'I will survive!'

Ever wondered how you'd cope with a crisis? Jacqui Paterson meets six incredible women who have overcome illness, personal demons and life's many challenges to achieve some phenomenal goals. Prepare to be inspired... ▷

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY. STYLING PAMELA HARRIS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP DEBBIE KORRIE. FOR CLOTHES FEATURED ON THESE PAGES, SEE ADDRESS BOOK

◁ **Sarah Peck, 32, lives in Devon, with husband Cris, 42, and children Joe, 8, Sam, 7, and Charlotte, 2. She was diagnosed with myeloid leukaemia on the day she learnt she was pregnant with Charlotte.**

'I risked my life for my baby'

"Hearing the happy news of my pregnancy followed by the bombshell of life-threatening leukaemia was terrifying. I'd been exhausted for a while and, after visiting my doctor, I was sent for blood tests, which I presumed would show a recurrence of the anaemia I'd had before. Instead, the tests revealed I had leukaemia. At first, we didn't know what type of leukaemia it was, and my GP wasn't sure if I could carry the baby to full term. Everything was a blur as I listened to the diagnosis, and it wasn't until I got home that it hit me that I might not see my two boys grow up. I was inconsolable.

"Cris and I briefly considered terminating the pregnancy so that I could start treatment immediately. But, to be honest, that was never an option for us. The baby was healthy and my blood supply was separate from hers, so the leukaemia couldn't be passed to her. We simply couldn't abort a healthy baby and agreed we had to give her every chance at life. I had to delay my treatment, which meant my condition could become acute at any time. But it was a risk we were willing to take, and my doctor was supportive. He agreed that if there were any changes in my condition, we would reassess the situation.

"With careful monitoring Charlotte was born by caesarean section at 38 weeks. I breastfed her for two weeks, then started an intensive course of chemotherapy, followed by a day of total body irradiation and a stem-cell transplant. That's when I felt at my lowest. I was separated from my family and my newborn baby, I lost all my hair and I felt terribly ill. Nevertheless, I clung to my grandmother's philosophy – that there are always people worse off than you are. At least I was lucky enough to have a family to support me. In my darkest moments, visits from my husband and children were all that kept me going. Our childminder would bring Charlotte to my isolation room every day, and Cris would bring the boys in at night. Just seeing them and holding their little hands gave me strength.

"Getting the all-clear in March last year was the happiest moment of my life. Friends and family say I'm more laid-back than I used to be. I don't worry about little things, so if the boys refuse to get dressed in the morning I let them stay in their pyjamas. As long as we're happy and healthy, nothing else really matters to me."

'I set up a school for autistic children'

Sam Hilton, 37, from Kent, has two severely autistic sons, Max, 9, and Charlie, 7. Her eldest son Josh, 13, has Asperger's Syndrome. Sam set up Step By Step, a charitable school for autistic children, when her local authority refused to provide specialist teaching for Max.

"It was heartbreaking to see Max struggling at school. My husband Damien and I had initially paid for him to have a private tutor in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – a training system for autistic children. Max had shown such a huge improvement that I begged the Local Education Authority (LEA) to subsidise it. But they insisted that if he couldn't cope with a mainstream education he would have to go to a special-needs school, even though none of them catered for autistic children. I knew he would continue to deteriorate without ABA and I was determined to fight for it.

"Our ABA tutor put me in touch with other frustrated families and before long I had the idea of setting up our own school. We raised funds with raffles and sponsored car washes, then applied for government and education grants. After raising £500,000, Step By Step opened in September 2003 with 10 places for autistic children. We'd battled so much red tape, but our determination kept us going.

"Then came the bombshell that the LEA wouldn't recognise Step By Step. Once more, I refused to be bullied, and took them to an educational tribunal – twice. The first ruling was against us, and was devastating; Damien and I lost thousands of pounds in legal fees, but I continued to send Max to Step By Step. This time I faced the threat of imprisonment for truancy, due to Max's 'unauthorised absences' from mainstream school – but I only had to look at Max's progress to know I was doing the right thing. When we won the second tribunal I felt huge relief. But, sadly, the stress of the past five years took its toll on our marriage, and last Christmas Damien and I split up.

