

From victim to Ironman, Long Beach resident Annemarie du LeBohn now uses her story to inspire others

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LONG BEACH – Competitor No. 2668 stood at the edge of the boardwalk, the Tempe Town Lake in Tempe, Ariz., at her feet, the rising sun above her, lighting up the November morning.

It was a beautiful sight, except she was about to go through hell. And it would be the best day of her life.

All around her, hundreds of racers were jumping into the frigid lake, creating what she would later describe as a human washing machine. She was shaking, not from the chill in the air but from the butterflies in her stomach.

Then she heard a voice. A booming instruction over the loudspeaker, speaking to everyone still left on the boardwalk, but it seemed like it was speaking just to her.

“Jump in,” the voice said. “You are avoiding the inevitable.”

So with that, [Annemarie du LeBohn](#) jumped into the chaos, and 16 hours, 7 minutes and 52 seconds later, she completed the 2.4-mile swim, the 112-mile bike ride and the 26.2-mile run. Her first Ironman race was complete.

Like thousands of other competitors that day, the goal for du LeBohn was to complete the race. But the Long Beach resident’s goal was deeper than simply crossing the finish line: she wanted to do so without a single negative thought entering her mind.

For years du LeBohn, 52, was trapped by negative thoughts, stuck categorizing herself as a victim. When she was 19, for a four-year period du LeBohn was stalked, sexually assaulted twice and had two attempts on her life.

Yet over the years du LeBohn, currently [raising money](#) through the crowd-funding site [Dreamfuel](#), (designed specifically to help athletes) to compete in a half Ironman distance in Napa on April 12, has come to accept her past. She uses the Ironman competitions she now loves and her story to help others learn to find and ultimately listen to their inner voice, stepping out of the victim role into an inspirational one.

It’s a role she is still getting used to.

“That’s hard to swallow, because if I could redo my story I wouldn’t have it happen, but it made me who I am,” du LeBohn said. “But now I understand my purpose. My purpose is to share this story.”

A big step towards sharing that story came in Arizona. It would have been easy to let negative thoughts fill

her mind during that first race. For starters, the weather was horrid, with rain and heavy winds blasting the field of competitors all day. Combined with the flu-like symptoms du LeBohn developed mid-race and it seemed as if she would not accomplish her goal.

“You really focus on your mental toughness in an Ironman. You are faced with the desire to give up,” said Angela Schatz, du LeBohn’s training partner, who ran with her in Arizona. “And when you’ve been scarred, your body tells you that you cannot finish, but she never gave up.”

Not only did she get through with all positive thoughts, but du LeBohn was actually helping others get rid of their negativity during the race, giving a lucky few cyclists a rendition of the song she created when times were tough on the bike, a song sung to the tune of the famous Oscar Meyer weiner melody.

“I was lucky to have her there,” said Schatz, laughing at the memory. “She was making everyone around us smile.”

A couple of months after that first race, du LeBohn’s story was featured in USA Triathlon Magazine, and soon organizations and groups began reaching out to her, asking her to tell her story at speaking events. But she was hesitant, believing that people did not want to hear such a negative story.

She nervously agreed to speak, and it wasn’t until after that first speaking engagement, given to a women’s group of nearly 400, that she saw how powerful her story could be. After she spoke, a group of roughly 60 women stayed behind to meet her, all in tears, all who had gone through some sort of violation in their lives.

“I realized the story is much bigger than me. I knew I had to find some comfort in telling it. It was much like doing the Ironman,” du LeBohn said. “I had to change my thought process, I had to see myself not as a victim but as an Ironman. I knew the same thing applied to sharing my story.”

But it took her nearly 10 years to become an Ironman competitor. Du LeBohn doesn’t remember where she first heard about Ironman competitions, she just remembers wanting to do one. That moment came while riding her bike in Camp Pendleton. She spent the ride planning how to go about becoming an Ironman competitor.

She was already a decent swimmer and cyclist, but her weakness was running. As she likes to put it, the only long distance running she did back then was from herself. Hung up with her difficulty in running, she put off Ironman.

What finally got her training was inspiration from articles on Ironman competitors who had overcome obstacles such as cancer and the loss of limbs — including her role model, Sarah Reinertsen, the first female amputee to compete at the Ironman World Championships in Hawaii.

But her family was not initially supportive of her decision. The only one she found support from was her sister Donna, who helped her slowly get into running. The two ran a couple of marathons together and participated in triathlons together.

“You really have to push yourself physically, and our parents were worried about that,” said Donna. “But I was excited for her ... she was very well-organized in terms of getting prepared. She was very determined.”

The first six months for du LeBohn were spent just getting into shape for the real training. Du LeBohn does not rely on coaches, but trains with partners like Schatz or in groups when it comes to cycling. She trains all over the area, from Long Beach State to Irvine.

And while she was inspired by competitors overcoming the physical difficulty, du LeBohn was struggling with the mental part, still suffering from the scars of those four years.

Du LeBohn grew up in Santa Ana, in a picturesque community where everything and everyone felt safe. But that world was shattered one night at an engagement celebration at a friend's house. The man who would become her stalker was a new neighbor of a friend who tagged along to the party. He ended up assaulting her that night.

Over the next four years she was stalked, running into her attacker frequently as much as she tried to avoid him. She would end up being assaulted once more at another gathering, made vulnerable by something slipped into a drink. Du LeBohn was also shot at one night while walking to her car, still remembering the bullet whizzing past her head.

Slowly, the presence of her stalker, who was never reported, faded and she began to run into him less and less until he was gone. After the stalking ended, life went on for du LeBohn, but she found herself suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), going through life always worrying that something bad was just around the corner.

"I was constantly thinking about how am I going to survive this moment," said du LeBohn. "I wasn't living."

Along the way there were other tragedies: A collision with an 18-wheeler, a near-plane crash and more recently the loss of her father James to a stroke in 2012.

But once du LeBohn decided to listen to that inner voice, [The Voice Within](#) (the title of her TED talk), she was able to do Ironman races and find that purpose, filling that sense of emptiness.

She regrets that it took her so long to follow her instincts, regrets letting those negative thoughts hold her back. Now, fully accepting her past, du LeBohn is on a mission to help others find their finish line, in whatever it may be.

"If I can give anyone a gift, it would be confidence in themselves," du LeBohn said. "Confidence in their voice, whether it's speaking that voice or listening to that inner voice and being true to themselves."

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