

Inspiration

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LeAnn Hilgers went from barely being able to move to being a taekwondo champ and motivational speaker. Now she helps others to overcome adversity and reach their dreams.



LeAnn Hilgers has a lot on her to-do list these days: Shuttle back and forth between offices in Calgary, Lethbridge and San Francisco; give motivational speeches across North America; prepare her weekly radio show on the Voice America network; practice taekwondo; finish her PhD — the list goes on and on.

But ask her what was on her to-do list 10 years ago and you'll get a decidedly different answer.

"I was basically laying in bed planning my own funeral," says Hilgers, talking of her darkest days, living in Lethbridge with a condition that blocked the intake of nutrients from her food and left her exhausted. "I mean, that was it, I couldn't do anything, or at least I thought I couldn't."

After months of doctor visits, Hilgers says she was no closer to a remedy. She was rick-thin, constantly tired and almost ready to give up on life.

Then someone suggested she take up martial arts and her whole world changed. It was a struggle for the first few sessions of taekwondo, but soon, she says, her energy level increased. Though her doctor advised against exercise, Hilgers continued and soon left the doctor behind.

"I told him I fell better and he said, 'you're welcome,'" she says with a laugh.

Within a few years, Hilger had gone from waiting to die to winning a silver medal at a national-level taekwondo tournament in New Zealand. She credits the exercise and self-confidence with helping her through her illness and setting her on a whole new road in life.

"Martial arts really gave me my power back. Everything flowed from there."

Hilgers started using her own story to make a point when she was helping organizations with their information services (she's a PhD candidate in the field). People kept telling her how inspired they were by her words, and eventually she decided to try motivational speaking.

"I realized that I could make a real difference in people's lives if I dropped the business side of my presentation and focused on the inspirational side."

Her philosophy is simple: Negative thinking doesn't yield results. Positive thinking does.

"Every time you tell yourself you can't, you buy it," she says. "It's garbage. Your limitations are garbage; throw them out."

Hilgers began to get a reputation as a speaker and by April of last year had decided to turn it into a full-time occupation. Soon after, she got a call from Voice America, an Internet talk radio network, who offered her a radio show.

She accepted and began producing programs based on her motivational talks. She also brought on guests who told their own success stories. Within a few months, she learned she was reaching up to 100,000 listeners.

"When they first called me up, I said 'Who are you?'" Hilgers recalls with a laugh. "Next thing you know I'm seeing the ratings. I had no idea how many people were listening."

Hilgers's show, *The Dream Big Revolution*, is now one of the highest rated shows on the Voice America network, which also airs programs by relationship guru John Gray (*Men Are From Mars*) and others.

Though she's taking things one step at a time, Hilgers already has her sights set on a television talk show in the hopes of reaching more people with her message.

"Whatever happens, I want to keep inspiring people to new heights. It's the most satisfying thing a person can do and I'm incredibly lucky to be able to make a living at it."

PHOTO BY KIM WALBURGER

To find out more about LeAnn Hilgers and how you can tune in to her radio show, go to www.leannhilgers.com

CITY/REGION

When it comes to motivation, the sky's the limit for LeAnn

By **SHERRI GALLANT**

Lethbridge Herald

As a rising star in the realm of motivational speaking, LeAnn Hilgers has travelled light years from a point in her life when she was confined to her bed, emaciated and planning her own funeral.

That was a handful of years ago, yet the journey is one of epic proportions. It begins when the

Saskatchewan farm girl — transplanted to Lethbridge — began to waste away despite eating a normal diet.

At five-feet, eight inches tall, she could barely function once her weight had dropped to 90 pounds but somehow continued to work and take classes toward a masters degree. Doctors failed to mitigate the effects of what she now knows are food allergies and an inability to absorb nutrients.

Against the advice of her doctor, Hilgers enrolled in a martial arts class at a Lethbridge school and, while even stretching was nearly impossible at first, within two weeks she began to feel better. After two more weeks, she told her doctor she felt strong and healthy and, even though he continued to advise against it, she increased her classes in taekwondo and steadily gained back her strength.

In 2004, she moved to New Zealand to further her career as a motivational speaker on corporate strategic alignment, a niche that she and a New Zealand colleague had the market cornered on to some degree. Her career was flourishing and her martial arts training intensified when she enrolled at a school where a number of the instructors were world

champions.

She set a goal for herself to have the courage to try out for a team being trained for national competition.

"I had no delusions, I'd never done anything athletic until two years before," she recalls. "I just wanted the courage to sign up and then run out before the laughter started. I was doing stuff I never thought I'd be able to do and I was in really excellent shape. I signed up and

nobody laughed."

Tryouts went on for several months and when the names were announced for the Auckland North team, she was stunned to hear hers included. The surreal moment proved to be pivotal for Hilgers. She captured a silver medal.

She calls Lethbridge home again, but has been staying in San Francisco for the past few weeks, working on her Internet radio show

to learn more, visit www.leannahilgers.com.



HERALD PHOTO BY DAVID FULLER
Multivocal speaker LeAnn Hilgers has come a long way since being confined to a bed and planning her own funeral.

to do something, then maybe you should be doing it. If you hate your job, then maybe you need a different job — something that you are motivated to do. And if you are doing something that you love and that you're passionate about, you don't need to be 'plugged in' — you'll have enough energy to do it. And that's what I try to get people to do, make choices, and make easy, simple choices.

Hilgers, 38, challenges people to dream big to set goals first, then dream. And dream big. To learn more, visit www.leannahilgers.com.

"The Dream Big Revolution", pulling together an advertising team and producing motivational vignettes for television.

"The Dream Big Revolution," which debuted in May on Voice America's 7th Wave Network, is sandwiched between Dr. John Gray and Chloë Wordsworth, both heavyweights in the self-help industry.