"At times it felt like I was fighting an impossible battle – it was a real David and Goliath situation. Some people have since called me an inspiration, but the way I see it, I'm just proof that if you really believe in something and refuse to give up, you can succeed. I've sacrificed a lot, but I was just doing what was best for my son – as any mother would. Before, due to his condition, Max wouldn't look me in the eye. Now he holds my face in his hands and says 'I love you, Mummy'. That makes everything worthwhile.

● Visit stepbystepschool.org.uk ▷

'I support victims of forced marriage'

Jasvinder Sanghera, 42, from Derby, has three children, Natasha, 21, Anna, 13, and Jordan, 9. At 15 she ran away from home to avoid an arranged marriage. After her elder sister, Robina, killed herself to escape her abusive marriage, Jasvinder founded Karma Nirvana, a charity to support victims of forced marriage.

"When I was just 14 my mother showed me a photo of the man they'd arranged for me to marry. I'd seen my five older sisters married off to complete strangers, forced to give up school and wait on their new husbands. I was adamant that wasn't going to be me. So at 15, I ran away with my secret Asian boyfriend, Jassey, and rented a bedsit in Newcastle. My family cut me off. 'In my eyes you are dead,' my mother hissed when I called a few weeks later. After that she would hang up whenever she heard my voice.

"Jassey and I scraped by on social benefit. A year later we moved to Leeds and opened a market stall, selling watches. I was very lonely and dreaded birthdays and Christmas, which reminded me of all I'd lost. When I fell pregnant at 18 with Natasha I felt even more vulnerable.

"Having a baby taught me that a mother's love should be unconditional, and that I'd been brainwashed by my family into thinking I was bad. Some members of the Asian community even told me to commit suicide because I was 'worthless'. Having Natasha made me realise I could never turn my back on my child, and that my parents were the ones in the wrong. Finally, I began to move on with my life.

"But I never gave up phoning my family, and eventually my youngest sister Lucy and older sister Robina started to talk to me again. When I was 22 Robina told me her husband was violent to her. A week later she was dead. She had committed suicide by setting herself on fire.

"Knowing how desperate she must have felt to end her life in such agony made my heart break, yet at her funeral all my sisters, except Lucy, ignored me. It was this attitude that prompted me to set up Karma Nirvana in 1994. Now, in association with Refuge charity, we have four Asian women's refuges. I try to show

women in my position that they aren't alone and that they do have options. I also encourage them to let go of anger. It eats you up, while forgiveness allows you to move on.

"It's so fulfilling to see a scared, battered woman blossom. They come in, barely able to meet my eye, and leave full of confidence."

● Karma Nirvana's helpline is on 01332 604098

'How I survived after losing my legs'

Diana Morgan, 46, a PR executive from London, lost both her legs in 1990 when she fell between a train and the platform. After years of legal battles, she finally reached a settlement with British Rail, and in 2003 was appointed chief executive of the Limbless Association. Today, she counsels others who have lost limbs, including victims of the 7 July bombing.

"It was the normal after-work rush to meet friends for dinner. My train was sitting at the platform, doors open, but as I stepped into the carriage it jolted and I slipped between the train and the platform. As I tried to pull myself back up, the doors closed and the train began to pull away. No one could hear my screams for help. One of my legs was torn off and I lost the other when I was electrocuted by the tracks.

"After the accident I had some terribly dark days. I struggled to accept what had happened, and felt as though I was trapped in a nightmare. One moment I was an active career woman, the next I was a double amputee lying helpless in a hospital bed. The physical pain was beyond anything I had ever experienced, but the psychological pain was more traumatic. Not only did I have to adapt to life without my legs, I also had to fight British Rail for compensation. It took two years for them to admit liability and a further three to get compensation.

"I decided to take things one moment at a time and I never tortured myself by wondering, 'Why me?'. Instead I thought, 'Why not me?'. Bad things happen to people all the time; you just have to remain positive. And although the court case was traumatic, it was an outlet for my anger.

"My experience taught me some valuable life lessons. I'm more positive than I was before. I know that sadness and happiness are both part of life's cycle, and that when things are bad they will get better. That's hugely empowering. A year after I lost my legs, I met my husband David, and two years later our daughter Lara was born. Those moments kept my spirits up.

