

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

MAKING THE MOST OF
LIFE'S CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

JILL E. SIEGAL

PRAISE FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

“Living itself is an act of courage and living with obstacles with the help of a marvelous program like *Overcoming Obstacles* should help make us bolder.”—RITA MORENO, Award Winning Entertainer

“*Overcoming Obstacles* is a program that teaches the value of goal setting, communicating, problem solving, decision making, and resolving conflicts. Those are the skills that are important in school, on the job, on the football field, and in marriage.”—H. WAYNE HUIZENGA, Founder, Blockbuster Video; Owner, Miami Dolphins

“Since the founding of *Overcoming Obstacles* in 1992, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation has provided annual support. Jill Siegal and her committed team provide the tools young people need to help them set goals, develop job seeking skills, and communicate more effectively. *Overcoming Obstacles* is doing just that—assisting young middle and high school students to overcome obstacles and become more productive, successful members of society.”—STEVEN M. HILTON, President, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

“The *Overcoming Obstacles* program gives our children the coping skills not only to survive, but to excel!”—KENNETH I. CHENAULT, Chairman & CEO, American Express

“Every young person should have the opportunity to receive the relevant skills instruction that the *Overcoming Obstacles* program offers. With your help, we can spread the message that this program carries to every corner of America, helping more and more young people gain the skills they need to achieve their dreams.”—CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN, Former Governor, State of New Jersey

“By teaching communication skills, conflict resolution, decision making, goal setting, and job seeking skills, the dedicated individuals of the *Overcoming Obstacles* program are helping middle and high school students across the country build a brighter future for themselves and their communities.”—AL GORE, 45th Vice President of the United States

“Every great cause needs two things: an inspiration that seems at once fresh and obvious, and a leader who can transform that insight into a crusade. Jill Siegal has done both with the *Overcoming Obstacles* program.”—TONY SNOW, Host, “Weekend Live,” FOX News Channel

“The *Overcoming Obstacles* program proves that communication, decision making, and goal setting can be taught and reinforced with success.”—MANNIE L. JACKSON, Chairman & Owner, Harlem Globetrotters

“The *Overcoming Obstacles* program does what this country needs a lot more of—it instills the skills and values needed to set a child on the path to a successful future.”—DR. RUDOLPH CREW, Former Chancellor, New York City Public Schools

“*Overcoming Obstacles* is a program which in my view is almost without parallel in terms of its impact and effectiveness. Its eventual objective is that all young people will have relevant skills instruction as part of their basic education. That will be a remarkable time for all of us.”—JOHN S. CHALSTY, Trustee, Columbia University

“Our company is very proud to be a part of *Overcoming Obstacles*. I’ve had the opportunity to participate in many great, worthwhile organizations and there are none anywhere that are better than *Overcoming Obstacles*.”—PHILIP J. PURCELL, Chairman & CEO, Morgan Stanley

“Most children are trying to make it. They just need high expectations and the support of people like those at the *Overcoming Obstacles* program. I hope you and I will stand up together to build such a movement.”—MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, Founder & President, Children’s Defense Fund

“The *Overcoming Obstacles* program helps reduce gang involvement, youth violence, and dropout rates, while increasing high school graduation and the employability of each young person. Now you too can be a part of the *Overcoming Obstacles* team.”—MUHAMMAD ALI

“The *Overcoming Obstacles* program does wonderful work by giving kids the tools to be more productive. The people at the Community for Education Foundation time and again show how wonderful they are as citizens.”—LARRY KING, Host, “Larry King Live”

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JILL E. SIEGAL

COMMUNITY FOR EDUCATION FOUNDATION
NEW YORK

In memory of **Jack Siegal**, who taught by example
the importance of communication, decision making,
and goal setting in overcoming life's obstacles.

This book is a publication of Community for Education Foundation
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Telephone orders 888-840-9606

Fax orders 212-406-7480

Orders by email www.overcomingobstacles.org

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-9755754-7-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004108887

Overcoming Obstacles:

Making the Most of Life's Challenges and Opportunities

Book design Julia Sarno

Cover design Emily Muschinske

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Overcoming Obstacles* program would not exist if not for the generosity—time, money and attention—of a lot of people. The first people to believe in the importance of bringing relevant skills instruction to every child were my parents, Jan and Jack Siegal. They gave me the funds needed to incorporate the Community for Education Foundation and everything flowed from there.

At the time of our organization's founding, John Mackey and Jack Kemp joined the cause and brought us a lot of attention and resources that wouldn't have been available if not for their involvement.

When we moved our headquarters from Los Angeles to New York City in 1996, one person more than any other provided the guidance and support our organization needed to fulfill its mission. That individual is John Chalsty, a man who seeks no credit but who deserves much for the development and growth of the *Overcoming Obstacles* program.

