



S P E C I A L I S S U E

# A Tribute to Rob Berkley

Life is Precious.  
Don't Waste a Drop.

In Honor of The Man Behind Women on Fire

**Hello, dearest friend.** What you are about to hear today is the final interview that took place with Rob and me only weeks before he died. Meredith Schoenberger, our cherished friend and Woman on Fire, who is also Rob's business partner and ultimately our caregiver, conducted this interview.

In it, as a couple more in love than ever, we share what our experience in facing a terminal illness was like, and how we were preparing for Rob's death. While it felt somewhat surreal to know that this would be our final interview together, it felt important to do. We were grateful to Meredith for agreeing to lead it. The questions were solely hers. I chose to share this intimate interview with you now as a tribute on what would have been Rob's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, on September 7, 2019.

In the months since his death, I have been greatly supported, saved really, by the power and love of your friendship. And since his loss, despite my absolutely broken heart, I've had several surprising awarenesses: (1) Everyone else didn't die, and I'm so glad you're here. (2) I didn't collapse and die with him, as I once had feared. (3) I miss him terribly and feel gut-wrenchingly sad, but I am not lonely or bereft or untethered because I feel very, very loved, supported and protected. I attribute much of my ability to move through this ocean of grief to the deep love Rob and I shared and consciously worked to cultivate, and to the strong and sturdy fabric you have woven beneath me. You mean the world to me.

I hope this interview reaffirms and inspires your own powerful choices in life. My greatest wish of all is that you continue to be uplifted by the love and care, wisdom and insight that Rob gave so freely all the days of his magnificent life.

**Meredith:** So we can set the scene for everyone, where in the world are you both coming to us from today?

**Debbie:** We're on Martha's Vineyard, and I am in our little makeshift studio where we do our Women on Fire Live Chat master classes.

**Meredith:** For the sake of anyone who is new to Women on Fire and tuning into one of these amazing interviews for the first time, Debbie, do you mind giving us the quick story of how you and Rob met? You always tell it so beautifully.

**Debbie:** [laughter] He's laughing. I tell this to women all of the time. If you're looking for a relationship, you only need one, and it can happen in the blink of an eye. For me, it happened in the blink of an eye. Rob and I were on a business conference call. When I heard his voice, I realized that this man was so smart, so interesting. I couldn't take my attention off of him. We became friends from that phone call. We were friends for a year and a half, but it wasn't romantic. It was just friends. In the blink of an eye, I met him on a business conference call and that started everything going.

**Meredith:** I love that, and when was the moment that you knew that you wanted to be in a relationship with Rob?

**Debbie:** [laughter] I got to know Rob and how wise, smart and interesting he was, but I think it was a good a year or so into it. I was dating other people, and I thought, "Wow, I wish they were more like Rob."

Then the famous story of when I really realized it: Rob and I were doing business together. He was working with some of my companies as a coach, and I was working with his company Simon & Schuster as a coach. One day, we were discussing our clients, as we often did, and he came to visit me. When he left, my doorman called me over to his desk and said, "You know I never say anything to you about the men you date." And I said, "Quentin, I'm not dating that man. He's my business associate." Quentin was not to be messed with. He shook his head and said, "I just want you to know, with that man, you have soul force." It was such a powerful statement, and of course, I stood there protesting: "I'm not dating him. He's just a friend. Quentin told me, "Get out of here." And the moment I got in the elevator, I remember my head hit the wall, and I was like, "No, no, no, no! I don't want to get involved with him." Then six weeks later, we decided that, yes, we actually do love each other, were attracted to each other.

**Meredith:** You guys couldn't deny the soul force.

**Debbie:** We couldn't deny the soul force! That's true.

**Meredith:** And so how long have you two been married?

**Debbie:** [laughter] Rob is still shell-shocked. Eleven years.

**Meredith:** I love that.

## Facing the Toughest Battle Together

**Meredith:** You both are going through what could only be described as one of the hardest and most devastating experiences that any couple can go through. Do both of you mind sharing with everyone what's going on?

**Rob:** What's going on for me is I was diagnosed with gastric cancer last September, and I'm undergoing my second round of chemotherapy right now to see if we can stabilize the cancer. It has progressed relatively aggressively, and it does not have a good prognosis, as this cancer does not. It's an orphan cancer. There are only about 27,000 cases a year, and there are very few targeted treatments for it and very few experts. In fact, maybe there are no experts.

