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Being a Game Changer – Embracing Diversity and Breaking Down Barriers to Achieve Success

Jessica Freiburg 2004

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Being a game Changer – Embracing Diversity and Breaking Down Barriers to Achieve Success

“whatever you dream of, I believe you can be, from the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea, you can crawl like a crab or with feathers fly high, and I’ll always be here, I’ll be near, standing by, and you know that I’ll love you till the day that I die, whatever you dream of, I believe you can be, for you are my child, courageous and free.”

It is such an honor to be back at Illinois Wesleyan for the 4th annual Women’s Summit and to speak to all of you wonderful women. The excerpt I just read is from a book that my 4 year old daughter got for Christmas. I find it fascinating because even at such a young age we realize that we should not have to be defined as one thing or fit into some sort of box. We are all unique in our own ways. You are all probably thinking that I am here to talk about my phenomenal career as a women’s basketball player at Illinois Wesleyan or my glamorous movie star lifestyle. But sadly no. My story is not extraordinary (I’m an accountant for gosh sakes) but it is unique. And because I was able to take the pieces that made me unique and turn those into something positive for my life, that is why I am here speaking to all of you today. At the end of the day we each define our own journey through life and when we take the challenges we face and turn them into opportunities, that is how we achieve success and become the game changer of our own life.

Diversity comes in many forms – it can be diversity of abilities, age, gender, race, religion, class or sexual orientation. I grew up in a small town in central Illinois, my mom was a teacher, my dad was a salesman, my grandpa was a mail carrier, my grandma was a nurse – all typical careers for their gender. I didn’t know any professional women that

had high powered careers running businesses or leading large teams of people. I didn't know anyone that was gay much less a gay couple raising children. I didn't know anyone who had a parent with a disability. But this is my story. My name is Jessica Freiburg. I am a wife, a mother of four, Partner of a public accounting firm, daughter of a father with disabilities and a proud gay woman. I have embraced diversity, broken down barriers and work every day to be a game changer in life.

When I was 3 years old my dad was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He had the progressive form and his mobility quickly declined. By the time I was 8 years old he was using a wheelchair full time and had to quit working. I remember feeling sad and embarrassed about the fact that my dad was in a wheelchair. I would sometimes choose not to go places with him because people would stare and I would feel uncomfortable. As I got older I realized how lucky I was to have my dad around and how much strength and grit he has. He has fought MS for over 30 years with a smile on his face every day. He has taught me to play the cards we are dealt and don't take life for granted. When I moved to Chicago in 2004, he inspired me to get involved with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. I have served in many capacities over the past 14 years – starting my involvement with their young professional board as well as serving on several national committees. Today I have the honor of serving as a Trustee for the IL Chapter Board.

My experience with the MS Society has taught me leadership skills, helped me build my professional network, raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to support research and programs for those living with MS and make lifelong friendships. MS was a game changer in my life but I

didn't let it take away my relationship with my father, rather I turned it into something positive for my life and others living with the disease.

There's a quote by Bob Moawad that says, "The best day of your life is the one on which you decide your life is your own, no apologies or excuses, no one to lean on, rely on, or blame. The gift is yours – it is an amazing journey - and you alone are responsible for the quality of it. This is the day your real life begins." I think my real life began after I was able to be my true self and come out to everyone I cared about. It wasn't always easy – I faced apprehension, I faced acceptance, I faced sadness and I faced joy. However, I know that others in this same situation have had a much tougher road. They've been shamed and banned from their family which makes this identity struggle even that much more difficult.

I recently watched Ellen's new comedy special, *Relatable*, and she reminisces about when she came out publicly back in 1997. She states the same people who loved me, overnight just hated me, just because they knew I was gay. Everything changed. I went through a depression, and people made fun of me, and people wrote articles about me, dissecting the whole process and why I did it and that I shouldn't have done it. She lost three years' worth of work and almost got turned down for her current talk show because producers were worried that people wouldn't watch a lesbian on TV. But Ellen persevered, she is now famous worldwide and she was a game changer in the LGBTQ Movement. I came out 8 years later in 2005, and although I don't have *quite* as public of a career as Ellen, I faced many of the same fears and worried about how it would affect me professionally.

After I graduated with an accounting degree from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2004, I started my career at a public accounting firm in Chicago. The industry and especially my firm were predominantly run by conservative men so I was nervous coming in as a young, gay, female and wasn't sure what to expect. The first few months of the job were grueling – I was adjusting to working a full time job, studying for the CPA exam, getting acquainted with a new city (one much larger than any city I had ever lived in) and trying to figure out my identity. I was struggling. I contemplated quitting my job, switching careers, moving back to my hometown – any of those which would help me get back into my comfort zone. This may be the same struggle for many of you when you graduate and go off to find a job or figure out the next phase of your life. But the key is to set your mind on a goal and don't give up. I promised myself I would give it a year and I didn't give up and eventually things started to click for me – I began to better understand the purpose of my work, found a mentor that would take me under his wing and share his vast level of knowledge with me and developed a support system of friends and colleagues to help me through those challenging days. These people helped me break down barriers. Barriers created by others and those I put in front of myself by self-doubt. These people were game changers for my career at Sassetti.

I am proud to say that over the past 14 years since coming out of the closet and becoming a professional I have gained confidence and gratitude in who I am. However, in my current role at Sassetti I am constantly networking and meeting new people, which means I am constantly coming out. And to be honest it isn't always easy. It's uncomfortable. But I know I have to continue to be true to myself and continue to pave the way for future generations of lesbian women.

I would be remised if I didn't take a moment to mention my amazing partner, my wife, Michele. She is incredible. She has the very hard job of CEO of our household, taking care of our four young children. Yes, I said four, and all under the age of five – this is usually what shocks people way more now than me being gay! Michele is a real life super hero. Her passion for activism has taught me so much. She's helped me realize that it should be my mission in life to open up people's eyes and give them a better perspective on diversity. To take advantage of the fact that I am a woman and that I am a member of the LGBTQ community as much as possible. Because of this have joined a multitude of women's committees and am now involved in a LBTQ council with the Chicago Foundation for Women. Additionally, at work, I am driven to create an atmosphere inside Sassetti of work/life balance, respect and adaptability to allow for more women to excel inside our firm. Because of that, Sassetti will become a woman owned business within the next five years as our more experienced partners retire and more woman are promoted into this role. This excites and energizes me because I know that creating a more diverse leadership team within our firm will make us more successful and sustainable for the future.

The world is changing in a positive way for women in positions of power. I feel blessed to have been given an opportunity to work my way up and become an owner in my firm. Between 1997 and 2017 the number of women owned business increased by 114%. In 2017, 11.6 million U.S. businesses were women owned. They employed nearly 9 million people and generated more than \$1.7 trillion in revenue. And more than that, 71% of the new women owned businesses launched each day are owned by women of color. Diversity in the workplace is

happening and all of us can do a part in that by continuing to support minority owned businesses and organizations that have similar values to our own. Look at all of the women who were sworn in to the House of Representatives in January – woman of all races, ethnicities, ages and religions. **Women** are stepping up to change the world and make it a better place. Women all around the world are going to be game changers because they know whatever they dream of they believe they can be, from the stars in the sky to the fish in the sea, whatever they dream they believe they can be, just like you and me. My name is Jessica Freiburg. I am a wife, a mother of four, Partner of a public accounting firm, daughter of a father with disabilities and a proud gay woman. I have embraced diversity, broken down barriers and work every day to be a game changer in life...and I hope you will all join me.

Thank you