A nonprofit organization is only as good as its boards of directors and advisors, and I couldn't be more proud of or grateful for the service of these fine people over the years: Muhammad Ali, Brandi Chastain, Ken Chenault, Donald Douglas Jr., Helene Freeman, Susan Fuhrman, Michael Gelfand, Gary Goldring, Scott Hamilton, Wayne Huizenga, Mannie Jackson, Spike Jones Jr., Jackie Joyner-Kersey, John Katch, Cathy Kinney, Sherry Lansing, Scott Mexic, John Moore, Rita Moreno, Edward James Olmos, Solomon Ortiz, Phil Purcell, Sandy Shapero, Don Shula, Myra Silverman, Tony Snow, Stuart Subotnick, Paul Tagliabue,

Tani Welsh, Christie Whitman, Steve Young, and Whitney Todd Zimmerman.

The time and attention of editors Emily Raabe and Elizabeth Hale, and *Overcoming Obstacles* staff members Tom Kelly, Matthew Damm, Erika Quinn Mancini, and Beatriz Sanchez have made this book about our program something I am very proud of. The encouragement of Denise Marcil, Nellie Sabin, Bart Morrison, Chuck Hamilton, Susan Dawson, and Dale Laurence was also important to the development of the book.

The financial support of key sponsors has helped our program develop and grow. I thank Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette; Occidental Petroleum Corporation; Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; MBNA Corporation; The Clark Foundation; Metromedia Company; The New York Stock Exchange; National Football League; The Herb Alpert Foundation; Dorsey & Whitney LLP; The Goldring Family Foundation; The Tiger Foundation; and, The Annenberg Foundation for their generosity over the years.

Most importantly, I thank the *Overcoming Obstacles* teachers and school administrators who have brought our program to life. I am in awe of what they do each and every day to help our children realize their greatest potential, and to make our world a better place in which to live.

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JOURNEY TO THE “4TH R”

“If you find a path with no obstacles,
it probably does not lead anywhere.”

—Frank A. Clark

We live in a country where optimism and the eagerness to succeed are so engrained in our culture that there is a name for it: The American Dream. But in the twenty-first century, this dream seems harder to realize than ever before.

How can our young people attain something as grand as the American Dream when they do not know how to set a short-term goal? How can our children reach out for help when they lack the ability to express their hopes and fears? And how can they be expected to make good decisions when they do not understand that their actions have consequences? These essential skills—goal setting, communication, and the ability to understand the long-range effects of decision making—are some of the necessary life skills that I have come to call “relevant skills.” Relevant skills are the “4th R,” fundamentals to learning that join Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic as the foundation for a solid education. But unlike the other “Rs,” relevant skills are not explicitly taught in classroom curricula. The unfortunate result is students who are unequipped to cope with the challenges that everyday life places in their path. This omission on the part of our educational system is dooming many of our children to failure.

This book will take you on a journey to the “4th R”—*Relevant skills instruction*. I will show you why we so desperately need this instruction in our classrooms, what the instruction is, and how you can be a successful advocate for the material becoming a part of basic education.

Before you take the journey to the “4th R,” I would like to share with you my own journey. It began with a girl named Sara—a cheerleader, a national merit scholarship finalist, and a bully in junior and senior high school in Pacific Palisades,

California. War with Sara in eighth grade made my life miserable. The battle began over a misunderstanding. Sara thought I had betrayed a secret. I hadn't, but that didn't matter. As I found out years later, the misunderstanding was just her excuse to hurt someone—a strangely cathartic experience for a young woman suffering the abuses of an alcoholic mother and her mother's boyfriend.

You are probably thinking, what could Sara have done that would be so awful? Well, she spread terrible lies and even rallied classrooms to chant hurtful things. I had been hanging out with the popular crowd, “the cool kids.” Needless to say, all of them dropped me cold. I spent breaks and lunch hours in the library, alone, sometimes crying. The bullying eased off in high school, but our graduation in 1979 wasn't the end of my pain.

As an adult, I had recurring nightmares about Sara embarrassing me in front of my peers. I always wondered, why was she so cruel? Why was she so cruel to *me*? What could I have done to avoid it? As an undergraduate major in philosophy, I thought about Sara when we would discuss morality and values. What happened to, “Do unto your neighbor as you would have them do unto you?” Did she want to be abused back? Was that it? Or did she thrive on the attention received by peers impressed with her combat skills? After all, as my popularity decreased, hers increased.

A major turning point for me came at our ten-year high school reunion. As I mingled and chatted, I saw Sara across the room. She came toward me. My heart pounded. My ears throbbed. I started to panic like a kid again. “I'm an adult! Stay cool and composed,” I thought. Then she opened her mouth.

“Jill, I have to apologize,” Sara said.

My mind was reeling—could this actually be happening? Could years of torture truly be coming to an end?

“I was really mean to you in school and I'm sorry,” she said. “I guess I have a lot of bad karma to work off tonight.”

It was a dream come true! The curse was lifted. How fortunate to be one of the lucky ones whose demons could be exorcised. We shook hands. But this was only the beginning.