So, that's the current situation. We have moved back to Martha's Vineyard from doing treatment in Boston. The Martha's Vineyard Hospital has been able to support us brilliantly, which is so fabulous. Debbie is my No. 1 caregiver, and we'll talk a lot about that. Thank you, because Meredith is here with us right now as a secondary caregiver, which brings sunshine to the world.

**Debbie:** That's for sure. As with many, many diagnoses, Rob just wasn't feeling well. We thought that maybe it was an ulcer or gallstones. It took quite a while before we figured out that it was indeed this very, very serious diagnosis. I think back to that day of having a doctor just simply walk into the room and say, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I'm really, really, really, really sorry." Our heads were spinning. What could this possibly be? We were expecting an ulcer or something of the sort that could be fixed very quickly. To get a serious diagnosis like that was quite traumatizing. Thus began our adventure into a medical world that we weren't familiar with.

**Rob:** Nor prepared for.

**Debbie:** Nor prepared for. Although, because we are coaches, very quickly, we took some time and then Rob said, "Let's make a plan," which Rob always does. Our plan consisted of a number of things: (1) We were going to get the best care that we could. (2) We were going to live our life as normally as possible, which included, at that point, moving to Boston so we could be near the treatments, and we both could continue the work we have.

What else was part of our plan?

**Rob:** Make it an adventure.

**Debbie:** Make it an adventure. And we did.

**Rob:** That was the third part of our plan. Thank you for reminding me. That was the first thing Debbie and I did. We sat down, took a breath, and made a plan. Then we started to work the plan. That was almost a year ago at this point. If we had not had that plan, I would've felt that this year of my life had been wasted in large part.

Having a very detailed and comprehensive plan allowed us to get maximum joy and fulfillment from our time together, which we still are doing. For anybody going through a situation like this, as miserable, as painful, as scary, as sad as it is, you can have incredible joy and happiness and fun and adventure and normalcy. It can be normal, too. Not all the time, but it can have some great normal moments. I just wanted to say that.

**Debbie:** Something funny for us is that we have never had a television in our bedroom, and we don't watch television. In our furnished apartment in Boston, over the months that we lived there, we had three or four televisions in this little two-bedroom, two-bath apartment. Part of the adventure and the joy was that — for years we've heard people talk about *Mad Men* and all these shows — so Rob and I would watch television every night. And the cat! Wilber sat at the end of the bed and watched TV with us. So to Rob's point about the fun, we watched all 92 episodes of *Mad Men* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

**Rob:** Which we loved. And that was pretty much all we watched.

**Meredith:** Those are two great ones. Those are the best.

**Rob:** They're great shows.

## Every Moment Is Valuable

**Meredith:** Going off of everything you guys have shared so far, I can say first-hand that watching you two love and care for one another throughout all of this has been a profound learning experience. I have a question that I would love for both of you to answer. I'll start with Debbie. How has all this changed your relationship?

**Debbie:** It's funny, there's a part of me that doesn't want to say this, but it's the truth: It was the best year of our life and our marriage. We have been together for 20 years and married for 11, and this year we grew closer. With all these things that we're saying, we actually had fun. Every moment became really valuable. There's this really great quote that says, "There are two things you can't look at with the naked eye for long: the sun and death." We're all going to die, but when our time is potentially shortened and death becomes part of your life, you can't just look at it all the time.

Yet, it helps to focus, and so I think this year has just been amazing, magical, deep one. There's no room for stuff that's petty. There's no room for stuff that doesn't matter. It's a very powerful stacking and sorting. It came down to a lot of it just enjoying the company of each other. We enjoyed great food when Rob was able to eat well, which was most of the time, although the treatments affected his ability to really enjoy the kinds of food that he — who is such a great foodie — normally enjoys. We took great pleasure in the simple things of walking through the Boston Public Garden holding hands, just enjoying each other's company.

**Rob:** You know I'd have to say with everything that Debbie said that our relationship has always been good. We have the normal issues. We have conflicts. We have disagreements, and we've talked about this on many other Women on Fire programs. But what this has done, at this point, at least for me, is to cause me to ask the questions: Am I squeezing every drop of love out of my heart that I possibly can in this moment when I'm with Debbie? Am I displaying the gratitude that I feel? Am I expressing the love that I feel, the care that I feel, the comfort that I get from her care? Am I communicating that to her? So the change would be, am I more of an active communicator of the magic that she brings to my life? And that's what I would say.

