We hear stories of people who have turned tragedy into triumph and we wonder if we would do the same. We hear stories of people who have reinvented themselves and we wonder why we haven't tried. We often hear about people who are resilient, show grace under pressure, capture the moment or just lift your spirit with their personality. But when you hear about all these qualities referring to one person, that person is undoubtedly Anthoula Katsimatides.

She is an American actor from Queens, New York, born to Greek immigrants. She speaks Greek fluently and has taught school in both countries. After earning a business degree Anthoula worked as an account executive for a top NY creative ad agency. She then went on to earn a Master's degree in education, after which she taught ESL classes at the high-school level.

She worked for New York Governor George Pataki in community affairs and public relations, "I sold the Office of the Governor and his message." Those skills would become invaluable in her next calling. On a sunny Tuesday morning in the fall of 2001, Anthoula's brother John was killed in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. John worked at Cantor Fitzgerald, a firm that lost 658 employees in one single, horrific blow.

Before the dust of that violence had settled, Anthoula began working with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation (LMDC), where she interacted directly with the families of the victims, performed crisis management, kept the families apprised of what was happening and relayed their concerns back to the offices of the mayor and governor. While wrestling back her own grief to be the rock for her parents, she tirelessly lent support and comfort to hundreds of families in an environment that was often angry and frustrating, always fraught with sadness, yet for Anthoula, backlit by a persistent sunrise.

The words of her brother, John, helped her see the light beyond the shadows. A little more than a year before John was killed, Anthoula's younger brother committed suicide. In the Greek tradition, Anthoula would wear black for a year, but in the days and weeks that followed, John pushed her to "be beautiful," to put the dark clothing back in the closet and live as my friend Randy Gage says, "out loud and in color." The day we first met on Manhattan's lower east side, I spotted her from a block away. With her purple outfit and sway, a kind of female swagger, she stood out on a dreary street like the little red coat in "Schindler's List." The memory of John's exhortations help her still today in her approach to living.
The emotional torrent of her life is evident in her passionate manner of expressing herself. Anthoula is funny, spiritual, curses like a stevedore and welcomes you into her personal space; she often brims with tears. She is the dark and olive-completed Catherine of Aragon, defiant of misfortune, emboldened by it. You may call that analogy a stretch, but the way I see it, the only difference between a person like Anthoula and a historical figure is circumstances.

The US Olympic Committee

In 2004 the Olympics took place in Greece. "I was so proud that the Olympics were going home to Greece, but it was unbelievable to me that I wasn't going and that I wasn't going to be a part of it. The overachiever in me wasn't satisfied to watch or be a tourist. I needed to work."

Fortunately, there was a board member of the LMDC who was also a board member of the US Olympic Committee. "He said, 'Anthoula, don't you speak Greek? There doesn't seem to be a Greek-speaking person going to the Olympics with the USOC.' So I said, well maybe I should be that person. I took a hiatus, went to Colorado for meetings to determine my role and I ended up being the liaison for the USOC members in Greece. I went to all the ceremonies, the games, translated for the dignitaries and athletes and was just there to help them navigate through a variety of situations."

Curiously, what started as a trip for Anthoula back to her homeland became a realization of how much she loves being from the United States. "I was such a proud American, ironically, like I thought, I'm going to Greece; I'm so excited. But I wore red, white and blue every day. I cheered on the American team. There was an anti-American sentiment at the time and maybe because of 9/11 - but I felt this incredible patriotism."

Offstage/Onstage It's All in a Life

So how did Anthoula become an actor? It's a divergence in a career path most of us would be timid about making, but Anthoula puts it perspective.

"In each job I held, I was asked by my profession to act, not acting in terms of being fake but acting in terms of living in the moment, performing, selling a story. Whether it was selling for an ad agency or selling 'irony' to high school kids, who really didn't want to be there, or selling a governor's persona, it's all performing. I was always required to be 'on.' Everything that I've done has in some way prepared me for this career change."

I asked her to choose among film, television and the theater if she could only do one. She said there are too many reasons why each one would be great. She identifies with different actresses in their genres. But performing on stage gives you an immediate response, "Every night is different depending on the audience. Every night you get a different kind of feeling when you walk off the stage. The applause is fulfilling; you walk away knowing you made some people happy."

Being an actor is hard work; "you are a commodity and you must constantly work at your profession, improve your craft, keep your name out there, make connections. I met Bob DeNiro on the Board for the 9/11 memorial and he is a gracious man (he insists she call him Bob, not Mr.
DeNiro or Mr Vitti). He introduced me to a casting director and after months of waiting, on the night of my father's funeral I got a call that I had been offered a part. A sign. Bob also autographed about ten movie posters that I purchased. Every year I raffle one off for my foundation." What, I didn't mention she also runs a charitable foundation?

"I look at September 11th in terms of September 12th. People from all over the world reached out to help me in the aftermath, so I want to help others." That quote perfectly represents the Anthoula state of mind, to always look for the healing rather than the blaming. From the mission statement of the JaM Foundation, "The Johnny and Mikey Katsoy Armstides Foundation for Life, Inc. was named for and inspired by the tragic loss of two brothers...The Foundation seeks to promote a diverse set of charitable endeavors, including music education, cancer research, aid for underprivileged youth, suicide prevention and the rights of crime victims by donating funds raised through a variety of community events to charities that embody the spirit, character and lives of John and Mike."

Like so many of the inspirational women I've been blessed to meet, Anthoula puts in the requisite 16-hour days. "Acting is a business and I work hard at it every day. You have to tune your instrument, that means taking classes, rehearsing and studying. I don't see my closest friends because I'm networking with casting directors, agents, producers and others in the industry." After all the heartache, the hard work is beginning to bring rewards.

Anthoula is flying to Paris to shoot a scene for a movie with Deniro and Michelle Pfeiffer. "The payoff for me is being privy to watching Deniro and Pfeiffer work, alongside one of France's most well-respected directors, Luc Besson."

Anthoula sends out a monthly e-zine to keep her associations abreast of things like her upcoming one-person show. On October 22, 2012 at the Shetler Studios on West 54th Street, in NYC, as part of five original solo shows, Anthoula will perform one she wrote called, "What Will People Say?" An old-fashioned family, a mugging, suicide, politics and a little dancing in between...

Anthoula is the effervescent personification of a phrase commonly used in personal development circles, "It's not what happens to you - it's what you do with what happens to you." She has the kind of story that Tony Robbins talks about just before the fire walk. Extraordinary things have happened to this woman, some wonderful and some awful, but her drive to find goodness and to uncover that which is enriching in every circumstance, is what makes Anthoula extraordinary.

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