



MAR 4

Posted 2:07pm

Guest Blog: Karen Austin

Sometimes we get the mistaken impression that the only people achieving lofty goals are the elite...the world-class athletes, the cum laude Harvard grads.

But every single one of us has both exciting potential and challenging limitations. It's up to each individual to deem what's possible, what's going to demand tremendous internal resolve, what in the end is going to make that individual proud and fulfilled.

Karen Austin sends us a Guest Blog, sharing her self-doubts, telling us who has inspired her to get up, put one foot in front of the other, and make her best self show up.

-Diana



The Generation Above Me

I step my toe into the water and it feels cold, unfamiliar. I don't feel as though I have the training, the equipment, or the support team. I'm in uncharted waters. But I take a deep breath and jump in anyway. Am I a long distance swimmer? No. I'm a graduate student again at 51. And I'm completely changing careers at midlife.

After teaching college English for almost three decades, I kept hitting roadblocks in my professional growth. I tried to work around them, but nothing was working. I wanted to prove myself by persisting, but the harder I tried, the harder I was failing. Finally, I remembered reading that one of the local schools, [Wichita State University](#), offered a master's program in gerontology, also called aging studies. After focusing on the growth and development of young adults, I felt a strong call to focus the rest of my professional life on the growth and development of older adults.

The year I turned 49, I enrolled in a master's program to begin a radically different career.

After applying to the program, I began reading everything I could find about healthy aging in my local library and on the internet prior to starting classes. I found news stories about Diana Nyad. I read with great interest about her long-standing career as a long-distance swimmer. I later created a [webpage](#) applauding her achievements and those of other mature athletes. I am also inspired by a body builder in her 70s, a gymnast in her 80s, a yoga teacher in her 90s, and a marathon runner in his 100s. I find inspiration in their strength, tenacity and perseverance.

Every time I start a new semester, I feel uneasy about taking classes with younger people who have more clinical experience with older adults than I. I am intimidated by taking graduate-level classes in fields where I have no undergraduate training: social work, communication disorders, biology, sociology, etc. However, I'll watch a video clip or read a news story about mature athletes and tell myself this: ***If they can push themselves beyond their physical limits, I can honor their example by pushing myself a little bit harder emotionally and intellectually.*** So I find my pace, get into the zone and push.

To an outsider, I may look like I'm walking through the stacks of the library as I look for the perfect source or rereading a textbook as I review for an exam or sitting at the computer as I write a 15 page. However, in my mind, I'm pushing through shark-infested waters, shaking off jellyfish stings, and humming



Karen Austin

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the tune to my favorite songs to keep pace. I may not get a medal hanging from a blue ribbon, but I do see a diploma waiting for me at the finish line.

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