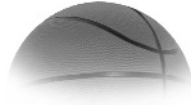


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**BE READY FOR  
CHANGE AND  
ADVENTURE**

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## OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

My husband John and I were standing in the kitchen of our home in East Lansing, Michigan, in March of 2007 when our lives changed forever.

John and I had been discussing the fact that it did not seem like I would ever be able to leave to coach another women's basketball team. Because my Michigan State contract was quite restrictive, it did not appear that there was any chance we could ever leave the state or that I'd have the freedom to work anywhere else.

Being in a place where you *want* to be forever is one thing; however, being told you can *never leave* that place is another matter entirely. John and I were confused and physically tired after the unsuccessful contract negotiations. We felt that we had made a tremendous effort to try to find a solution and had finally come to the conclusion that we were going to respect what we could not control and make the best of it. We were rationalizing by focusing on the fact that we loved our neighbors, we loved the town of East Lansing, and we had an incredible team with players I loved who were returning to school. John truly thought I was meant to coach that team; so we had come to the conclusion that perhaps a move just wasn't in the cards or something we could control at that time.

I was upbeat and excited to move forward. We really had come full circle. Interestingly, there was a calm peace about our conversation that day. We had stood up for our principles, relative to our large buy-out, and we felt good about our attempt to make things better and right. Since we had completed seven great years there, we felt we had earned such freedom and overall support.

We literally were in the middle of contemplating our situation when the discussion was interrupted by a telephone call from Jacki Silar, the longtime administrator of women's sports at Duke. Jacki had been an assistant coach on the women's basketball team when Duke was recruiting me as a player in high school. Since I had spoken to her all those years ago, it felt like a long-lost friend calling. And yet again, she was calling with an invitation: to ask me if I had any interest in becoming the women's basketball coach at Duke, a job which had recently

become vacant. If I had been sitting down, I would have fallen out of my chair.

The timing of the call was as overwhelming as the prospect of coaching at Duke. I was as excited as I had ever been; it almost felt divine. John and I actually started laughing, since we could not believe the timing. Of course, John had no idea who I was talking to when I answered the phone, despite the fact that I was pointing to the phone and mouthing the words “Duke, Duke.” He was shaking his head back and forth with a big smile on his face.

It was not a long conversation; Jacki just wanted to know if I would be interested in the job. Though I thought about my Michigan State players, I convinced myself that they would be better off without me and might benefit from having a different coach. I wondered if I could be as productive with administrators at the school, and whether everybody’s relationships could heal. I knew that my spirit was damaged, and that those feelings could potentially be passed on to my players. Coaches are only as good as their own health and the support around them. If you don’t feel comfortable in the situation you’re in, then it’s tough—almost impossible—to be an effective coach. I had pushed the envelope so far I didn’t know if it could heal properly; I knew that if that didn’t happen, the players would get hurt in the long run. The kids were never the reason I wanted to leave. In fact, I knew that we were leaving a gold mine, and potentially my second Final Four team.

As far as I was concerned, it had to do with taking responsibility as a leader. I knew that I had gotten into a not-so-positive contractual situation. I also knew that healing definitely needed to take place, and I worried whether this was compromising my players in any way. It was a classic case of a parent wanting to protect her kids. With this weighing on my mind, another opportunity surfaced—so I thought maybe this was what was meant to be. I needed to leave so the players could enjoy a new coach with no contractual or relationship issues.

A leader must evaluate a global view as well as the individual fit within the working environment. I refer to this as *collateral damage*; you can win your argument but lose out in the long run. What we learned from the situation was to control what we could; perhaps even more important, I learned to read and understand the long-term consequences

of contracts. The buyout clause was haunting to me in terms of my future, my freedom, and a sense of trust.

Coaching is a very humbling profession, since we truly are all replaceable as coaches. The challenge I was facing only reinforced this point of view. If a school and a coach have principles that don't line up, then difficulties can arise, which was the case in this situation. Like coaches, many business leaders are a product of their relationships. Though it's critical to be a person of principle with a strong belief in your philosophy, your relationships with people are also hugely significant. You have to be careful and understand what—and where—you are willing to compromise in order to move forward most efficiently.

The trials and tribulations of being a coach at a major university are not limited to men's sports. Like any executive in the business world today, women are just as involved as men in life-changing decisions. I know, because it has happened to me.

I was born and reared to be ready for change and adventure. I was always comfortable being the new kid in class. As one of my former high school teachers would later write on my college applications, "Joanne has that rare quality of not fearing being wrong or incorrect when she speaks in class." I always felt that was a thoughtful and very humorous comment to share with all my future college contacts and student-athletes. But it's the truth; I have never been afraid to be wrong. This easy acceptance has helped me grow faster than most people. In fact, I attribute becoming a head coach at the tender age of 26 to this willingness to share information. I consider my naïveté to be an advantage, because it enabled me to drop my guard and listen and learn—whether I was right or wrong. Some folks make the mistake in business of taking a title and letting it control them, especially when they are young. I was excited about my title, but I was definitely a people-driven person. I knew the importance of seeking out older, more experienced folks for advice and to bounce ideas off of regularly.

As a product of a British mom and a mostly Italian naval pilot father, I was always ready to travel almost anywhere. I learned a great deal about survival and fighting through tough times; I've had more than my fair share of handling conflicts and change through transitions and life lessons.

