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Orange County Woman Finds Direction at OCC Works on Exciting Projects With Abdul-Jabbar

Deborah Morales discovered the ultimate direction for her life while an Orange Coast College student, and she's now on the fast-track to success.

Actually, she'd prefer that others see her as being on "the fast-track to significance."

The 45-year-old Santa Ana resident calls herself an "iconomist" by profession. The term merges the words "icon" and "economics." At the moment, her career skills are being fully tested as she serves as friend, business manager and public relations advisor to former NBA basketball legend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

"I do legal work for Kareem, contract negotiations, marketing, branding and sales, and write proposals and business letters," she says. "I kind of created my job. I spoke with other sports agents and discovered that they don't do what I do. I decided to call myself an 'iconomist.' My purpose is to help icons – like Kareem – go from success to significance."

Morales played a crucial role in bringing about Abdul-Jabbar's most recent book, "On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance." It's the sixth book for the NBA's all-time leading scorer. Morales contracted with Orange Coast College writing professor, Raymond Obstfeld, to write the book.

Abdul-Jabbar will be at OCC Wednesday (Feb. 28), from 2-4 p.m., to discuss his new book and to autograph copies. He'll speak in Robert B. Moore Theatre. Admission is free.

"On the Shoulders of Giants" will soon be turned into a motion picture by Spike Lee. Morales assisted in securing funding for that project. Lee, Abdul-Jabbar and Morales are serving as the project's executive producers.

"I'm thrilled with this whole project," Morales says enthusiastically. "It's all a dream come true."

Three years ago, Morales was nearly at the end of her rope. She'd been a highly successful entrepreneur, starting and operating a variety of businesses.

"My businesses were going well, but then I became really, really ill," she says. "I had businesses in Southern California and Las Vegas, and was doing extensive traveling, including to Mexico and China.

"But I became so totally fatigued that I was unable to work. I spent two years in bed...and lost everything. I spent a full year seeing doctors and trying to get a diagnosis."

That diagnosis finally came. She had fibromyalgia; a disease that's often referred to as chronic fatigue syndrome. FMS (fibromyalgia syndrome) is a musculoskeletal pain and fatigue disorder for which the cause is still unknown. Most patients with the disease say they ache all over.

"I had to force myself to get out of bed and exercise," she says. "It was horrible. In the fall of 2004, as a 42-year-old, I decided to return to school. I was scared to death, but I had to re-start things...I had to find a new direction for my life."

She enrolled at Orange Coast College, the school she'd attended as a young woman in the early 1980s. Raised in Mammoth, Calif. and Orange County, she enrolled at OCC after graduating from University High School in Irvine.

"I'd never really liked school much," Morales confessed, "but I enrolled at Coast and soon began to enjoy being on campus. I served as president of the college's student advertising agency, and I did ad layouts for OCC's Community Education Program."

She left school after several semesters and became a motivational speaker.

"I had lots of energy and enjoyed speaking in front of audiences. For four years I gave speeches to high school students, encouraging them to consider continuing their educations at a college or trade school."

Over the next 10 years she owned several companies, including "Basketeers," a company that distributed highly creative gift baskets.

"We made baskets for Nordstrom's, Mrs. Fields and the U.S. Army."

But, the businesses – and the pace – began to take their toll on Morales' health, and she began to feel increasingly fatigued. Ultimately, she was confined to bed rest.

"During my two years in bed I watched the inspirational film, 'Seabiscuit.' I learned that the author of the book, Laura Hildebrand, had fibromyalgia. During the time that she wrote the book she was bedridden, and had only enough energy to write for two hours per day. I was inspired by her determination and moxie."

Struggling to get well, in the fall of 2004 Morales enrolled in OCC's Counseling 101 class, titled "New Horizons for Men and Women." Nicolette Jackson, director of OCC's center for re-entry adults, taught the class.

"Nikki was so nice," Morales remembers. "I talked with her after the first class meeting and told her that I suffered from fibromyalgia. I told her, 'If I fall asleep in class, please know that it has absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the class. It's just something I can't help.' She completely understood."

The one-unit course challenges men and women to explore educational and career options. Students take a battery of tests and write career objectives.

"The tests told me that I had the aptitude and skills to be a photographer, writer, minister, judge, sports agent, sales manager, sales person, or lawyer. Those are all skills that I use today as an iconomist."

Coincidentally, at about that time Morales' longtime friend, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, advised her to read Viktor Frankl's groundbreaking 1946 book, "Man's Search for Meaning." Frankl was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, and Holocaust survivor.

