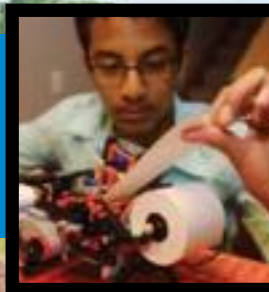


Real Kids



Real Stories



Real Character

**Choices That Matter
Around the World**

Garth Sundem

free spirit
PUBLISHING®

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To Leif and Kess,
may you change the world.

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INTRODUCTION

How tall are you? How athletic are you? How smart are you and how many friends do you have? How much money do you have and where do you live? What music do you like and what clothes do you wear? What language do you speak at home? The answers to these questions shape the story you tell yourself about who you are—they help you understand your *identity*.

These questions are also pretty easy to answer. You're either five feet tall or you're not. You either like classical music or you don't. This layer of your identity is like the paint on a house—it's either red or it's not. But what goes on inside that house is a whole other story, and the questions that shape your inside story are much harder to answer:

If you see a friend doing something you know is wrong, do you speak up? If you mess up on the sports field or on a test, does it make you quit or does it push you to practice harder? When you see a problem in the world, do you wait for others to figure it out or do you search for your own solutions? If you were diagnosed with a life-changing disease, would you still show the world your smile? When you do a good deed, do you need people to know about it?

When you think about things like courage, kindness, creativity, persistence, resilience, and responsibility—

some of the things that make up your *character*—it's pretty easy to imagine you're like the person you heard about who saved someone from the subway tracks and think you'd do the same! But would you? Would you *really*? Unless you've been put to the test, you might not know.

It's hard to know your character. It's also hard to change it. Doing one brave thing doesn't necessarily make you courageous, just like doing one kind thing doesn't necessarily make you a kind person. The opposite is true, too: Just because you came home from soccer practice one afternoon and said something mean to your little brother or sister doesn't make you a spineless jellyfish toad who should start sleeping in the garage to protect humanity from your evil.

Character is not necessarily something you learn with your head—it's something you feel with your heart. You can try studying it like you study for a math test, but that's about as good as trying to eat peas with a knife. Being able to define character isn't the same thing as having it.

If you really want to know and grow character, you have to experience it. You have to see it in action. You have to sit with character until it finds its way into your head *and your heart*. This book is a good start. But even at its best, it's just a start. When the bell rings or you close this book for the night, that's when character really starts. That's when you have the chance to *actually be* one of the young people from these pages.

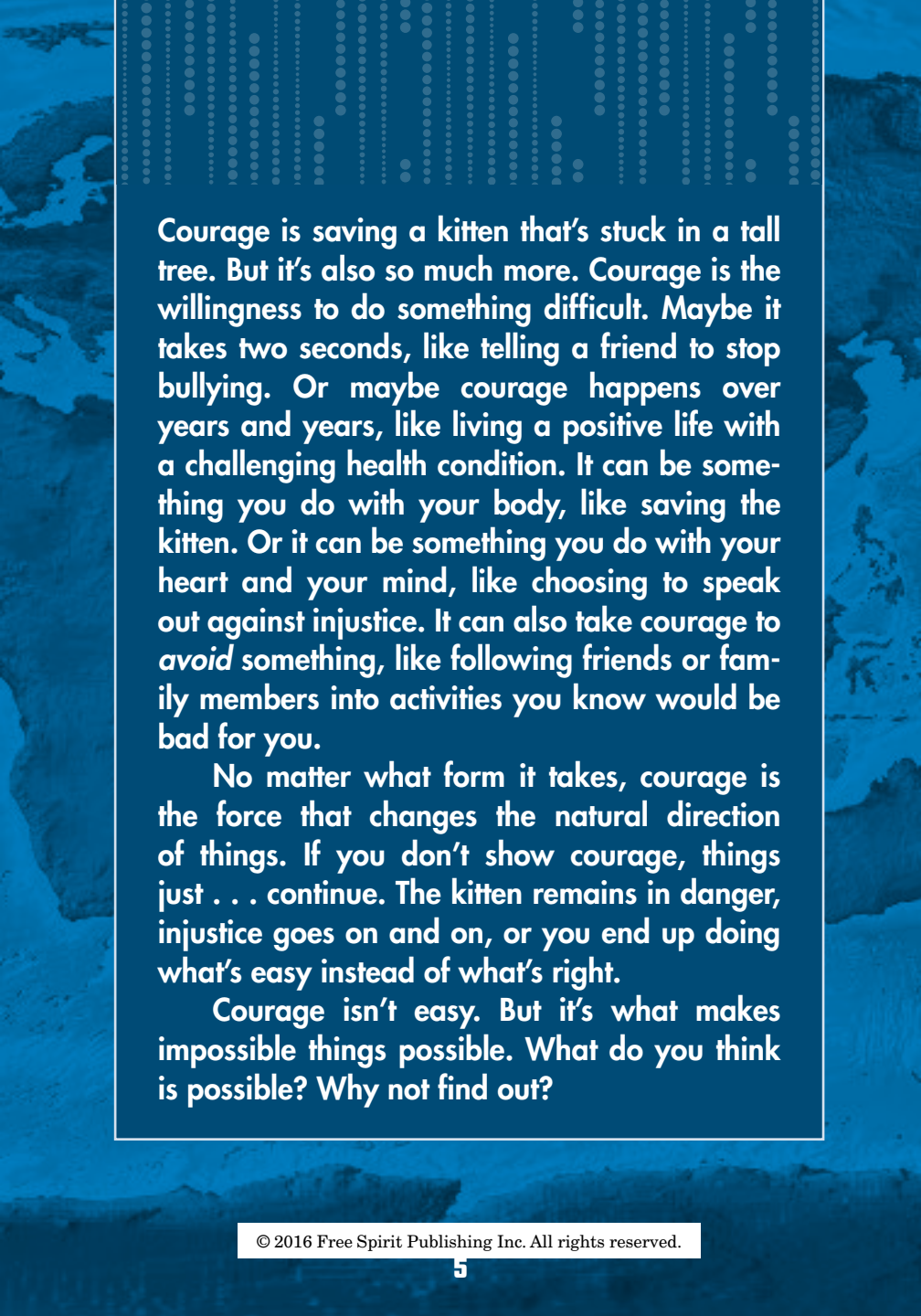
It doesn't take a million dollars or a superpower to have character. It just takes a choice—the choice to be conscious of your choices. The choice to do the best you can do in your imperfect skin with your imperfect brain in an imperfect world. In some ways, it's the choice to *matter*. And in some ways, it's the choice to let other people matter more. These choices, over the course of your life, make up your character. These choices start today.

