

# *In the Face of* **ADVERSITY**

Brenda Warner has faced challenge after challenge: an accident that left her son blind and brain damaged, a breakdown of her first marriage when she was 8-months pregnant, her parents being killed by a tornado, a new relationship with promising football player Kurt Warner, and the pressures his sudden success brings to their growing family (they have seven kids!).

Through food stamps and funerals, Super Bowls and serving others, Warner's strength is unwavering—and she shares all in her new memoir, *One Call Away*.

**BY WENDY RUBICAM**

**PHOTOS BY JAMES PATRICK, [WWW.JAMESMPATRICK.COM](http://WWW.JAMESMPATRICK.COM)**



When you see happily united couple Brenda and Kurt Warner enjoying retirement from NFL superstardom with their brood of seven kids, you might think that they are just one of those lucky couples who've been dealt a winning hand throughout life. While football fans might be aware of Kurt's rise from an undrafted grocery store stocker to two-time NFL MVP-winning quarterback, Brenda Warner has her own story to tell. Her recently published memoir, *One Call Away*, shares a life story that may surprise readers. The book title represents the many phone calls Warner received that changed the course of her life. "I've had many of those calls that took me down a different path that I never planned on, and it wasn't easy," she shares. "So, it represents that one call away. That we're all one call away from good news, bad news, and what are you going to do with it when you get it?"

As a young enlisted marine in her first marriage, Warner dealt with a devastating accident that severely disabled her infant son, followed by the breakdown of her marriage when she was pregnant with her second child. As part of a closely knit family, she relied heavily on her parents for a while, and then put herself through nursing school while living in Section 8 housing with her two young children. Her son Zack's disability was initially a source of pain for Warner, but she says that her happiest moments have come from the toughest times. "I remember when Zack was injured and I thought that I didn't want to go on; I didn't know how to be the mom of a special needs child," she says honestly. "I remember the first time he walked and he was 2 ½. He wasn't the 1-year-old that most people are when they walk, but when he let go of that walker and took off on his own, I'll never forget that day."

Warner faced another tragedy when her parents were killed in a tornado in Arkansas. "From the moment my parents were killed and thinking that I couldn't go on and that I didn't want to wake up in the morning and grieve again, you know, it showed me how precious life is and it showed me that I need to surround myself with good people in my life and live it, fully," Warner reflects. "There is a burden and a blessing in everything and all of my good times coincide with some really rough times, but that made them even sweeter."

**"In my life I went from being a Marine, living with honor, courage and integrity, to being in line with food stamps, still living with honor, courage and integrity—same person—but with food stamps," says Warner. "I would like the reader to know that circumstances don't determine who you are, and they are not a measure of God's love for you. This book started out being a way of telling my kids why I am the way I am. However, I have found by sharing my story through the years that people find hope and encouragement in it, and hopefully *One Call Away* can help someone else get through some dark times of their own."**

The Warners wrote their parenting book, *First Things First*, in 2001 and Warner says that Kurt continued to encourage her to write her life story. But it was an argument with her teenage daughter that made her realize that there was a lot her children didn't know about her life, and convinced her to share her journey.

"I thought, 'It's time.' If I have a teenage daughter that's going to be on her own soon, I want to get those stories down so she can take them with her and learn from my mistakes and be blessed by things that have happened in my life that I've been able to endure," Warner shares.

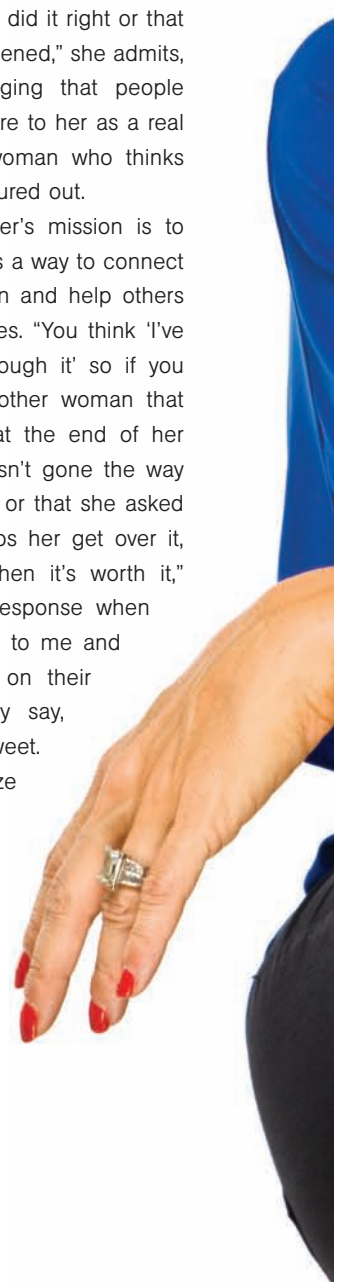
The process was a lot of work, and made more challenging by the fact that Warner was dedicated to telling her whole story and "keeping it real."

"I did have to make a promise to myself that I was going to put the good, the bad and the ugly in the book—that it can't just be all of my high points, that I did it right or that good things happened," she admits, while acknowledging that people tend to relate more to her as a real person than a woman who thinks she's got it all figured out.

Today, Warner's mission is to share her story as a way to connect with other women and help others through hard times. "You think 'I've already been through it' so if you can help some other woman that feels like she's at the end of her rope, that life hasn't gone the way that she planned or that she asked God for; if it helps her get over it, get through it, then it's worth it," she says. "The response when women come up to me and they have tears on their cheeks and they say,

'You wrote my story,' I realize that's bittersweet. They've lived a hard life, too, but I also realize that they don't feel like they're alone, so it's been worth it. It really has."

Warner has been traveling extensively promoting the book and as a speaker for Women of Faith, which is a whole new life for the stay at home mom of seven. "It's really fun because it's taken me to a different place in my life, that I have my 'thing' now and you know, for a long time I followed Kurt's thing around, and now I get to have my thing





and so I appreciate it," Warner says. "And those times when I can be at home and be mom, I'm grateful for that too, but this is a new chapter in my life."

Part of Warner's new chapter is also having her husband home more since his retirement. The couple bought a Scottsdale home in June that she says just "feels like home."

"It's been fun in the morning to sit and drink coffee when he's making breakfast for the kids and we're all talking about our day, and it's just a new stage in our life," she says.

Kurt is passionate about his role as dad, and the couple continues to put marriage and family first. She speaks with conviction on the subject of the couple's 14-year marriage, saying, "We are just committed. We're just not backing down, we're not giving up and we're just going to work this out. We find time to be together, we make it a priority to have a date night, to connect, and we're just trying to balance life like everybody else, but marriage is our priority."

She admits that the couple's favorite date night is picking up take-out food and watching a movie in bed. "It's funny that we end up doing what we used to do when we had no money...it just is a way to connect. We shut the door and it's just the two of us enjoying each other's company and that's our favorite date night," she says with a smile.

As for future plans, the couple continues to work with their First Things First Foundation, providing help for single mothers through Habitat for Humanity and spending time with Make A Wish families at Disney World every year, among other things. These two causes seem especially dear to Warner as she recalls her own story. "I was given no hope when my son was injured...I'd be lucky if he lived, I'd be lucky if he ever sits up. And now he's 22 and he's my miracle and we get to share our story with those families that have been told there's no hope," she says with passion.

Though Kurt is enjoying his work on the NFL Network and picking and choosing projects that come along while Warner is committed to reaching out by sharing her story, family remains the core for the couple. "Together as a couple what's next is just still raising those children to be world changers and realizing that huge responsibility and the huge privilege of doing it," Warner shares. "And we have a lot more to go!"

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