Back on Board

In this edited excerpt from his opinion piece titled “Back on Board,” HIV-positive Olympian Greg Louganis reflects on a revealing documentary about his life--while challenging himself, and all of us, to find joy and hope in our daily lives.

November 10, 2014 By Greg Louganis

We’ve all heard people say that we should take time to smell the roses. All too often it’s not so simple. The stressors of life and the strife of internal conflict make us question if we are doing the right thing. So we often miss chances to take joy in the little things.

Now imagine what it’s like to look back on your life. Not a random trip down memory lane, but an in-depth examination. Do you think there will be more examples of joy or sorrow? What would you find on such a journey of discovery? And what would you do with the results of such an examination?

Your answer might simply be “I don’t know.” And you’re not alone. I’ve spent the last three years following a crazy adventure into the unknown.

A documentary producer read a New York Times article about me returning to diving after a nearly 20-year absence—in Will Sweeney’s mind there was more to be told. He wasn’t the only one.

Cheryl Furjanic, a documentary producer and professor at New York University, realized that those under the age of 27 rarely knew my name, my contributions to the sport, my coming out story, or my public acceptance of my HIV diagnosis at a time when the disease was misunderstood and people were dying from it quickly.

I didn’t have to return to diving. In fact, I felt largely unwelcome. Those feelings were reinforced when a notable figure in diving was asked if he had read my book Breaking the Surface after it hit the New York Times best-seller list.

The response, which others didn’t know I heard, was, “Louganis is a stain on USA Diving. Now everyone is going to think we are the Men’s Figure Skating of the aquatic world”—a comment that garnered many laughs from those involved in the discussion. But I got back in the diving world because I truly felt I had more to contribute.

Then I was approached about being in a biographical documentary project. You’re probably

wondering what my first thought was. It certainly seems self-serving. I didn't want this to be another example of a fading star trying to grasp a last few minutes of fame.

But the more we talked, the more I realized that a story about my life isn't about me as much as it's about fighting to get where you want to be and questioning whether you're doing the right thing along the way. Participating in this project could help others see that there's a whole lot of life out there if we choose to live it.

The resulting documentary, Back on Board, which premiered at the American Film Institute Documentary Festival in June—and has won critical acclaim since—is a raw look at my life.

I openly discuss struggles with life in general—not just being gay, living with HIV and trying to find acceptance in a solitary sport and the world around me, but also experiencing life as a recovering alcoholic and dealing with the threat of losing my home due to some bad business decisions, the possibility of filing bankruptcy, and other very frank and honest topics.

The film is a harsh and thorough look into my life—sometimes inspiring, sometimes awkward, sometimes embarrassing. But all in all, it's a truth told with honesty and love. And though I'm obviously its focus, the film could just as easily be about so many others—it's bigger than me.

As I watched the final film amidst the attendees at the festival, it dawned on me that this project allowed me to "smell the roses," so to speak. And it forced me to ask myself a very harsh question: Why look back to find joy when you have the opportunity to experience it every day if you open yourself up to it?

So I pose the same question to you. Are you going to look back on your life to discover the joys and hopes that outnumber the regrets, or are you going to start taking the moments to find the joy in your everyday life?

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