

Personal Best

Ian Howard's Remarkable Road to Happiness

BY LINDA FRANCES JOFFE PHOTOS BY BILL & HOPE WEST

"To ignite the healing fire, you need to believe something with your heart," writes Carolyn Myss, a prominent figure in holistic healing and author of *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can*. "The heart holds the catalyst that causes the rest of the body and mind to heal in a chain reaction." The power to rid oneself of disease, claims Myss, lies in our belief systems.

Sarasota resident Ian Howard would most certainly agree.

The 44-year-old personal trainer, author, and former actor is an inspiring example of the role that a positive outlook can play in banishing disease. He has survived many illnesses—encephalitis, two bouts of cancer, over 12 surgeries, severe depression and anxiety, painful back surgery for a herniated disk and two herniated cervical disks—using the power of positive thinking and a regimen of health and fitness.

"I willed my body's recuperative powers to come and save me," says Howard. "And save me, they did." This is his remarkable story.

Ian Howard grew up in Middletown, New Jersey. His parents were divorced when he was very young, and his mother worked seven days a week, which meant he had to manage without much adult guidance. When he was a teenager, the athletic youngster turned to weightlifting and bodybuilding to boost self-esteem. His heroes were martial arts expert Bruce Lee and actor Steve Reeves, who played the mythical Hercules (and the original Superman). In 1978, Howard competed in the Teenage Mr. New Jersey bodybuilding contest.

Howard's devotion to physical fitness carried through to his first year of college at Rutgers University, where he worked out with a vengeance in the basement of his fraternity house. "I was a fanatic," he admits. "I never smoked or did drugs, and I didn't drink. But I was addicted to working out." He appeared in *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and became the world's record holder in a physical challenge known as the vertical mile, climbing and descending a total of 452 flights of stairs in a 19-story building in an hour and a half.

On a summer break, the 19-year-old was bitten by a mosquito on a canoe trip through a New Jersey swamp. Shortly afterwards, he was overcome with a severe headache and later diagnosed as

having encephalitis—an inflammation of the brain. It left him in a near coma for days, and in bed for months.

"I slept all the time, which is why they call it the sleeping sickness," recalls Howard. "There is no cure for this illness; either you get better or you die. As my immune system fought this malady, I programmed my subconscious mind towards recovering."

Howard is convinced that his recuperation was aided by his college friends who, at his invitation, came to work out in his bedroom as he slept. He believes that, by subconsciously hearing them engaged in the training he longed for, his body was propelled towards recovery.

After several months, he returned to what had been his summer job as a health and fitness instructor at a New Jersey gym. Confused as to what to do next and altered by his life-threatening illness, Howard decided to train to be an X-ray technician, while continuing to work as a fitness instructor. He thought perhaps one day he would become a doctor.

But the universe was not through with Ian Howard. In fact, the real drama was about to unfold.

On a routine pre-employment chest X-ray, doctors discovered a large cancerous tumor between his lungs, pressing against his heart. Within days, Howard traveled to Philadelphia for major chest surgery, followed by months of radiation therapy that left him weak and burned the inside of his lungs.

But Ian Howard survived. Adrift once more, he joined the Navy. He was 22 years old.

Within two years, the cancer returned—this time, behind his kidneys and in his liver. He was told that it "did not look good." Howard was dispatched into a Temporary Personnel Unit (TPU) with criminals, because he was told that he was of no use to the Navy anymore. On hearing that news from his commanding officer, he threw a punch at the Commander's head—missing his target, but breaking his hand on a wall out of frustration. For six months, he lived in a precarious mental and physical state—washing the officers' mess hall as others slept; no contact with friends and family; isolated; and with a death sentence hanging over his head.

"The Navy broke me," says Howard with complete candor. "This was the beginning of my bouts with depression and anxiety."

On March 9, 1983, he was finally discharged from the Navy. Falling back on his years of physical training and knowledge about the body's remarkable ability to heal itself, he walked away from the traditional medical establishment to follow his own alternative path to healing.

Moving in with his grandparents in Miami, Howard began an intense regimen of weight training, cardiovascular workouts, and nutritional therapy. He knew that the physical training would stimulate his endocrine system to counter disease; that only through strengthening the bones, ligaments, and tendons would he increase circulation to every part of his body. He gave up junk food and fortified himself with supplements.

He also fed his *mind*—with positive thoughts.

"I began to realize that your subconscious mind is like a powerful computer; it doesn't have the capacity to doubt," says Howard. "However you program it, that's the mode it operates in. I began to program myself with positive thoughts. I just wasn't going to let anything beat me."

Six months later, he was cancer-free; the tumor had disappeared. And although he's been through a number of physical challenges since, the cancer has never returned.

Author Carolyn Myss writes, "As terrifying as disease is, it is also an invitation to enter into the nature of mystery." Mystery or miracle, Ian Howard was cured.

While in Miami, he conducted several television interviews about his ordeal. As an actor, he appeared three times on the television show, *Miami Vice*, and in a movie called *Private Resort* with Johnny Depp. He was a fitness consultant to stars such as Ed McMahon, and managed the Terminator, a professional wrestler. Along the way he wrote two screenplays and two books, and invented a fitness game. (He is currently working on a novel, a love story entitled *Honey....It's Now or Never*.)

But perhaps the most significant event of his life in Miami was meeting his wife Wendy, with whom he now has two children, Brandon and Brittany. In 1990, they moved to Sarasota, attracted to the good school system and a quieter lifestyle. They have been married for 16 years and are part owners in a trade show business. He continues to serve as a personal trainer for a select number of clients, and writes regularly for *Ironman* and *Natural Muscle* magazines.



"It's said that we have 600,000 thoughts a day. If only 10 percent of those are negative, then we'd have 60,000 negative thoughts a day. A daily dose of motivation can turn a negative attitude into a positive outlook."—Ian

Howard

than obsess about what they lack.

As for disease, Howard would be the last one to steer anyone away from the medical establishment. Rather, he urges ill individuals to investigate all of their options and to adopt his simple daily prescription for health: attitude; exercise; and diet—in that order.

It is a powerful message that Ian Howard is determined to take to as many people as possible. His mission is to show, by example, what can be accomplished through positive thinking and focused attention to one's physical well-being. His autobiography is about to be published by Lighthouse Press, and he hopes to use that as a springboard for appearances on national talk shows such as *Oprah*. He plans to donate a portion of his income to charity.

He's also trying to get one of his screenplays picked up—especially the love story he calls *Ya Gotta Live* about a single woman with three children who moves in with her mother and overcomes a severe bout with cancer.

If this theme sounds familiar, it is because Ian Howard's own story is the stuff of Hollywood movies. And yet, it's a story to which everyone can relate.

"I want to offer hope to the average American," says Howard. "I've been so blessed—now it's time to give back." ■

IAN HOWARD
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