

Minda Dentler - TED Talk TRANSCRIPT

It was October 13, 2012, a day that I will never forget. I was on my bike, pushing up what seemed like a never-ending barren hill.

And it wasn't just any hill: it was a 15-mile climb up to a town called Hawi on the Big Island of Hawaii. And it wasn't just any ride: it was at the Ironman World Championship. I can still feel my muscles burning.

I was struggling, tired and dehydrated, as I could feel the heat emanating from the asphalt, measuring almost 98 degrees. I was near the halfway point of the bike portion of one of the most prestigious, longest, single-day endurance race events in the world.

Every year, during my childhood, I watched this very race on TV in our family living room. I sat next to my dad on our 1970s-style orange and brown sofa, and I remember being in utter awe at how these athletes pushed themselves to their limit in this grueling race.

And just so you don't get the wrong idea, my family members weren't just spectators. They were incredibly athletic, and I always participated from the sidelines, cheering on my three siblings or handing out water at local races. I remember wanting so badly to be able to compete, but I couldn't.

Even though I couldn't play sports, I decided to be active in my community. I volunteered at the local hospital in high school. In college, I interned at the White House, studied abroad in Spain and backpacked through Europe all by myself with my leg braces and crutches.

Upon graduating, I moved to New York City for a job in management consulting, earned an MBA, got married and now have a daughter.

At age 28, I was introduced to the sport of hand-cycling, and then triathlon, and by luck, I met Jason Fowler, an Ironman World Champion, at

a camp for athletes with disabilities.

And like me, he competed in a wheelchair. And with his encouragement, at age 34, I decided to go after Kona. The Kona, or Hawaii Ironman is the oldest Iron-distance race in the sport, and if you're not familiar, it's like the Super Bowl of triathlon.

And the Ironman, for a wheelchair athlete like me, consists of a 24-mile open-water swim in the Pacific Ocean, a 112-mile hand cycle ride in lava fields — now, that sounds exotic, but it's not as scenic as it sounds, and it's pretty desolate — and then you top it off with a marathon, or a 262-mile run in 90-degree heat using a racing wheelchair. That's right, it's a total distance of 1406 miles using just your arms in less than 17 hours.

No female wheelchair athlete had ever completed the race because of the strict, seemingly impossible cutoff times. And so there I was, putting it all out on the line.

And when I finally reached the top of that 15-mile climb, I was discouraged. There was no way I was going to make that swim in my time limit of 10 and a half hours, because I was almost two hours off pace. I had to make the agonizing decision to quit. I removed my timing chip, and I handed it over to a race official. My day was done.

My best friend Shannon and my husband Shawn were waiting at the top of Hawi to drive me back to town. And on my way back to town, I began to cry. I had failed. My dream of completing the Ironman World Championship was crushed. I was embarrassed.

I felt like I'd messed up. I worried about what my friends, my family and people at work would think of me. What was I going to put on Facebook? How was I going to explain to everyone that things didn't go the way I had assumed or planned?

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A few weeks later I was talking to Shannon about the Kona “disaster,” and she said this to me: “Minda, big dreams and goals can only be realized when you’re ready to fail.” I knew I had to put that failure behind me in order to move forward, and it wouldn’t be the first time that I had faced insurmountable odds.

I was born in Bombay, India, and just before my first birthday, I contracted polio, which left me paralyzed from the hips down. Unable to care for me, my birth mother left me at an orphanage. Fortunately, I was adopted by an American family, and I moved to Spokane, Washington just shortly after my third birthday.

Over the next few years, I underwent a series of surgeries on my hips, my legs and my back that allowed me to walk with leg braces and crutches. As a child, I struggled with my disability I felt like I didn’t fit in.

People stared at me all the time, and I was embarrassed about wearing a back brace and leg braces, and I always hid my chicken legs under my pants. As a young girl, I thought thick, heavy braces on my legs did not look pretty or feminine.

Among my generation, I am one of the very few individuals in the U.S. who are living with paralysis by polio today. Many people who contract polio in developing countries do not have access to the same medical care, education, or opportunities like I have had in America. Many do not even live to reach adulthood.

I have the humbling knowledge that, had I not been adopted, I most certainly wouldn’t be in front of you today. I may not even be alive. All of us, in our own lives, may face seemingly insurmountable goals.