**Debbie:** This is why we love you so much. This is why I love you so much. You did. You succeeded. Honestly, you made my year heaven on earth in what could be a traumatic, horrifying hell. You did that, Rob. Even to this day, a day doesn't go by that you don't say to me, "How are you doing?" You're caring about how I'm feeling throughout all of this, and I know that takes a lot of energy to even think about. I feel very much a focus of your energy and love. You're squeezing out the love!

**Rob:** It takes no energy to see how you're doing. That is not an energy-sucking activity. In fact, it's very easy because I care so much.

**Debbie:** I want to go back and say something about the beginning of this. So many times when people receive a diagnosis, as Rob pointed out, it's scary, it's uncertain. There is always the possibility of healing or some sort of miracle if the diagnosis is a bleak one, and many, many, many people are healed. But at the beginning, they don't know. One of the most important things that I learned was from a man who had been my longtime therapist and who I've interviewed in the past for Women on Fire, Dr. Norman Shub. He was with us in the beginning when we found out our diagnosis, and he told us something invaluable. He said, "If you keep repeating the story over and over about your cancer, you will get post-traumatic stress syndrome."

**Rob:** Yes, he said that.

**Debbie:** I was already getting it in the first few weeks after the diagnosis because I'd had to repeat the story so often, and I was living it 24/7. Maybe you were, too, Rob. I don't remember if you were feeling the anxiety that I was.

**Rob:** I was just like, "I'm tired of this already."

**Debbie:** Just knowing that really gave me permission. Norman was very clear. He said, "You have to minimize the amount that you tell the whole world and discuss it. So we tried to, in the beginning, just put out one email every so often to give an update because we know there are so many people who love and care about us. But all the individual stories repeated over and over and over really can cause some problems.

**Meredith:** That's such a valuable tip, Debbie, and something that's so important to remember — even if it is not related to death or a diagnosis or something along those lines — for any type of obstacle or big challenge or tragedy.

I've had the extreme privilege of getting to love and care for you both, and I can say that it really feels like you two have never been stronger. How have you been able to stay so sturdy and connected in the face of so much uncertainty, not knowing how and when and where and what's coming down the road?

**Debbie:** That's such a great question.

**Rob:** It is a great question. The first step in doing that is to say everything. Say everything whenever it occurs. There are moments for me of great embarrassment and great shame because there are certain things I can't do for myself. I just have to say it. I say, "I'm so ashamed I can't do this" or "I'm so embarrassed I can't do this." Step one is to say it all; the positive, too. "Thank you. Wow, that was amazing! That lasagna tonight was delicious. So was the garlic toast. Awesome! Out of this world!" But to say it all. No thinking, "I can't say this because I'm going to hurt Debbie's feelings." Like Debbie went out of her way to make French toast this morning. You really worked hard at it. I gave instructions, and you followed the instructions. You brought it up and gave me a beautiful forkful, and I took a bite of it and I went...

**Debbie:** "Eww! It's mushy."

**Rob:** It didn't quite work out. But if I had edited myself, I would've created a distance between the two of us. This way, if she was upset she could've said, "That hurts my feelings." Or "I cooked that French toast for 45 minutes. I sautéed it and used a special torch." Or whatever. But, instead, it was right there on the table, and we could deal with it instantaneously. So the first and foremost thing is to say everything instantly — which actually is a good thing for any relationship.

If you're going to be in a relationship, to be able to say what is in the moment to your partner is everything. That will grow you closer. The second thing is, when Debbie has an offer for me, meaning some article to read or a video clip, whenever I have the energy, I'll receive that, even though I don't want to at times, because it's important to her. And so to receive an offer from your partner. John Gottman talks about this a lot. When you receive an offer, you deepen your relationship.

**Debbie:** That, Meredith, is what I think has made the difference, that kind of depth. Rob, you have done that. I can say that is one of the hallmarks of this last year. You haven't held back. What that's done for me is that it really has strengthened me. It rarely offends me. It makes me know exactly where you stand.

**Rob:** And vice versa.

**Debbie:** Thank you. Being compassionate with each other by being clear and direct. I

appreciate your being so honest, and I know that we have grown because of that. And you're never mean.

