generations, during which defeat becomes familiar. The hope of something more, well, who has time for that when you’re just trying to survive?

I liken it to someone who’s drifted off at sea, not knowing how it happened, and once she realizes and starts trying to fight, the undertow sweeps her out even farther. As time passes, she loses sight of the shore and, treading water as hard as possible, becomes exhausted. After all, people weren’t made for the open sea, with its merciless waves. The shore becomes a hope that seems far too grand to dream of ever seeing again. They may think they need a life preserver, but while a life preserver is good for the immediate need of not drowning, it won’t

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guide them to dry land. What that castaway needs is someone to swim out, through the choppy water, with a reminder that dry land is a vigorous swim away. But it's possible to make it!

That's what Hire Hope is to these women. We meet them where they are, hold their hands and say, "Kick hard! Look—swim like this! Keep breathing; you're almost there." And, once they reach the shore, we help them revive the notion of a flourishing life and career that will take them places they've previously never dared to hope.

Looking back, I can only see my whole story as beautiful. Yes, there's been tremendous pain, but I love how it's being used to make a difference. At the heart of it, my story bears similarities to our Hire Hope participants'; there's been trauma, yes, but there is redemption and the heartbreak has given way to new growth and beauty. For me, I wouldn't change a thing.



### REACT

*What do you think of Randstad's approach? Have you benefitted from a mentor in a work situation? Are you a business owner or in another position of being able to train another person in office etiquette, scheduling, business writing, social media, and so on?*