

My Risky Life

By Jill Gurr

I have been a risk-taker all of my life, but especially since graduating from college, when I traveled alone to remote locations. I lived in Latin America for a year and Europe for three years. I started off my journeys with little money and difficulty communicating, yet always managed to benefit tremendously from my experiences. During these times, I had some extraordinary adventures and my whole life was even at risk on a few occasions. I reveled in the excitement of taking chances and challenging myself as I trekked to foreign lands. I grew my skills so that I'm now fluent in four languages, but I still didn't feel fulfilled. I craved a different type of thrill.

I developed a lucrative career as a script supervisor in the film and TV industry, responsible for the continuity of film and TV projects. My work involved maintaining all the details of costumes, dialogue, camera angles and everything else involved in production. Most people don't have a clue about what a script supervisor does, yet it's considered the second most important job on the set, after the director. If I didn't catch someone else's mistake, it could cost the production company hundreds of thousands of dollars to fix it. Every moment was filled with risk.

I lived a glamorous life, working with top movie stars like Sean Connery, Antonio Banderas, Julia Roberts and many more. I made a lot of money and spent months at a time living in exotic locales all over the world, like Moscow, Buenos Aires and Budapest. My family and friends were so proud of me, especially seeing my credits on films and TV movies.

I was also making great progress with my screenwriting career. I've been writing stories, poetry and essays since I learned how to write. This evolved into a blossoming career as a screenwriter. Two of the scripts that I was hired to write were produced; one starred George Kennedy and another starred Ed Asner. Several of my original scripts had been optioned, and one came very close to getting produced. I was developing a good reputation and the future looked bright, but I was still missing something.

About fifteen years ago, I came to a point in my life where I really felt compelled to reach out and help others in a way that would utilize my talents. Since I didn't have any children, I wanted to share my love of writing with at-risk kids -- youth

who are at risk of getting into trouble -- in hope of inspiring them to change their lives.

My heart ached for the thousands of abused, neglected and abandoned children who were forced to live in group homes and larger institutions. I felt so blessed to have two wonderful parents who had given me a great life and I wanted to help those less fortunate.

I was especially drawn to incarcerated youth, many of whom are foster kids. An idea for a screenplay popped into my head about two rival gang leaders from different ethnic backgrounds (Latino vs. African-American) ending up at the same detention camp where they had to resolve their differences. I spent over a year contacting local detention facilities with an offer to teach a free Screenwriting Workshop, but I only got the brush off. It was very frustrating.

Then the 1992 Riots occurred in South Central LA. Our city was torn apart and many small organizations formed, seeking volunteers to make a change. I joined one and met Wanda Patterson, the Art Director at Optimist Boys Home. She was delighted for an opportunity to bring my project to the 100 teenage boys who were incarcerated at this detention center.

Around 30 boys signed up for my Screenwriting Workshop. They were a multi-ethnic mix of mostly Latinos and African-American youth. Some of these kids looked pretty tough. If I'd met them on the street, I would have felt intimidated. It was pretty risky putting myself into an environment where I was working with young rapists, assaulters and thieves, but they didn't scare me at all. I just saw them as children who had rough lives.

I pitched my story idea to the boys and then let them make it their own. I explained that every story needed a protagonist and an antagonist and that conflict was essential. We established a system of raising your hand to be called upon so that the boys could share their ideas, but it often became chaotic with everyone shouting at once to be heard.

The story and characters gradually evolved. I had the boys improvise scenes as their fictitious characters, which I tape recorded and transcribed into a screenplay format. I brought the written scenes back the following week and had the kids read them aloud. As the youth heard their peers recite a piece of dialogue that they had improvised the week before, it was fantastic to hear them exclaim, "Hey! I said that!" I could see them blossom as their words took on meaning and their confidence grew.

We had a final read through of the script when it was completed. It was powerful to see these kids react as their script came to life. During our discussion afterwards, several kids shared how deeply the experience had touched them. They realized through this process that gang life was self-destructive.

Some producers optioned our script. The best part though was that a number of the kids who had been illiterate learned how to read and write through my program. I witnessed other remarkable changes as well. A tough gang leader had gang tattoos removed from his neck and his hand, and several of the boys intended to go to college.

Ecstatic with the results, I quickly came up with another idea for a screenplay and started a new Screenwriting Workshop -- this time at a coed detention center. Again, these girls and boys were transformed through the experience of contributing to a screenplay, but especially from my interactions with them every week as their mentor. They opened up their hearts, shared their problems, and flourished under my guidance.