**Rob:** And I want to appreciate how well you received it this morning. We worked it out.

**Debbie:** We did. We worked it out. You still ate your French toast, and you were happy. Actually, I think you ate it all. You were like, "That was pretty good." You drowned it in syrup!

**Rob:** It was the syrup. Then it was good. Magical.

**Debbie:** Syrup will fix any mistake in my culinary errors. I think what's strengthened us is that I know, with your limited energy, everything you do is to keep our bond strong and to keep our life normal. All of you know that Rob makes me "stinky" coffee (a.k.a. hazelnut coffee!) every morning and the fact that it's very, very difficult for you to do that but you continue to do it. Even if you don't do it, you are instructing me on exactly how many grams of coffee and water.

**Rob:** Making coffee is chemistry. It's not culinary.

**Debbie:** [laughter] Yes. It's just those sorts of things. You make the effort even in this dreadful, horrible illness, which is not you. It's this thing that has taken over your body. Remember back in the days when you used to call your cancer Boris? When Boris invaded your body? You still are you and doing the things that keep us strong. Those things are what matter to me and go a very long way of strengthening us.

**Rob:** Thank you for saying that. And I've taught Meredith how to measure the grams now too. It's 44 tonight, now, kiddo!

**Meredith:** There's backup now! I'm ready. I'm prepared.

**Debbie:** And she's feeding the cat now, too. It's helping a lot. Daren, our assistant, said, in situations like this, the little things become really big things. So the helping of you coming in, Meredith, feeding the cat, feeding us, emptying a dishwasher is huge because everything takes energy. It's really helpful. Besides the sunshine!

**Meredith:** Thank you guys for sharing all of those. I think they're super helpful.

## On the Wings of Angels

**Meredith:** What would be some of the biggest mistakes that a couple can make when they are going through intense grief and/or facing really enormous obstacles?

**Rob:** We can make it simple and just go back and reverse some of the tips we just gave. Withhold, don't appreciate, be mean without compassion. Do not express your gratitude. Don't share your thoughts and feelings, all those things. If you do that in any relationship, I guarantee your relationship will suck. And if your relationship sucks, it's probably because of one of those things that you're doing or many of them at one time. But it's the inverse of all the stuff that we've talked about. It's not dwelling on the thing. It doesn't deserve it. It's having a plan, not going into it without a plan like a wild person, chopping down trees and running around like a maniac. You have to have a plan.

**Debbie:** To your point, I remember when, within hours or days of this diagnosis, you said, "We're not going to run around in the woods like crazy people. We're going to sit down and figure it out." Because what happens when you run around in the woods is your chances of not eating or getting killed are a lot greater. [laughter]

**Meredith:** That's great. I love that, you guys. Got to have plans. Everyone, make sure.

**Debbie:** I've been part of some groups with this particular cancer, and I've seen all sorts of situations dealing with this. One of the things that makes me really sad is the couples that had a bad relationship and got the diagnosis and tried to stay together. I saw a lot of resentment and blame. I think that's also part of those things that would blow people apart is if there's any sort of resentment or blame, saying, "I don't get to live the life that I want to live because he or she has this diagnosis." As horrifying as that sounds, it's actually pretty prevalent if people don't go into this with some strength.

**Rob:** Or support. So, to just put a cap around Meredith's question, no support means no success. If you don't have support, you will fail. You will crash and burn, and you will live a life of misery. If you have support, it will lift you on the wings of angels, which ours have.

**Debbie:** There's been no bigger group of angels than the Women on Fire community.

**Rob:** True. By the way, Women on Fire, thank you. I know those videos weren't for me specifically, but I saw every single one of them, and they were magnificent. In fact, I think you all should make more videos. For you, for your self-expression, as a way of expressing yourself in the world. It's a beautiful tool, and it works for you. Your spark comes through. I just wanted to say that and let you know, from the bottom of my heart, how deeply I appreciate each and every one of you and the time you took and the discomfort you faced looking in that little peephole — which I face myself and I totally understand — and for bringing it home, for pushing the publish button, as Seth would say.

**Debbie:** Seth Godin would say that. That's right. That was beautiful, Rob, and I feel the same way. And many of those videos, if not most, if not all, were for you and me. That was really a precious, precious gift. And photos too. I love the hashtag "Photos for Rob" or "Photos for Rob and Debbie." It's really beautiful.

