

# Annemarie du LeBohn: IRON WOMAN

Assault survivor reclaims her voice.

By Julie Bawden-Davis

**W**hen Annemarie du LeBohn pedaled the 112-mile cycling portion of an Ironman triathlon, straining through 30-mile-per-hour winds, the Toastmaster's primary thoughts were not how her legs hurt or her lungs heaved. Instead, she entertained only positive thoughts and treasured every second of the 17-hour, 140-mile event.

"When we have negative thoughts, we're usually casting ourselves in the victim role."

That du LeBohn even participated in the 2010 endurance competition was in many ways a miracle. In 1996, she survived an accident in which her car was lodged under an 18-wheeler truck's bed, and as a teen she suffered a violent assault that left her with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Yet at the Ironman triathlon in Tempe, Arizona, she triumphed. An Ironman race starts with a 2.4-mile swim, continues with a 112-mile bike ride and ends with a 26.2-mile run (the length of a marathon) — with no breaks in between each segment. The ability to push past the discomfort of this daunting physical challenge and focus on the positives is a hard-won skill that du LeBohn credits Toastmasters with helping her acquire. In

motivational speeches, she talks about surviving a brutal rape — and subsequent stalking — at the age of 19, and how she overcame years of anguish and self-doubt.

"For years I was uncomfortable with being seen, and I lacked confidence in expressing my voice," says du LeBohn. "Instead of seeking justice for the attack, I clammed

up and consequently became uncomfortable appearing in front of people — until Toastmasters."

By participating in local speech contests and becoming president of her club, the Mitsubishi Motor Mouths in Cypress, California, she gained the confidence to effectively express herself.

"Toastmasters gave me a secure, peaceful environment in which to learn to share my story," says du LeBohn, a real estate journalist, educator and corporate social-responsibility specialist who assists companies in embracing charitable causes.

## A Winning Message

While her motivational speeches acknowledge her brush with death in the truck accident and the attack years

earlier, du LeBohn's message is also laced with hope, purpose and resolve. In talking about the attack, she focuses on how she eventually worked through what could have been an emotionally crippling experience and instead emerged a champion.

"When something traumatic happens to you by someone else's hand and you're forced to carry the burden of their issues, you tend to question who you're supposed to be," says du LeBohn.

Her journey to the Ironman started in 1998, two years after the accident. Seeking a way to ease the pain from the muscular and skeletal damage caused by the incident, du LeBohn took up swimming and began competing in ocean swim competitions. In 2001, she participated in the AIDS/LifeCycle charity bike ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles. She even considered the Ironman at that time, but shelved the idea because she had never been a good runner. At the end of 2009 — the same year she joined Toastmasters — du LeBohn read about Ironman contestants who competed despite great challenges, and decided that she wanted to enter the Ironman as a way to banish lingering negative thought processes that had plagued her for years.

"The Ironman is more of a mental game than a physical one, and I decided to discipline my mind and body to



Annemarie du LeBohn

enjoy every moment of the competition, no matter how harsh the conditions became,” she says. “The triathlon ended up being the best day of my life. Once I jumped into the water, I was more relaxed than I’d ever been.”

For a year prior to the event, du LeBohn trained with triathlete Angela Schatz, who also finished the Ironman. Schatz praises her training partner for her commitment and positive spirit. “Annemarie and I would be out there for hours on Saturdays cycling 100 miles, and we kept each other motivated,” Schatz says.

### Telling Her Story

After du LeBohn won her Ironman medal, *USA Triathlon* magazine featured her as an inspirational athlete in its Spring 2011 issue. In the wake of that positive publicity, she was asked to be the motivational speaker for the Women in Default Services National Conference in June 2011. Before then, she had not yet spoken of her attack in a speech. But with her confidence bolstered by completing the Ironman, du LeBohn decided it was time to finally tell her story.

“I was really nervous about giving the speech, because I wasn’t sure if people wanted to hear about what happened to me,” she says. “I practiced my speech twice with my

club, and all of the members were so encouraging and helpful. Everyone, including the men, said that it was a story that needed to be told.”

Du LeBohn was heartened at the response to her speech at the conference. “Afterward, women came up to me crying, thanking me and sharing their stories,” she says.

Rae-Ann Ruskowski, a member of the Mitsubishi Motor Mouths, says she has been especially inspired by du LeBohn and her speeches. “Annemarie leads by example and with a quiet strength,” she notes. “I owe much of my commitment and growth in Toastmasters to her.”

“Her speeches pull you in, and you always come out learning something,” Ruskowski adds. “My favorite is her ‘life story/Ironman’ speech because of how uniquely motivational it is.”

In the speech Ruskowski refers to, du LeBohn reveals her seven training tools for accomplishing your goals, including the importance of taking risks. “Giving my speech about what happened to me is the riskiest thing I do, but it’s important if it helps just one person,” she says. “Competing in the Ironman also involved risk, but participating in the race vastly improved my life.”

Du LeBohn stresses to her audiences the benefits of staying positive. “When

we have negative thoughts, we’re usually casting ourselves in the victim role,” she says. “The only way to experience a better life is to focus on the fact that we have control of our life.”

Milton Shaw Jr. has worked with du LeBohn since 2008 in the area of corporate social responsibility. “In her writing, speaking to audiences and everyday communication, Annemarie always puts a positive spin on things,” says Shaw, senior vice president of strategic relationship management at Lender Processing Services, Inc. in Westminster, Colorado. “She possesses a great sense of humor and a zest for life.”

It is a zest for life, regardless of one’s circumstances, that du LeBohn seeks to convey to her audiences. “I share with people when I speak that it’s never too late to become who you were meant to be, no matter what has been thrown in your path,” she says. “It is possible to be peaceful and powerful at the same time and to follow your dreams. And the sooner you set out after those dreams, the better.” 

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