I want to share with you what I learned when I tried again. One year after my first attempt, on a sunny Saturday morning, my husband Shawn dumped me into the ocean at the Kona Pier and, with 2,500 of my closest friends and competitors, we started swimming as that cannon went off promptly at 7 a.m.

I focused on one stroke at a time, staying in between bodies, counting my strokes — one, two, three, four — and lifting my head to sight every so often just so I wouldn't get too off track.

And when I finally reached the shoreline, Shawn picked me up, and he carried me out of the water. I was so stunned and thrilled when Shawn had told me. I had managed a one-hour-and-43-minute swim time. On to the bike segment I had eight hours and 45 minutes to complete the 112-mile bike course.

I broke up the course in seven- to 10-mile segments in my mind just to reduce the enormity of the race. The first 40 miles, they clipped by as we benefited from a little tail wind. By 4 p.m., I had made it to mile 94, and I did the math and I realized I was in serious time jeopardy because I had 18 miles to go and less than 90 minutes, and that included a few sizable hill climbs.

I was stressed out, and I was scared that I wasn't going to make that time cutoff again. At this point, I pushed my internal voice aside that said, "This hurts. Quit." And I told myself, "Minda, you better focus. Focus on what you can control, and that is your attitude and your effort."

I resolved to be OK being uncomfortable, and I told myself, "Push harder, forget about the pain, and keep that laser focus." For the next 90 minutes, I cranked as though my life depended on it.

And when I rolled into town, I heard on the loudspeaker, "Minda Dentler is

one of the last competitors to make the bike cutoff." I did it!

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By only three minutes. It was 5:27 p.m., and I had been racing for 10-and-a-half hours. The first 10 miles of the run went pretty quickly, as I was so excited to finally pass people with my three wheels to their two feet. The sun quickly went down, and I found myself pulling up to the bottom of Palani hill, looking straight into a half-mile hill that looked like Mt Everest at mile 124 of the race.

My friends and family were ready at their stations to talk me up that hill. I was struggling, tired, desperately gripping those rims just so I wouldn't tip backwards. When I finally reached the top of that hill, I turned left onto a very lonely 15-mile stretch onto the Queen K Highway, totally exhausted. I pressed on, focusing on one push at a time.

By 9:30 p.m., I made that final right-hand turn onto Ali'i Drive. I heard the crowd's roar, and I was overcome with emotion. I crossed that finish line.

And my final time was 14 hours and 39 minutes. For the first time in the 35-year history, a female wheelchair athlete completed the Ironman World Championship. And it wasn't just any female athlete. It was me.

A paralyzed orphan from India. Against all odds, I achieved my dream, and through this very personal commitment to myself, I slowly realized that completing the Ironman was about more than conquering Kona. It was about conquering polio and other disabling but preventable diseases, not only for myself, but for the millions of children who have been and still will be afflicted by vaccine-preventable diseases.

Today, we are closer than ever to eliminating one of those diseases everywhere in the world. In the mid-1980s, polio once paralyzed more

than 350,000 children a year in more than 125 countries. That amounted to a staggering 40 cases an hour.

By contrast, so far this year, the last endemic countries have reported a total of only 12 cases. Since 1988, more than 2.5 billion children have been immunized against polio, and an estimated 16 million children, who otherwise would have been paralyzed like me, are walking.

Despite this incredible progress, we know that until it's eradicated, polio remains a very real threat, especially to children in the poorest communities of the world. It can reemerge in some of the most remote and dangerous places, and from there, it can spread.

And so this is my new Ironman: to end polio. And I am reminded every day, when I look at my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Maya. She is able to climb a ladder in the park, push her scooter or kick a ball across the grass.

Almost everything that I see her do at her age reminds me of what I could not do at that age. And when she was two months old, I took her to get her first polio vaccine. And when the doctor came in the room to prepare the shot, I asked him if I could take a picture to document the moment. When we left the room, I could feel my eyes welling up with tears.

I cried the entire way home. It was in that moment that I realized that my daughter's life would be very different from mine. She will never be faced with the crippling disability of polio, because a vaccine was available, and I chose to get her immunized. She can do anything she wants, as can each of you.

Now I'd like to leave you all with one question: what is your Ironman?

Thank you.



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