**Rob:** It was. They're very healing. Thank you all.

**Meredith:** I love that, and so you guys have been going through this since last September, and a lot has happened. There's been a lot of ups and downs since the diagnosis. Have there ever been days where you felt like you wanted to give up?

**Debbie:** I'll let Rob answer that. I've never once thought or felt that I would give up.

**Rob:** Hard question, but thank you, honey. There have been days where I felt like giving up. When my hands or my feet don't work, I feel like quitting. But you know what? It doesn't make sense. You're always there with a little spark of hope to get me back on track. All I have to do is say, "Hey, this totally sucks. I feel like giving up." And you go, "I hear you. I hear you want to give up. I understand. Just let me know when you're ready. But maybe today is not the day." And that's how we work it out. Those are the words, and that makes the hugest difference. I get back on track because I never quit anything in my life. That's not true. I quit some stuff. I quit tennis team.

**Debbie:** [laughter] That's because your ACL ruptured or you would never have quit.

**Rob:** I don't quit. I'm not going to quit this. But, boy, there are days when I feel like quitting, because it gets really, really shitty. Basically, for anybody that has somebody in a family that's going through something like this, these illnesses turn you into a giant baby. They force you

back into the world of fundamental needs. Sleeping, eating, drinking, going to the bathroom — all those things become inordinately complicated, and they start to stop working right.

If they're not working right you can't be comfortable. It's hard to fight on. I'm lucky. I have incredible care, incredible. From Debbie, from Meredith, from hospice, from the hospital here, incredible care. But if there's somebody in your life that's going through this, remember that it makes them into a baby. They're going to behave like a baby now and then.

There's nothing worse than not being able to go to the bathroom by yourself, right? Or go to the bathroom at all, or to make your food, or to eat, or when you spill food on yourself to wipe yourself off. All those things. It gets pretty crazy. So just remember, you've got a giant baby on your hands. That's me.

**Debbie:** I want to thank you for letting me take care of you. It has been my honor to take care of you and to be at your side and to have you allow me to do this. It has healed a part of me that makes me feel even more whole to be able to care for you in this way. You were such a dynamic, strong, powerful person on your own before this. You were such an individual and a great partner. At the same time, you were really so incredibly strong, and I wasn't ever able to take care of you in this way. Maybe it's even a surprise to me, but I actually love caring from you and it's an honor.

**Rob:** Thank you. The biggest revelation for me is how little love I allowed into my life before this and how loved I am and how much there is in Debbie's caregiving. At first I hated it because it meant I was a helpless baby. But now it fills me up every day, and I feel so privileged. You're an incredible caregiver. We should pay to be care-given by Debbie Phillips. It's an incredible experience. It's incredible, and you are so caring and so tender and so gentle with me that it makes it easy. It makes this horrendous, unpleasant, stupid, meaningless thing tolerable. So thank you.

**Debbie:** My pleasure, and it makes me feel really, really good. And I also think that, as part of this journey, we are seeing where you are today, but over the course of this time, I have sobbed and cried and felt like my world was going to come apart, and you comforted me every step of the way. You held me. When you couldn't hold me any longer, I laid my head in your lap and you comforted me in every way. You were always there for me doing that. In the

way of us caregiving for each other through this, it's been really powerful, and it's been reciprocating. It's just a different way of caregiving, but it's all the same, and it's all an exchange of love.

**Rob:** It is an exchange of love. Thank you.

**Meredith:** As you guys all know, at Women on Fire, it's really all about inspiration, strategies and support. And so, as we're coming to an end here, I want to just touch on the support aspect and this whole community that surrounds you. What have you found to be most helpful while going through this?

**Debbie:** For me, I've found, there's a saying, "Stay close and do nothing." And I think that all of the people, and there have been so many, who just have stayed close. And then there have been these moments when I really needed something. And so the messages that come, that say, "I love you, I'm thinking about you" or "Is there anything that you need today?" One day, Rob wanted beef stew, and I went to check my phone and a friend said, "I'm at the grocery store, could I get ingredients to make you something?" I'm like, "Yeah, beef stew."

This notion of "stay close and do nothing, but be ready to help" has been extremely helpful to me along the way. What isn't helpful are the dozens and dozens of messages saying, "How is Rob today? How are you today? What's going on? What's the latest?" I can't answer that 40 times a day or even a week. That's not helpful. But what is helpful are those statements of love and support, "I'm here and I will do anything that you need." Or the specific, "I'm here. Do you need dinner?"