Garth Sundem



Chapter 1

Courage



Courage is saving a kitten that's stuck in a tall tree. But it's also so much more. Courage is the willingness to do something difficult. Maybe it takes two seconds, like telling a friend to stop bullying. Or maybe courage happens over years and years, like living a positive life with a challenging health condition. It can be something you do with your body, like saving the kitten. Or it can be something you do with your heart and your mind, like choosing to speak out against injustice. It can also take courage to *avoid* something, like following friends or family members into activities you know would be bad for you.

No matter what form it takes, courage is the force that changes the natural direction of things. If you don't show courage, things just . . . continue. The kitten remains in danger, injustice goes on and on, or you end up doing what's easy instead of what's right.

Courage isn't easy. But it's what makes impossible things possible. What do you think is possible? Why not find out?



The Courage to Be Different

Zach Veach

When Zach Veach was four years old, he told his parents he wanted to be a professional racecar driver. It made sense: Zach grew up watching his dad, Roger, drive in truck and tractor pull competitions. But his family knew how much work it takes to become a pro driver and only wanted Zach to go down that long road if it was what he really, really wanted. When other kids in his small hometown of Stockdale, Ohio, started racing go-karts, the first step on the long path to driving professionally, Zach's parents encouraged him to wait.

Then when Zach was 11, his dad won the national truck and tractor pull championship in Macon, Missouri.

"Driving home from the championship, we saw a little go-kart track off the highway," Zach says. They pulled over, and there on the side of the road, Zach got

his first taste behind the wheel. “I don’t know why, but that day my dad decided to sell his trucks and tractors, give it all up, and help me reach my dream.”

Zach’s dad bought him a go-kart, and Zach started going to the local track after school and on weekends, running endless laps alone late into the evenings to get a feel for what a kart could and couldn’t do. People have called Zach a “natural.” But this “natural” talent actually came from sacrificing every evening and weekend to get thousands of hours of practice.

With practice, Zach started to get fast.

Really fast.

So fast that his lap times started to turn heads. One of those heads was famous racecar driver Michael Andretti, who owned an IndyCar team. After watching 14-year-old Zach drive, Andretti invited him to try out for his USF2000 team, which is kind of like what college baseball is to the minors. It was Zach’s first taste of professional racing, and he ate it up, finishing fifth in points despite starting after the first two races of the season had already been run. In 2010, Zach was a semi-finalist for *Sports Illustrated Kids SportsKid* of the Year.

But Zach’s skills on the racetrack didn’t matter back at his middle school in Stockdale. Because Zach was small, he was picked on at school. Once, a kid pushed his head down onto a desk so hard that Zach

FAST FACTS

IndyCar is a professional auto-racing organization.

chipped a tooth. Another time, Zach won a weekend race in Indiana and proudly wore the winner's cap to school on Monday. At lunch, a kid grabbed the hat, poured milk on it, and threw it in a trashcan. Zach took it in stride. When winners of the Indianapolis 500 cross the finish line, they're handed a bottle of milk and they pour it over themselves. Zach retrieved his hat and imagined he had just won the famous race.

When Zach was 15, he graduated to the Indy Light circuit—like minor league baseball and just one step away from the major leagues of IndyCar itself. In Indy Light, Zach would be driving at about 200 miles per hour, and he was still too young to get a driver's license!

It was pretty obvious some of the older drivers didn't think Zach belonged. He'd be on the inside of a turn and an experienced driver would push him into the grass. It felt like having his face shoved into a desk by a kid at school or having his hat thrown in the trashcan all over again. Maybe at school he was too small to be a match for the kids who bullied him, but behind the wheel, the size of his body didn't matter—it was his courage that counted. For Zach, courage was all about finding a peaceful mind.

"Driving is one of the most peaceful places on earth," he says. "You have to get into your mindset. Even when people are trying to shove you around, you have to stay cool and confident so you don't make mistakes."

On the track, Zach let his driving do the talking. His first year in Indy Light, he took third in a race at the Milwaukee Mile and won a race at Auto Club Speedway in Fontana, California, to finish the season in seventh place overall. In 2014, Zach's second Indy Lights season, he won three races and stood on the podium nine times to finish third overall.

"Ever since I was young, I was that kid climbing trees, wanting to know how high I could get. I've always been interested in finding my limits, pushing myself to see how far I could take myself," Zach says. For Zach, courage has always meant more than going 250 miles per hour while inches away from other cars going just as fast. It's been the courage to be different, the courage to find his limits.



OHIO, USA

population: 11.6 million

capital: Columbus

Now at age 21, Zach is trying to race in the big leagues: the IndyCar circuit. By the time you're reading this book, all it will take is a quick Google search to see if he made it. Whether the answer is yes or no, you can bet that Zach had the courage to *try*.

