

Flowing with the Go

A Jiu-Jitsu Journey of the Soul

By

Elena Stowell

Flowing with the Go: A Jiu-Jitsu Journey of the Soul
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*To my heart, Carly,
who continues to inspire the world,
here on earth and there in heaven.*

Mom



A portion of proceeds from this book will go to the
Carly Stowell Foundation
for Education in Athletic and Music Performance

“The mission of the Carly Stowell Foundation is to provide enhanced education in athletics and music to young people who demonstrate passion for learning and a commitment to excel.

“We support individualized instruction and group activities that include teams and ensembles, develop potential and leadership, teach responsibility, and foster creativity and expression.”

www.carlystowellfoundation.org

Do what you love, love what you do.



Preface

This manuscript is rooted in a mother's love for her daughter and what happens to that mother when the daughter is gone. Four and a half years ago, my daughter Carly passed away suddenly, before my eyes. And that is where this journey begins.

In many ways, this is a story about grief, but it also is a story of resiliency, self-discovery, and the healing power of belonging.

Carly and I shared a great deal of time together—supporting her basketball career and musical pursuits, molding her dreams, and, well, everything that goes along with having a teenage daughter. After she was gone, I didn't find joy in basketball, in hopes and dreams, or in me.

So it was a surprise to many people—and no one more than me—that I found joy in a sport that previously I knew nothing about: Jiu-Jitsu.

Jiu-Jitsu is a martial art that practices the grappling aspect of hand-to-hand combat. It was both physically and mentally challenging. I found muscles I never knew I had, and I found out that many of the spiritual tenets that underpin Jiu-Jitsu provided just the right spiritual guidance I needed to work through my grief. I also found a gym that was filled with people who accepted me “as is” and never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself.

In this story, I introduce the people who made an impact on my journey: my coach James Foster, who is the owner of the gym and a second-degree black belt, my other coaches at the gym, my friends,

my doctors, my family. Through the sparring sessions that became a part of my journey—both in and out of the gym—I have been able to piece together what I hope to be a map of my traveled path and promise for the future. The antics herein are at times garnished with my sophomoric sense of humor and, at other times, with an immense depth of frustration and sorrow.

Working out is so similar to working through grief. In my manuscript, I share openly and honestly my emotional rollercoaster. Tied into that rollercoaster are the contributions of my grief therapist and my naturopath, without whom I could not have found a way to move forward when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. It is my hope that my readers will find inspiration in these words and find comfort that they are not alone with their own feelings of loss.

My tale concludes with my training for and participating in the World Championships—and getting back into the GO of life—hence, *Flowing with the Go*. Sometimes the key to survival and renewal is found in the most unlikely of places.

—Elena

Foreword

***T**he first day Elena stepped into my school, I had no knowledge of the tragedy that had fractured her life—a horrible event which in a roundabout way led her to seek out training in martial arts and, through apparently random events, to my school. My first meeting with Elena showed me a person who, like most students who are new to the mats, needed direction and guidance. I had no idea how much, until my assistant coach and close friend Rick (or Brick as you will come to know him) informed me of the tragedy Elena had recently endured.*

Elena didn't know that I knew, not for a long time; in fact, it was she who would finally come to me with her sorrowful tale. And even though it was not common knowledge between us at first, I always kept her situation at the forefront of my instructing Elena. Every word that I chose, the way it was spoken, and the manner in which I instructed her was tempered by my knowledge of her tragedy and what I felt was the best approach to help her become whole again. In my heart, I knew that she could live again and that the art of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu would be a major factor in her rebirth.

I've been humbled and honored to have witnessed Elena's transformation and strength. I am proud of her, her dedication, her hard work. To have played a small role in helping her persevere and accomplish many of her goals, I am also transformed. To see her smiling, to witness her joy of life again, is a gift for all of us who know her.

Elena, you are a true inspiration to me, and I look forward to the day that I promote you to the rank of black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. You have only scratched the surface of your true potential. Remember: “A Black Belt is a White Belt who never quit”!

With Love,

James Foster

Owner and Head Coach

Foster Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

It's Okay To Cry . . .

Martial arts training benefits the body, the mind, the soul, without a doubt. But there is something even deeper about the sport . . . it draws kindred spirits.

As a coach and reverent student of the sport, I firmly believe the art form draws in and captures people who need to be there, as it did with Elena.

Many times, the whole experience is like walking in the right door at the right time and meeting the right person at the perfect moment.

When I first met Elena, I remember most vividly wanting to stop her tears, to erase her fears, to help her heal. We all did. I believe that's why she was sent to Foster's, a life-changing moment guised as an apparent random act through an Internet search.

Perhaps for Elena, the darkness will never fully go away, the wound will never fully heal, and the pain found within her heart and soul will always be there!

But through Jiu-Jitsu and her teammates and coaches, her spirit is certainly fortified anew, her mind has learned to handle the emotions, and her body is strong. She has regained control of Elena.

And she also has learned this important life lesson: “It’s okay to cry, just not on the mat!”

“Brick”

Coach Rick Geist

Foster Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

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Filet of Soul

*“Grief is better shared in the light.
Standing in the dark speaks of guilt.”*

— Wonder Woman
Comic book #226, author Greg Rucka

“Is it good for your soul?” My organic, benevolent, and intellectual friend Susan asked me this question after I spent an afternoon explaining that the bruises on my arms were from my new hobby, Jiu-Jitsu.

I stared at her and shrugged my shoulders. I had not taken the time to think deeply about why I had gravitated toward a sport that appeared rather aggressive. Why did I walk into that padded, red-and-black martial arts gymnasium? It wasn't like I woke up one day, cast my knitting needles aside, and announced, “Today I'm gonna take up combat sports.” I had never before participated in a martial art—or any individual sport, for that matter. I didn't watch Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) on television. I didn't know what a gi was. I also didn't know that I had walked into that gym to see if I could live fully again.