**Meredith:** That's so helpful, Debbie, thank you. I think those strategies and ways to really support someone when they're going through any type of hard situation are really helpful.

## Creating a Meaningful Experience

**Meredith:** Before we go, I don't want to ask this question, but if I'm being vulnerable and transparent, it is on my mind And I'm sure that it's on the mind of some of you who are listening. And Rob, this is for you: are you afraid to die?

**Rob:** That's quite a question, and thank you for asking it. I don't mind talking about it. Am I

afraid to die? Of course, because I don't know what's coming. I've spoken to quite a few people, and no one else seems to know quite what's coming either. But do I live in dread, fear of death? Absolutely not. I'm ready, when that time comes to have that experience.

Part of what I've asked my teachers, my own teachers, in this time is to help me get ready to make it the most meaningful experience possible, regardless of what it is. And so I'm ready. I'm in no hurry. I'm scared, but I'm not in dread. I have no underlying terror of it. I'm ready. I'm not excited about it. I could be honest with you about that. There are other things I would rather do than die. Right?

But I have lived an incredible life, and it continues as you have all heard today. The last year has been a great year. It's been a great year. And so I welcome what comes. I just want to be ready. And there's very little place to learn how to be ready. So if you've got work to do, help people learn how to get ready. I'm not quite sure I know what I'm doing, although I do have some instructions, and I am practicing. I am getting ready as best I can, and I will take whatever comes. But I'm not rushing down that hallway. I'm going to hang on here as long as I can and keep hoping for a miracle. Whatever comes, I'll just deal with it.

**Debbie:** In my own practice as the partner here, with this being the person I love most in the whole world, I too am thinking, "How can I make it comfortable? How can I make his transition, while I don't want it to come either, how can I prepare for it so that he's at peace, and he's calm and deeply satisfied? There aren't many answers. Fortunately, Rob and I are huge proponents of hospice, and they've been enormously helpful to us about what to expect. Almost my entire life I have had grief and death subtitles of all of my work. I'm still astounded how we do not deal. Every one of us dies. A lot of times people go, "If I die, she can have my jewelry." Well, there is no "if I die."

**Rob:** Everybody dies.

**Rob:** We don't know when it's going to happen. It could come like a meteorite. It could take forever. Who knows? You may have a lingering death. You may have an instantaneous death. But there is nothing better than having a ready death.

**Debbie:** That is a powerful thing to say. "There's nothing better than having a ready death."

Rob and I did something that every couple should do. You can just google "Hospice

Five Wishes.” These five questions are really powerful around how you want to die. We are such a death-phobic society that we don't think about this. But there will be no better time than now, if you're healthy, to study these questions and begin to think about:

- Who do you want to have with you?
- What do you would want the circumstances to be?
- What do you want to say to the people that you love and that you leave behind?
- How do you want your body treated?

All these questions are incredibly powerful. While Rob and I dreaded doing them at first, once we did them, we really got into them, didn't we?

**Rob:** Yes, it worked out great. It wasn't fun, but it was kind of fun.

**Debbie:** We made it fun that night. We cried and we filled them out and we cried some more and we filled them out.

**Rob:** We came up with some bizarre scenarios that we did not write down.

**Debbie:** That's the fun of it.

**Meredith:** I want to thank you both so incredibly much. We all love you immensely and thank you for your vulnerability and your love and for inspiring us all.

**Debbie:** Thank you for being with us. I want to thank Rob for all of the gifts that he has given to Women on Fire. Everything from *Great Start* to the last talk he gave at the Women on Fire Retreat in Miami about making the most of your magic, and everything in between. If we can give even a fraction of the gifts that you have given, Rob, to us, what a great thing that is and a great accomplishment. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for how you have been the rock behind Women on Fire and bolstered what this community is all about.

**Rob:** Thank you. I believe so deeply in Women on Fire. It's impossible to describe, but what the women have is something that doesn't exist anywhere else on the planet. And to see the results from my perspective, it's extraordinary and so rewarding. It makes me want to keep coming back and doing more. I realize you don't want to hear from me every month because that's pretty boring. [laughter]

I feel like there's so much more to talk about that I don't have time for. But I will do

my best in the short amount of time I have to talk about more. So I hope this has been useful. I tried to share what was in my heart. Meredith, you did a beautiful job. And Debbie, as always, thank you for being such an incredible partner. So thank you, everybody. Thank you, Women on Fire. Women on Fire, I cannot say how much I appreciate you and love you all.