One day, I met a fellow screenwriter named Erika Clark. I shared with her my experiences of teaching at the two detention facilities. Another thought popped into my head, which I expressed. I had learned so much about mentoring these kids. I bet there were other people like me that wanted to reach out and make a difference. Wouldn't it be great if I could help them to do it?

The next thing I knew, Erika called to say that her professor at the American Film Institute, producer Leslie Stevens ("The Outer Limits"), wanted to give me a \$5,000 donation, so that I could form a non-profit organization to help other people mentor high-risk and at-risk youth.

Of all of the risks that I had taken in my lifetime, this one was the biggest of all. Should I risk starting up a nonprofit organization with absolutely no background in this industry? Should I give up my career in the film industry, after working so hard to build it and also enjoying this work?

I decided it was worth the risk. So in 1996, I founded *Create Now!*, a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization. I received a couple of grants that enabled me to set up an office and to launch the charity. I've worked long, hard hours over the past twelve years. For nine of them, I received no salary at all. I tried finding work as a script supervisor, but I couldn't do feature film jobs anymore or I would lose *Create Now!* so I maxed out my credit cards and went into debt.

Around three years ago, I was almost homeless. I tried everything to find part-time or temporary work. Even though I had once gone to an esteemed secretarial college in London and had excellent typing and office skills, I couldn't even get a job as a receptionist. I had no family or friends that could help me out, and I didn't know how I was going to pay my rent. There was no one to turn to for help. I faced homelessness and it was the scariest moment of my life.

Luckily, an angel came to my aid. A woman that I knew through a writing group asked how I was doing. When I told her of my situation, she immediately loaned me money and I was able to pay my rent.

At the same time, I transitioned my script supervising career to the commercial industry. Since I'm multi-lingual, I got jobs on Spanish commercials, as well as those shot in French and Italian, and of course English. I was able to juggle this work while making great progress with *Create Now!*, so I could finally get paid a salary from my organization. Now I'm financially stable and paying off my debts.

Create Now! is also thriving. As of July 2008, the organization has served more than 15,000 high-risk kids in Southern California and we're growing stronger every day. Through the organization, I've personally mentored more than 50 of these kids and I've trained dozens of other mentors to work with them. Many of these youngsters have transformed their lives.

Tasha is one of my favorite success stories. She came from a poor community in South Central, Los Angeles. A very bright girl with many talents, Tasha didn't get along with her family. When she was thirteen years old, she began running away from home. She hung out with boys who got in trouble with the law. She was sent to detention camps over the next few years.

I met Tasha at a detention facility when she was almost sixteen. She eagerly signed up for a *Create Now!* TV Writing Workshop with a professional sit-com writer. When she returned to her home in South Central, her mentor continued to visit her weekly. They formed a strong bond. *Create Now!* provided Tasha with additional mentors, myself included. She applied to USC Film School and received a scholarship and was one of only fifty people in the world to be accepted into their prestigious film program.

Tasha graduated from USC in December 2004. She is currently in her second year of law school at the University of Chicago. Here's what she wrote: "I am extremely grateful to *Create Now!* for helping me find a positive outlet at one of the darkest times in my life. I consider every success I've had since I was introduced to your program a direct consequence of all the wonderful things *Create Now!* has offered me. Thank you so much for helping to shape my future."

When I hear back from the kids that we serve, and also our volunteers who gain just as much from mentoring as they give out, I realize that the risks I've taken in my life have led me to where I am meant to be. The sacrifices have been plentiful. My financial situation may be tight, but I sleep well at night.

I'm always excited when I wake up every day. While I still work long hours, it feels more like play. I continually meet wonderful people who want to help our cause. And I'm elated about the book that I'm currently writing: "Change Lives:

Mentor Youth,” which gives concrete and inspirational guidance so that people all over the world can mentor youth to make an impact.

I’m also being honored and recognized for my work. I was featured on “NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams” in November 2005 on the segment, “Making a Difference.” In June 2007, I was spotlighted on CNN’s “Anderson Cooper 360°.” This year, I was one of eight people in the country selected by the Simon Wiesenthal Center to be part of their newest exhibit called, “Everyday Heroes,” which is now showing at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and will be expanded nationally next year.

So I’ve come full circle with my story, and while my life is far from over and I feel like I’m just getting started, I have to ask myself the question: Was founding *Create Now!* worth the risk?

You bet!