Already her ratings have put her near the top and she's starting her second season.

"I give really simple practical advice," she said. "When I talk about your dreams, what I say is OK let's set down your goals. You don't need to be plugged into an energy source because if it's something that you realize is benefiting you, and if it's something that you value and you believe in, important, you will be motivated to do it."

Most of all, she cautions against accepting limitations on one's potential.

"We hear 'I can't,' or we tell ourselves 'I can't' and then we believe it, and then we can't. Don't buy it. Your limitations are self-imposed. I call them the Mr. Snuffleguano (of beliefs) because they're invisible to everybody else and we're the only ones who know they exist."

People often approach her, knowing she is a motivational speaker, and ask her to motivate them.

"No, I can't. Sorry. If you're not motivated to do something, then maybe you should be doing it. If you hate your job, then maybe you need a different job — something that you are motivated to do. And if you are doing something that you love and that you're passionate about, you don't need to be 'plugged in' — you'll have enough energy to do it. And that's what I try to get people to do, make choices, and make easy, simple choices."

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Taekwon-do benefits former Muenster resident

by *Jacquie Bergerman*
Journal staff writer
 Her story proves more benefits than usually thought possible.

Approximately 10 years ago, LeAnn Hilgers, originally from the Muenster area, became mysteriously ill. She became intensely hypoglycemic, developed assertive food allergies, and experienced food malabsorption.

After two years of battling these issues, Hilgers' health had declined to the point where she was extremely ill.

"I started wasting away and weighed less than 90 pounds. I was so weak I stayed in bed," she explained.

It was at this low point during her illness that a friend suggested Hilgers take taekwon-do, a martial art that primarily teaches self-defense techniques.

Against the strict advice of her doctor, Hilgers chose to attend a class.

"I got exhausted just putting on the uniform," she remembers.

Hilgers followed along with what she could handle during that first class, but left feeling "absolutely hooked."

Within two weeks of attending taekwon-do classes, Hilgers started feeling better. She had been ill for two years at this point, and was wary of believing that after such a short time she would experience such benefits.

Hilgers continued to attend taekwon-do classes and within six weeks felt healthy and strong. Her malabsorption, hypoglycemia, and allergies were not eliminated, but her strength and vitality had returned.

"Before I started taekwon-do, I had never been in sports — I was anti-athletic. Taekwon-do appealed to me because of the social element. It was also empowering because I learned to take care of

myself. Once you understand that you have power, that bleeds into every other aspect of your life," Hilgers stated. "All of a sudden I was kicking and punching."

The sport also appealed to her as it was an excellent stress reliever.

At this time, Hilgers was completing her MBA in Calgary, and life wasn't easy.

"School wasn't working out, I was working a bleak job with an abusive boss, and was in a bad marriage."

Hilgers stumbled upon the chance to complete her degree at a New Zealand school and decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

When she arrived in New Zealand, she immediately sought out a taekwon-do club and came across a one that had world champions as teachers. She quickly joined and began training hard.

During her training, Hilgers decided that she needed a goal. She chose to sign up to try out for the National team. Her initial goal was to get the courage just to sign up. Once she did this, she tried out and was surprised to find that she qualified.

"I learned what high performance athletics is all about," she said.

Her training was comprised of jogging several kilometres a day and taekwon-do two and a half hours a day, up to four days a week. Hilgers also mentioned that she "had the privilege of working with excellent instructors."

Hilgers trained hard and qualified for Nationals. Three days before the competitions started, she didn't make her weight category. Instead of resigning herself to defeat, she stayed focussed on her dream and prepared herself to qualify. Her focus

paid off and she eventually made her weight category.

Before the competition began, Hilgers focussed her energy on mental preparation. She pulled through the first day and ended up qualifying for the gold medal round in her weight class.

Hilgers took time to mentally prepare for the gold medal round, sizing up her opponent. When her time came to fight, Hilgers came on strong, gaining some powerful hits.

Once her opponent saw her strength, she powered back with a blow that broke Hilgers' nose. Hilgers stayed on her feet and remained in the competition.

At the break mid-way through the fight, Hilgers was asked if she was okay to

return to the match. She hadn't come all this way to back down, but she didn't know if she could finish. Her coach took one look at her and put her back in the fight, which, according to Hilgers, was the best decision he could have made for her.

At the end of the match, Hilgers and her opponent anxiously waited for the verdict. Usually, winners are determined quite quickly; however, this match was so close that the judges had to take a few extra moments to come to their decision.

The winner was announced, and Hilgers was awarded a silver medal.

"I never thought this was possible," she said. "We all have skills, abilities, and talents that we had no idea we have."

Hilgers moved back to Calgary in 2006 and has become a motivational speaker, using her story to inspire others to dream big. She travels around the world and in May 2008 started her own talkshow on Voice America. Midway during her first season, Hilgers became one of the top-ranked hosts on her network. Her show discusses success and goals.

"The focus of my show is to stop wasting time and get what you want," Hilgers told the *Journal*.

Hilgers' show features ordinary people who have done extraordinary things with their lives.

"We're all presented with opportunities and challenges. No one's life is perfect. You make choices to make a better life for yourself, your dream life," she commented.

Hilgers wants to dedicate her life to helping people realize their dreams.

"I have the best job," she smiled. Hilgers still enjoys taekwon-do today as it gives her a sense of freedom and empowerment; she also likes the social aspect of the sport, saying "there are so many benefits."



Silver medalist

LeAnn Hilgers, formerly of Muenster, won a silver medal in a national taekwon-do competition in New Zealand. The martial art helped Hilgers gain her strength back after a long illness.