## **After Interview**

**Hi, it's Debbie again.** Thank you so much for listening to this interview of Rob and me. It means so much to me that you listened. Only a few weeks later, on December 17, 2018, Rob died just as he had practiced. It was a conscious, peaceful and loving death, at home, surrounded in love and care. His final words to me before we went to bed that night were "I love you big time."

In this After Interview, I would love to leave you with more of Rob's joy, wisdom and learning. These snippets are taken from Rob's final appearance at the 2017 Women on Fire Retreat in Miami. Only a few days before the retreat, we learned that Rob had gastric cancer. He wouldn't even consider canceling or changing his plans to speak on "Creating Your Magic.

The Women on Fire Retreat was Rob's favorite event of the entire year. He, and I know many of you listening, loved the portion when he spoke to Women on Fire. I hope that you will listen and that you love and enjoy the inspiration of Rob at his finest.

## **Highlights from Rob's Speech at His Final Women on Fire Retreat**

**Rob:** I want you to really pay attention to this one. This is so important because it is a trap that is so easy to slip into. I say this without judgment because there's room in life for both. But there's room in life for both, only with awareness. Without awareness it becomes a trap. I want to talk about the contrast between pleasure and happiness. They're just starting to understand this right now. Pleasure is a short-lived experience and happiness is persistent. Pleasure happens in the body. It's visceral. Happiness is ethereal. It happens in the spirit. It happens in the mind.

Pleasure is about taking something, and happiness is about giving. Pleasure is very often achieved with substances or behaviors — like me and oatmeal cookies. Pleasure is experienced alone. It's a solo experience, happening inside your own body and your own brain. Happiness is experienced in social groups.

Pleasure, in its extremes, leads to addiction. The reason it leads to addiction is the pleasure chemical dopamine. Dopamine stimulates the neurons in your brain. Since your body is very smart, what the neurons in your brain do is release a substance to tamp it down a little bit so you don't get over-excited. So your body tamps it down. Then what do we do? We take a little bit more. It revs us up and then our body tamps us down a little bit more. If we persist with this long enough, our neurons start to die off. When they die off, you need more and more extreme amounts to get that same experience of pleasure, which then becomes addictive. I made it very simple. It's much more complicated than that, but the CliffsNotes version of this is perpetual pleasure and over-stimulation leads to a down regulation of your body. You need more and more and you get stuck in an endless cycle.

Happiness, you can't be addicted to. The neurotransmitter of happiness, serotonin, is actually a calming substance. It creates this feeling of tranquility, of connectedness. The happiness neurotransmitter doesn't addict you. But the funny paradox is that dopamine is the archenemy of serotonin. So the pleasure chemical attacks the happiness chemical.

The reason I'm going through this whole thing is not to have a science experiment. It's so you have the awareness of how these two things are at play in your body all the time. There's nothing wrong with pleasure now and then, just bring it to consciousness. If you want to read more about it, Dr. Robert Lustig is starting to publish a lot about it.

Let's talk about how to create happiness. I love this part. I love to think about creating happiness. When I want to create happiness, I go out and sit in the backyard and look for bugs. [laughter] I just sit there and look for butterflies or whatever happens to be there. I can just sit back in that spot and make something [photographs]. I don't care if there is anything there or not. It's the doing of it. It makes me happy. **Create things will make you happy.**

**Take stock of what is good in your life.** Everyone here has to have a Gratipad by now. Every morning, Debbie has hers. Before I get near Debbie, I ask, "Did you do your

Gratipad this morning?” [laughter] Actually, that’s not true. I’ve never before met anyone who wakes up with a smile every day. It’s really special.

**Engage directly with the people you love and care about.** I mean to hear their voice, see their face. Texting doesn’t seem to do it. It’s fun. I love to text, but it doesn’t give that same connection. Even just the vibration of somebody else’s voice can bring happiness.

**Invest in others.** What can I do to help make your life better? How can I invest in you so that your life is richer, so your life is more profound while you are on earth? The amazing thing is that the more you invest in others the more you care about them. If you want love to grow, invest in your partner. The more you invest in your partner, the more love grows. It’s profound.