The reunion propelled me into a deep investigation of childhood cruelty and neglect. Why was Sara, like many kids, so unhappy? I learned in subsequent conversations with Sara that this top academic student dropped out of college and life in her twenties. As she said, “My house of cards came tumbling down.” Could something have been done to help Sara? Can something be done for kids today? I wanted answers, so I spent the next year conducting a research project. The topic: “What is the missing link to effective education?”

My first interview was with Sara. Additional interviews involved fellow classmates, current students, local business owners, teachers, superintendents, and concerned parents. I was shocked to learn how many of my peers were in twelve-step programs to recover from alcohol and substance abuse. I was surprised and saddened to discover how many had married and divorced, how many were dissatisfied with their jobs and career choices, and how many were in therapy to heal childhood wounds. I was also disturbed to hear businesspeople say that they were not able to hire local kids for jobs because the young people had no work ethic.

After all of the interviews, one common theme emerged. Everyone with whom I had spoken—people from different socio-economic backgrounds and generations—offered basically

the same solution to all of these problems: teach our children the skills they need to be successful in life.

From that time till today, I have committed myself to being a part of the solution, which I firmly believe is relevant skills instruction.

The next key event in my journey to the “4th R” occurred on September 29, 1991, when I read a cover story in the *Los Angeles Times* about Amer-I-Can, a program run by NFL Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown. Out of his home in the Hollywood Hills, Jim was teaching life skills to gang members, ex-gang members, former prison inmates, and their family members. I believe it was fate that led me to Jim and Amer-I-Can. On the same day I read the article, I was on the phone with a friend who worked at one of Los Angeles’ radio stations. When I told her I wanted to contact Jim to find out more about Amer-I-Can, she said, “Hold on. Our station manager was just married at Jim’s house. He’ll have Jim’s phone number.” Indeed, not only did he have Jim’s number, but he was speaking with Jim at the precise moment my friend ran into his office.

I called Jim Brown immediately and he invited me to a meeting at his house that evening. In fact, he challenged me to come to the meeting. He was skeptical that a white “bougie” (Jim’s word for middle class—short for “bourgeois”) woman would come up to his home and attend a meeting of over one hundred kids from the inner city.

I spent that evening and the next three months first training and then facilitating group life skills sessions for Amer-I-Can. I had the privilege of working with young men who had given up—or were trying to give up—a negative lifestyle in order to

create something positive for themselves and their families. I saw how a little bit of information went a long way in helping young people change. These young men learned about time management, respect for self and others, and personal responsibility. The problems they faced were strikingly similar to those the children in Pacific Palisades encountered: how to ask for help, resist negative peer pressure, plan for the future, find a job and meaningful career, and build a healthy family. I decided to leave Amer-I-Can in January of 1992. Jim’s focus was on community centers and prisons. Mine was on changing our nation’s *system* of education.

As I dug deeper into the inadequacies of education, I learned why the skills relevant to success had not yet become a part of basic education. According to Sidney Thompson, then superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, the instruction was most definitely needed, but there were no comprehensive curriculum materials available for relevant skills instruction, or quality professional development.

Before I left Amer-I-Can, I became acquainted with one of Jim’s friends, John Mackey, another NFL Hall of Fame player. For decades, John had worked to bring hope and opportunity into people’s lives through his businesses and as a motivational speaker. When I told John my dream of creating an organization that could bring relevant skills curriculum materials to America’s teachers, he said, “Whatever you need, let me know!” Over the years, John opened doors to funders, served as a guest speaker in classrooms, and offered guidance for program growth.

By April of 1992, my mother and father, Jan and Jack Siegal, had given me the funds to incorporate the Community for Education Foundation, a nonprofit organization with the goal of bringing relevant skills instruction into the education of every

child. That summer, John Mackey introduced me to his good friend of many years, Jack Kemp, then secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. I shared with Jack my strategy for youth empowerment and community building through a “4th R.” He immediately came aboard.

With the help of John and Jack, and the involvement of other board members, private foundation partners, corporate sponsors, community leaders, and friends, the Community for Education Foundation launched the *Overcoming Obstacles* program in the fall of 1992. Since that time, we have worked with thousands of educators across the country to impact the lives of hundreds of thousands of students with relevant skills instruction. While these numbers are impressive, there are still so many children to reach, and the “4th R” will be taught to every child if and only if parents, educators, and concerned citizens demand it of their schools.

Imagine what our world will be like when all children learn the skills relevant to success. During their regular school day, our kids will learn how to make appropriate decisions, set and achieve meaningful goals, and communicate well with everyone in their lives from parents and employers to teachers and friends. They will learn how to ask for help. They will learn how to respect themselves and others. And they will learn how to apply to college, write a résumé, fill out a job application, and advance within their chosen career. They will also learn the importance of community service. Our world will have far less crime, a motivated and skilled workforce, a stronger economy, and many more responsible citizens and healthy children. The “4th R” is a bridge to that world.