I found out later in life all of those lessons would be quite valuable to me as a college basketball coach.

Even though Duke had called me, I was not immediately offered the coaching job. I had to go visit the campus in Durham, North Carolina, and meet with the committee that would be selecting the coach. I was excited, unsure, motivated—and taking an enormous risk, since Duke had not actually offered me the job. Additionally, the MSU community was not looking favorably on me for engaging in the Duke search.



### MY FIRST MEETING WITH COACH K

Duke officials had sent me my itinerary not long before I was to depart for Durham; much to my disappointment, I saw that a meeting with men's basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski was not on it. I learned early in my career that it is extremely beneficial to have a good rapport and productive relationship with all the athletic programs, but especially with the men's basketball programs. There is no reason why both men's and women's programs cannot be mutually beneficial to one another.

It could be said that I had a very productive working relationship with the men's basketball coach at both the University of Maine and Michigan State. Tom Izzo, at MSU, had taught me to pay attention to great detail and to value a championship coach. With Coach K, I was valuing the very best coach in the business.

Additionally, Coach K is the most influential person in terms of Duke's basketball program and perhaps the greatest coach in the history of the sport. I was not going to get on the plane to fly to Durham without being absolutely sure I was to meet with the person responsible for building Duke into a worldwide basketball power.

To this day, I don't know whether it was Joe Alleva, the athletic director who hired me, or Jacki Silar who set up the meeting with Mike. As it turned out, Coach K was leaving Durham early to begin his USA Basketball duties on the same day I was there. Mike graciously agreed to meet early, at 8:00 AM, just before he took off for his trip.

In retrospect, I was happy with the choice I made about my decision to include Coach K on my itinerary. The impromptu itinerary change may have caused the Duke officials to have been taken aback somewhat since the request was unusual, but I felt good that I had the fortitude and the wherewithal to do what I thought was the right thing to do. At the time of making that decision, I had to check my emotions, stay reasonable, and come up with a solution; and I didn't have a lot of time. Much like calling a certain play in a time and score situation at the end of the game, I hoped I had not only made the right call but had enough time on the clock to execute.

I looked forward to our meeting; I had read Coach K's books throughout my entire coaching career (in fact, I felt I could quote them) and was extremely comfortable meeting him. I was not concerned with whether we'd have something to talk about. I knew that when you can think logically, embrace reason, stay cool—what some people in this day and age call “keeping it real”—then good things can happen. I was immensely excited to get on the plane.

At 8 AM, I walked into Coach K's office and sat down. We talked for more than an hour, and he raised a question at one point: “I understand you have not officially been offered the job?” My reply was, “No, I have not.” With a little higher intonation in his voice—and in a slow, firm statement of care—he asked, “What are you doing here, then?”

It was simply the way he asked that made me think about the question myself. He was interjecting the thought about caring for my entire career and seeing the whole rather than just this part—my attempt to become the coach at Duke. He understood what was happening to me without my telling or even alluding to the facts of what had happened at Michigan State. He was putting the care piece for me ahead of Duke.

Coach K knew my situation at Michigan State, as well as the risk I was taking by coming to Durham without an official job offer. He asked if he could walk with me to my next meeting, and of course I agreed to his extraordinary gesture. We left his office on the sixth floor and went down to the media room on the first floor, where the hiring committee was meeting. He asked me to remain in the hall as he went into the room to talk to the group.

Though I never found out what Coach K said to the committee, I did learn later that he had explained how a coach with my credentials should not have been placed in this position, and he explained the risk I was taking by even being on the Duke campus. He tried to help the committee members understand my situation—and what I was willing to do to get this job.

Mike came out of the room a short while later. He wished me well with my candidacy and gave his regards to my family, then gave me a quick hug. Excited about leaving to coach the USA basketball team, he wished me well and said he hoped to see me at Duke.

Mike's leadership on that morning was an act of random kindness and support. He will never know or understand how much that meant to me—and how it impressed me beyond measure as a coach attempting such a bold personal and professional move.

Whether it was Mike's talk to the committee that convinced them to offer me the job, I will never know. But they did. I said yes, and after days filled with clouds and fog, my world was sunny, bright, and very busy once again.

Ever since I was a young girl growing up in Maine, I had an intense desire to be the best I could be. I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity I was given. I wanted my life to be what *I* wanted it to be, not what somebody else wanted it to be. Without even realizing it at the time, my desire was to live my life by choice, not chance. I have tried to do that ever since, and so far, it's worked out pretty well.

The choice to coach at Duke was an awe-inspiring leap of faith to truly test my abilities at the highest level of the women's game. A motivated, excited, proud, and humbled pioneering spirit churned inside of me as I realized how much there was to do and learn.



**Coach P being interviewed outside the locker room of Cameron Indoor Stadium during the 2010 NCAA Tournament First-Round Media Day on March 19, 2010. Duke hosted the first and second rounds of the 2010 NCAA Tournament.**

*Source:* Duke Photography

### CHAPTER 1 QUESTIONS

- The first chapter deals with a major change in my family's and my life. How have you handled change lately?
- What recent examples of leadership in your life have been lonely or challenging?
- When you have entered new adventures or challenges in your life, what have you done to understand the value of the people who came before you?
- During times of transition or in the face of adversity, what have you done to stick to your principles?
- When in your professional and personal life have you stated what you need and negotiated for it appropriately?