

Portrait in Perseverance

Meet the Remarkable Bonnie St. John

by Barbara Meyer

Go Red For Women is excited and proud to introduce the keynote speaker for their November 14th luncheon—renowned athlete, bestselling author, and leadership consultant Bonnie St. John. Confident, intelligent, beautiful, and strong, Bonnie epitomizes the remarkable women who make up central Kentucky’s heart health community.

The event’s purpose is very personal to Bonnie as her mother Ruby died of a heart attack at age 67. Ruby, an English teacher with a Ph D., was a devoted parent who placed everyone else’s needs before her own, including her health.

Brother Wayne, mother Dr. Ruby Schwimmer, Sister April and Bonnie (taken only a week before Ruby passed away).



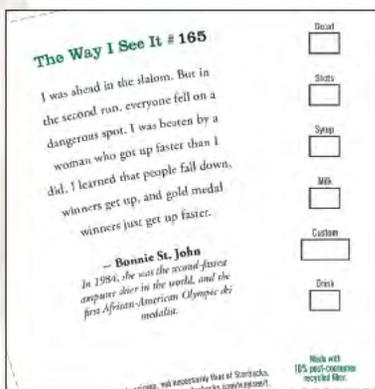
“My mother was the classic example of the matriarch of the family,” Bonnie observes. “She was always putting off the care that she needed in order to focus on others. Women must be advocates for themselves since heart disease and heart attacks are preventable. They can impact their lives and those of others around them

by learning about heart health and about making the best decisions for their bodies in spite of challenges like time, funds, and lack of information.”

Bonnie understands facing challenges and overcoming them firsthand. Growing up in San Diego, she started life with a rare condition that stunted the growth in her right leg, resulting in it being amputated when she was five years old. When she was 10, Ruby brought home a brochure on skiing that included a silhouette of an amputee on a ski. In



Bonnie was honored by having her inspirational quote on a Starbucks coffee cup: “I was ahead in the slalom. But in the second run, everyone fell on a dangerous spot. I was beaten by a woman who got up faster than I did. I learned that people fall down, winners get up, and gold medal winners just get up faster.”



spite of her decidedly non-snowy surroundings, Bonnie was inspired to try skiing. At 15, she was invited on her first ski trip. With borrowed equipment made for amputees and her own determination, Bonnie’s natural athleticism kicked in and she was on her way.

Burke Mountain Academy, a private school for skiing in Vermont, recognized her talent, gave her a full scholarship, and trained her to be a champion. At just 19, she went on to win a silver and two bronze medals in downhill events at the 1984 Paralympics in Innsbruck, Austria, becoming the first African-American ever to win Olympic or Paralympic medals in ski racing. Her accomplishment was celebrated in many ways, including a visit to the White House where President George W. Bush honored her. She was the second fastest woman in the world on one leg in 1984; footage shows her gliding down the slopes with the same confidence and ease that she applied to the next stages in her life; education and career.



After the Olympics, Bonnie continued her pattern of surpassing. She graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard and earned a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University in England, taking an M.Litt in Economics. At IBM she became an award-winning sales representative. Her accomplishments came

to the attention of the White House, where she joined the National Economic Council as a Director for Human Capital Policy, appointed by President Bill Clinton. Bonnie then applied her unique perspectives and insights to help others as a writer and motivational speaker. Described by NBC “Nightly News” as “one of the most inspiring women in America”, Bonnie has traveled the world over the last twenty years, as a keynote speaker and leadership consultant for over five hundred different companies, non-profits and associations. In live, radio, and web-based appearances, Bonnie continues to inspire leaders at every corporate level to enhance their skills and achieve their fullest potential.

Bonnie frequently donates her free time during travels to schools, community groups, and homeless shelters where she feels that she can make an impact. She has volunteered as a coach for disabled ski racers for the Adaptive Sports Foundation, and recently counseled survivors of the Boston Marathon bombing who were transitioning to new lives with prostheses. In 2010, Bonnie was appointed to the U.S.’s official delegation to the Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver.

Bonnie’s latest book, “How Great Women Lead”, is a series of profiles based on interviews with instrumental female leaders, co-authored with her teenage daughter Darcy. “Exploring leadership through the eyes of strong and vital women from around the world was an especially meaningful experience,” says Bonnie. “Darcy and I learned from each other so much. It was rewarding to work together as mother and daughter. It was a big dream, and we had to solve problems, and approach our goals in different ways. To achieve big goals, you have to be resilient, and to get the results you want, you have to persevere.”

The book profiles leaders like Hillary Rodham Clinton, Dr. Condoleeza Rice, fashion designer Eileen Fisher, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg, and many other notable women. Not all of the women are high profile or household names, but each is impactful.

“Women lead everywhere, in different styles, it doesn’t have to be a certain way”, Bonnie feels. “They carve their own paths, that is why they are successful. Every woman can bring herself to making a difference in the world.”

Bonnie found that though each woman profiled had her own individual experience, they shared a similar authenticity and comfort with their own flaws and strengths, doing things their own way. The

stories show that a purpose larger than oneself is often the catalyst for leadership. Bonnie observes that women frequently have challenges about perfectionism and micromanaging, and recommends that they learn to let go and rely on other people more.

“When you try things that don’t work, don’t see them as a series of failures, but a series of learning experiences”, she says. “For example, when it comes to health, everyone has different needs, and you have to continually test out new approaches to find out what’s best for you. It takes effort to learn what habits and behaviors succeed for your lifestyle.

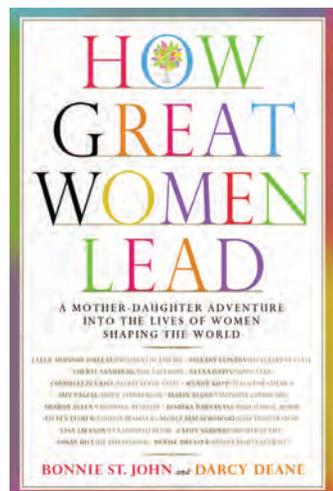
What works for you in one phase of your life may no longer work for you in another, so it’s a continuous process.”

With her demanding schedule, Bonnie relates to the day-to-day challenges of living a healthy lifestyle. She stresses the importance of doing small actions consistently, for long-term benefit. With her travel schedule constantly changing, Bonnie proactively plans steps for exercise and healthy eating, traveling with Zumba and yoga routines loaded on her computer, enabling her to continue exercising when she’s on the road. When she and her husband fly, they bring their own food, so that they always have healthy options in the right portions.

“Everyone has setbacks, no matter the size of your aspirations”, Bonnie notes. “I’d rather play big and have big dreams than limit my options by keeping those dreams small. Life is full of challenges, and we grow as individuals by the way that we meet them.”

Bonnie has been a popular guest in both national and international media including: The Today Show, CNN, CBS Morning News, NBC News, PBS, NPR, and The New York Times, as well as People, “O”, and Essence magazines. Learn more about her life, career, and projects by visiting bonniestjohn.com. For more on Bonnie and Darcy’s exciting new book, visit howgreatwomenlead.com.

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Bonnie's daughter and co-author, Darcy