**Stretch and move your body gently.** I believe in high-intensity exercise for fitness. That’s one side of the equation. Debbie did an interview with Michaela Boehm. She talks about nonlinear movement, just to move your body for fun. Not to get your heartbeat to 197 beats per minute, not trying to bench-press 700 pounds or whatever the case may be. You just to move for fun, to stretch slowly and gently, to enjoy yourself with no purpose but to experience what a magnificent vehicle you are in. Even if you can only stretch your fingers. Just to feel how magical that is. That brings us to happiness.

**Spend time in nature.** Nature, when I last checked, is free. Every study ever done says that going out in nature you will feel better almost immediately.

**Laugh.**

And **rest.** I love to rest. I would want all of you to rest. I would be willing to bet that everyone in this room is a perpetual doer. If you are sitting at home, not doing anything, you’re thinking, “Something is wrong. I’m being bad.” What I would want for you is to be able to just rest without guilt. To go out on your back porch and look at the butterflies. How cool is that?

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Actively embrace what is special about you. I can go around and in about 15 seconds talking to someone, I can see what’s special about people. But they go, “I don’t know what’s special about me.” Ask the people around you who love you and care about you. They know

what's special about you. Part of the work of a great coach is to be a mirror to help people see what's special about themselves. They can then take it inside to fortify and revitalize themselves so they can take that out into the world. Focus on your gifts, strengths and talents, not your flaws, warts and bumps. As I get older, I look at photos people take and go, "Wow, how did my father sneak in?" then I go, "Well, that's OK. He was a good looking guy." [laughter]

I want you all to take this totally to heart. You have everything you need in this moment to begin — or continue — expressing your magic. You have everything right now. Nothing more is needed. You have everything. There's a million ways to say this, and I think I mix my metaphors here, but if you take action then the road is going to unfold in front of you. I could get all Law of Attraction on you. We could do that, or we could talk about the way the reticular activating system of the brain works — what you think about tends to bring more of the same. It doesn't really matter.

The only thing I know for sure is if you take focused action on something and if you're in a community that helps you take supportive, continued action, good stuff is going to happen for you. Stuff is going to happen. It's not that hard. You have to take action, though. If you sit around the house moping and saying, "Well, I thought about it. I've been envisioning it for 45 years, but I haven't done anything yet," it's not going to happen. But if you start to take action, magic will happen. No reason to wait! Start now. As I said before, you're all perfect.

You have a plan that allows you to take persistent, focused action. The way I think about this is you start with the end in mind as well as you know. Where am I going to get to? We do this all the time in Vision Day. Then you go back and create a step-by-step plan to get there. Depending on who you are, the plan needs to be at the level of detail that you wake up on a Monday morning and know exactly what you're going to do for your plan. "What's my critical focused action this morning? What am I going to do this afternoon? What's my one big thing I've got to get done today to make my magic happen?"

Five hundred words a day for 100 days is 50,000 words. Where I come from, 50,000 words is a book. You want to write a book? Write 500 words a day. A poem a day for 50

weeks is a poetry book. I coached and worked with the poet laureate of Martha's Vineyard. This is the No. 1 poet on our happy little island. When I first worked with him, he said, "I'm having trouble. I'm struggling to create." I can share this story with his permission. I said, "How can we do it so you can do something every day?" Persistent, focused action. All of a sudden he has two more finished books, workshops, everything. He's really a genius, but it took his persistent, focused action and a good plan.

One person uplifted a day for 365 days is 365 people uplifted. Let's just say that of those 365 people only 150 go out and uplift another person, and those 150 uplift only 75 more. By the time you're done it's like the stuff that grows in the back of your refrigerator. It's yogurt on Monday and by Friday it's the Monster from the Black Lagoon. It grows exponentially. Step by step. One thing at a time. As you take action, you're going to get better at what you do. It can't not happen. You will learn. You can always get better.

A man that I think of as a photography mentor is now in his 80s. His curiosity is extraordinary. The questions he asks is extraordinary. The fact that, in his 80s, he is starving for knowledge and growth. It is unbelievable. Regular action helps you grow and go. I hope you found this useful.

*With love and gratitude to Rob Berkley, whose wisdom, caring and guidance will remain in our hearts and minds forever.*