"Kareem, who'd been a friend of mine since 1994, recommended the book," Morales says. "Frankl asserts that if you find a purpose and meaning for your life, you'll get well."

A wispy apparition of a "purpose" began to materialize in Morales' brain. Feeling energized and stronger physically, she decided to enroll in an OCC writing class during the spring of 2005.

"Nikki had suggested that I look into writing as a career option. With my illness, I needed to be engaged in something that was calm, not frenetic."

Morales took her newfound health and enthusiasm into Anna Waterhouse's OCC scriptwriting class.

"Anna rocked my world," Morales says with a big smile. "She was deeply caring. I'd never experienced a teacher like her before. I began to write, and she encouraged me. She introduced me to writers who came to campus to speak in her class and others. She introduced me to Raymond Obstfeld, and I began to sit in on his OCC writing class."

Several weeks into the semester, Waterhouse took Morales aside.

"I don't want to break your heart," Waterhouse told her, "but you're not a writer. You're a producer."

"I resisted at first," Morales says, "but Anna kept insisting that I was a producer. One day she brought Hollywood producer, Barnett Bain, to speak to the class. I listened to what he had to say and it suddenly became very clear to me. I was producer material! I discovered a direction for my life that had integrity."

Abdul-Jabbar was looking for a way to turn his Harlem experience into a documentary film. Born and raised in Harlem, Abdul-Jabbar grew up with a love for basketball and jazz. He received national exposure as a basketball player at Power Memorial High School, and was recruited to UCLA by legendary coach, John Wooden.

Morales went to Obstfeld to see if he'd be willing to write Abdul-Jabbar's script. Obstfeld, an OCC writing professor for the past 30 years, is author of more than 40 works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. He's also sold numerous original screenplays.

Obstfeld agreed. He came up with the title, "On the Shoulders of Giants." The metaphor of

“dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants” has been attributed to Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century.

“Raymond doesn’t work for free, so I sold my house in Costa Mesa and Kareem and I put in equal amounts of money for the project,” Morales said. “My realtor became so excited with the project that she matched the amounts that Kareem and I had contributed.”

Obstfeld and Abdul-Jabbar began working together.

“Raymond and Kareem immediately hit it off,” Morales says. “Raymond and Kareem have much in common. Both grew up on the East Coast. As a Jewish kid, Raymond was the target for a lot of other kids and would frequently get beat up. He learned to defend himself...and to stand up for what he believed. Kareem became a target as well as a young person, and he stood up for his values. They’re both very intelligent and well read. Both love mystery stories...in fact, Raymond has written lots of mystery novels. They had long conversations.

“Raymond developed a list of questions, and Kareem began answering them in detail. Both were involved in the writing process.”

Harlem was the unofficial capital of Black America in the twentieth century, and became the Mecca of African-American culture, the place where many aspired to be and home to many of the most important voices in Black history. Abdul-Jabbar set out to chronicle this seminal period in African-American history and how its literary, musical, and sports achievements had shaped his own destiny.

But, as Obstfeld began to put his script together, he came back to Morales and Abdul-Jabbar with a suggestion.

“He told us that what we had was really not a movie script but, rather, a book,” Morales says. “He encouraged us to make the story into a book first, then a movie. We agreed.”

The book was published this month (February) by Simon & Schuster, and contains cover endorsements from Maya Angelou, Spike Lee, Phil Jackson, Billy Crystal, Herbie Hancock, Bob Costas and NBA commissioner, David Stern.

Abdul-Jabbar is currently traveling the country promoting the book. It debuted at Number 25 on the New York Times Bestseller List.

Obstfeld completed a script for the film, and writer-director, Kevin Willmott, has refined the script and will direct the documentary, which starts production soon.

Morales now runs Abdul-Jabbar’s office in Long Beach.

“Kareem is in the office a couple of days a week. He’s also a part-time assistant coach for the Lakers, working primarily with 19-year-old, seven-foot center, Andrew Bynum. Kareem is the spokesperson for the Ralph Lauren Cancer Center in New York, and he recently became a part-time host with ‘The Best Damn Sports Show Period.’

“He keeps me extremely busy!”

With her fibromyalgia in retreat, a new book on the New York Times Bestseller list and a movie in the offing, Deborah Morales is counting her blessings.

“It’s like a miracle...what has happened,” she says. “I have my health back and the most exciting career I could possibly imagine. And, I have Orange Coast College to thank for that.”

Get ready, world. The Iconomist is in!