



## NEIGHBORS

# Every day is a winding road

*For Marlene Chism, life is a wonderful path she enjoys traveling*

by Heather Berry

**C**harismatic, energetic and inspiring are words that might describe Marlene Chism. No, Marlene's not famous or rich. She's not the inventor of some marvelous new product which makes life easier. She simply lives every minute with the expectation that whatever choice she makes gives her a chance to learn more about herself.

Years ago, Marlene, now a motivational speaker, knew she wanted more out of life than her factory job offered. But to do something else would require change, something many people find hard, as Marlene did at first.

"My biggest fear was that I'd end up living on the street if I failed at whatever I chose to do," she says. "But then I thought, if I fail and end up living on the street, I'll just make lemonade out of lemons! Wouldn't that make a great story to share from a speaker's platform?"

A native of Springfield, Marlene graduated from high school in 1976 and jumped right into the work force so she could get away from home, buy a new car and be on her own. She found a job at Kraft Foods and spent the next 21 years working on the factory production line, tearing down equipment or driving forklifts.

"After a few years I realized there was no way I could do that type of job forever," says Marlene.

So, while still working at Kraft, Marlene attended cosmetology school and got her license and then realized she didn't think she could stand that forever either.

"I've always had a million things

going on — which might be viewed as a lack of focus," says Marlene, "but that's part of the search and finding your path in life."

Marlene kept searching for what she wanted in life. At age 25, her brothers got into bodybuilding and she thought she'd give it a try. She went on to win several state titles and even competed nationally. It was fun for a few years, but not something she wanted to do forever.

"When you work a blue collar job, working with the same people every day and there's no window to look out of, you don't know what the rest of the world is like," says

Marlene. "You live for today and not the bigger picture. That was my world."

Still searching, Marlene took advantage of benefits Kraft offered which allowed her to return to college. Ten years later Marlene graduated with top honors from Drury College with a degree in communication.

"Psychology class really opened a lot up to me. For the first time I realized that knowledge truly is power," says Marlene. "I'd never been exposed to the power of positive thinking.

"I was raised to believe you go get a job, you work hard and if you're lucky, something good might happen to you."

Coming from a family that accepted whatever life sent their way and beginning to believe she could have control over things in life simply rocked Marlene's world.

She joined Toastmasters, a group



Each day offers Marlene Chism opportunities she can choose to use — or lose.

which teaches communication skills, and began to change. And when you change, sometimes it makes other people uncomfortable.

Marlene's husband, Gerald, saw her change from a more traditional wife role into a more assertive "I am woman, hear me roar" woman.

"We both had to adjust to the change," says the entrepreneur.

About six years ago, a friend asked Marlene what she would do if there were no limits. Marlene said, "I'd be a dancer or choreographer." Marlene's friend reminded her that she was in her 30s, didn't live in New York and

had limited dance training. So her friend asked what her second choice would be.

"I'd be a motivational speaker who helps others see their own potential," Marlene said, a

comment she now finds ironic.

So in 1999, Marlene quit her job at Kraft and began her own business, ICARE Presentations (Improving Communication and Relationships Everywhere.) ICARE's mission is to help people discover their potential, solve communication problems and build rewarding relationships.

Whether she's teaching a half-day session to a group of secretaries or leading what she calls "Authentic Power" workshops for managers, Marlene inspires and motivates people to be the best they can be. Her growing list of clients includes *The Detroit Free Press*, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and NASA.

Marlene tailors her talks to the

group and even offers some light-hearted learning. In one session called "Winning The Big Contest," she teaches bodybuilding techniques to help people focus on the big picture to see what life is teaching them.

"Women love 'Dancing Outside the Box' which is a motivational talk about relationships and boundaries. I even tap dance at the end when I talk about the stages we go through as we transform ourselves. It's great fun!"

As with many of us, it took Marlene several different roads and detours to get to where she is in life, but she's happy. Marlene is also working on a book and is currently pursuing a master's degree in human resources development.

"I'm still a work in progress, but I'm sure enjoying this path I'm on."

As she looks back over the past 27 years, it's hard for Marlene to recall the person she once was. "It makes me realize that I have so much more potential," says Marlene.

One thing Marlene tells groups is, "By your choices you reveal your commitments." She wants people to be clear on what's truly important in their lives so they don't end up allowing circumstances to control them.

"It makes me very happy to know that I can help others create a new vision for themselves," Marlene says. "After all, if a factory worker can tap dance and motivate people from Seattle, Washington to Long Island, N.Y., anything is possible."

*You may contact Marlene Chism at ICARE Presentations, 1223 W. Linwood, Springfield, MO 65807; by calling (417) 831-1799 or via e-mail at marlene@icareconsult.com.*

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