"To women going through tough times I'd say, give yourself time to grieve and heal. Don't sit on anger and do take positive action. For me, that was working with the Limbless Association, counselling other amputees. And remember, change is always on the way."

● For advice, visit limbless-association.org ▷

'I have two businesses and six children'

◁ **Louise Ward, 40, from Torquay, Devon, has six children, Roo, 15, Nancy, 14, Poppy, 12, and Peach, 11, from a previous relationship, plus Lulu, 3, and Joe, 2. She runs her own hair salon, and is renovating a restaurant with her husband, Patrick, 39.**

I've always found being a mum incredibly fulfilling. I love having children and was determined to be around as they grew up. But I had ambitions too. Luckily, as a hairdresser, my work has always fitted around nursery and school hours. Although it's taken a lot of time management, my busy life is hugely satisfying. By contrast, my husband Patrick felt unfulfilled working in telecommunications and was not enjoying the draining daily commute. After five years of this, we were both desperate to spend more time together as a family. Opening the restaurant seemed the obvious choice as we'd previously run a bistro together and really enjoyed it.

"When the restaurant opens Patrick will run it. But as I also have catering experience, I'll help out when he needs an extra chef or waitress! We'll be working seven-day weeks to start with – and it's already a full-on juggling act combining work, family, the renovations and the salon. There are days when everything seems to go wrong and when I think of all the money we've borrowed and the risks we're taking – I just want to walk away. But then I step back, look at everything I've achieved so far in my life, and I feel proud. Having a dream and acting on it is incredibly satisfying, and knowing that we're building a family business, one that will give us a better quality of life, makes it all worthwhile.

"You have to be prepared to compromise and make sacrifices as a working mother, especially with two businesses and six children. Yes, there are moments when I feel guilty, but I meet my children from school at least twice a week, and I never miss big events like concerts and sports days. Birthdays are a big deal in our house too; it's important that everyone feels special. I always walk home from the salon as it allows me to wind down from the day, and by the time I walk through the front door I'm 'Mum'. One cuddle and all the stress simply melts away."

'I motorcycled to Timbuktu'

Carole Poirot, 39, an interior designer from Norwich, is married to Martin, 36, a financial adviser, and has a son, Dylan, 8. She was the only woman in a team of motorbike riders who completed a gruelling month-long rally from Lisbon to Timbuktu, North Africa, in January this year.

"Being a mother has always come first in my life, but I'm also an adventurous person and I think it's important to push yourself beyond your comfort zone. That's why I learnt to ride a motorbike, and it's also what inspired me to sign up for the rally. I'm a mum, but I'm an individual too, and this seemed like the ultimate way to prove it. It was also a great way to show Dylan that anything is possible if you put your mind to it. Initially, friends and family were quite surprised – especially since I'd only learnt to ride two years earlier. But once they'd got over their shock, everyone was really supportive, particularly my husband.

"I rode with a group of 35 men, and even though I was the only woman and had the least riding experience, everyone accepted me immediately. They gave me loads of encouragement and advice, and offered invaluable tips on cornering – my weakest skill!

"But being away from my husband and son was harder than I'd ever imagined. We kept in touch, of course, with text messages and mobile calls, but I felt really homesick during the first week. Some days we'd ride for 12 hours straight, by which time I couldn't even feel my backside. I often collapsed, exhausted, not sure if I could go on. We were travelling off-road through isolated parts of northern Africa and there was even a risk of kidnapping. I'd think of my family back home and wonder, 'Am I being selfish, putting myself at risk?'

"But whenever I felt really vulnerable the guys would quickly raise my spirits with a joke. Most nights we'd stop at sunset and chill out over a meal and a few beers. I'd think about how far I'd come that day and everything I'd experienced; how the African children would crowd around us when we stopped for breaks in the tiny, remote villages; how the wind rushed past my face, and terrain evolved from thick bushland to undulating sand hills. Then I'd feel a real rush of excitement and pride.

"After two weeks on the road we arrived, finally, dusty and delighted, in Timbuktu. As I hugged my fellow riders, I couldn't wipe the huge grin off my face. I'd made it – and it was the most fantastic feeling in the world. I arrived back in the UK having travelled a total of 8,000 miles in four weeks. I was happier and more confident than I'd ever felt – living proof that every risk you take makes you stronger." □