In April 2007, my universe came crashing down, creating a spiritual vortex that enveloped my sense of caring about myself or my future—my daughter Carly died in my arms from a fatal arrhythmia just a week shy of her fifteenth birthday. In the midst of providing CPR, the arrival of the EMTs, the ambulance ride to the emergency

room, and the finality of “I’m so sorry” from the doctors, I lost my faith and my sense of security and entered an empty life, shrouded by the uncertainty of whether or not I mattered anymore.

I began seeing a grief counselor at the insistence of my dearest friends, who also drove me there because I couldn’t be alone with my thoughts. Without their persistent compassion, I would have slept all day, drank wine at night, and cried every moment I was awake. I felt as though I was wearing a lead blanket. I did not have the energy or desire to care about anything, least of all myself. Who was there to care about? Who was I, now that Carly was gone?

Carly was my firstborn. She was a precocious child with the ability to focus on tasks for a long period of time. For this reason, she began playing the piano at age four and could read, write, and memorize ahead of her peers. Carly would continue the legacy of her father’s family and excel at music, playing not only classical piano, but clarinet and saxophone. She played in the top jazz band and wind ensembles as a freshman in high school. My role in this aspect of her life was simply to listen, watch, encourage, and support. Without even a hint of musical ability myself, I could easily, and equally, be awed by an elementary or high-school performance. Once when I asked Carly about the importance of music in her life, she pointed to a scar on her knee that was shaped like a quarter note and said, “See this, Mom? Music is my destiny.”

It was in athletics that Carly was most like me. In fifth grade, Carly approached her father and me and, with her ever-confident tone, told us, “I like soccer, but I really LOVE basketball. So I’m going to just focus on that.” And focus she did. In seventh grade, Carly was asked to play on an elite travel team that competed at several national Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) tournaments throughout the year. That first summer, Carly was not a starter on the team. In her mind, she didn’t get nearly enough playing time. Instead of pouting like so many kids her age do when things don’t go their way, upon her return from the age thirteen and under (U13) Nationals that August, she said, “Take me to the gym. I want to train.” And for most of August, Carly spent

up to three hours a day with Mo, her coach, improving her shot, ball-handling, footwork, decision making, and passing from the point. She was tenacious, never wanting to stop a drill until she could do the prescribed task correctly. I have always told my children that “hard work pays off.” And for Carly it did. That fall during tryouts, people constantly remarked on the improvements to her game. Not only did she start, she led the team in shooting percentage and efficiency (positive stat points per minute of playing time). That spring, after a recruiting tournament in Chicago, Carly received a letter from Notre Dame. It was pretty clear that college basketball was in her future.

It is no secret that I was entrenched in Carly’s life. Like Carly at that age, I had made college athletics my goal. Her work ethic reminded me of my own. The only difference was choice of sport: she loved basketball, and I loved volleyball. Her dad and I coached Carly and a team of her school friends from fourth to sixth grade. When Carly began playing on her travel team, she insisted on also playing with her school friends on the original team. This meant four practices a week sometimes, but she never seemed to mind. Staying connected to her friends was a priority for Carly. At one basketball camp they all attended, Carly was asked to “play up” with the high school players, but she turned down the offer, preferring that she and her friends stay together.

I was the “team mom” for the elite team. I traveled to all of the tournaments, attended every practice and training session, and filled in when they needed a “big body” to push around the post players. I loved this life. I was with my daughter, watching her live her dream, and she wanted me there. Before I accepted the assistant’s position, I asked her if my close involvement would make her uncomfortable. I didn’t want to cramp her style or step on her toes. I wanted her to be free to be herself and did not want to do anything that might taint our relationship. She said, “I want you here. You are my biggest fan.” And that is why I was with her the day she died.

We were in North Carolina to play in an NCAA viewing tournament. We had spent the day on the campuses of Duke and the University of

North Carolina. The team had dinner together, and I will never forget that final evening of teenage restaurant antics. All of the laughter, smiling, and lightheartedness were infectious. I will be forever grateful as well for the hug and “thanks for dinner” I got as we left the restaurant.

I remember the first time someone asked me about our final minutes together. I’m sure they were curious to find out if we had been arguing. Earlier that day, Carly had left her cinch bag behind at the Wendy’s, where the girls went for lunch. Of course, it was not there when we went back to look for it. In that bag were her new video iPod and my digital camera that was a birthday present from my parents, which she had borrowed without my permission. Everyone knew that her oversight weighed heavily on her mind. One of my favorite pictures of Carly was taken in the Duke cathedral. She is in the second pew, holding hands with her two best friends, eyes squeezed shut as she prays to find her bag.

That evening, back in the hotel room, she was lounging on her bed, hair wet from the shower, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup wrapper in her lap, talking to her boyfriend on her cell phone. I overheard her lamenting to Tyler about her situation, and I walked to the end of the bed to get her attention and said, “Carly, let it go. YOU are so much more important than THINGS.” It was maybe five minutes later after she hung up that a strange noise made me look over my shoulder. She was having an irreversible arrhythmia.

A lot of what you hear about death and grieving sounds cliché until it is happening to you. There is a saying, “Let not the sun go down upon your anger.” I believe it was by the grace of God that my last words to Carly were words of love and comfort. I hope she took them with her and, in her new role as guardian angel, can whisper wisdom into the ears of people who are in the midst of death, so that they will not suffer the torment of unkind last words.

*“My heart
Where did you go?
Wounded companion went
Away from me to bathe in tears
Come back.”*

— Elena Stowell