



## **Cristina Fontanelli**

### **Victorious Woman – May 2011**

### **Letting the Light Shine**

Not good enough, not pretty enough, not thin enough, not “worthy”...those fears and others hold so many women back from stepping up into the greatest expression of themselves. Usually nothing seriously validates those “not enough” feelings but that doesn’t matter to most women, including the Brooklyn-born Cristina Fontanelli.

Cristina grew up with artistic parents. Her father liked to draw and paint and her mother was the family songstress. So the foundation was already all around Cristina when, at eleven years old, she watched *Gone With the Wind* and decided to become an actress. Cristina remembers, “...when Scarlett O’Hara pulls the rotten carrot out of the ground and said, ‘As God is my witness, I’ll never go hungry again!’ I decided right there on the spot that I wanted to be an actress and went home and ordered all the Shakespeare plays.” Cristina’s direction was set, but the path would not be easy.

In love with singing and acting, at school she found creative outlets to test out her skills. Being on stage allowed Cristina to step out of her “extremely shy” self and into the shoes of her on-stage character. In addition, during her school years, she did well scholastically and was well-liked, often being elected to different leadership roles.

After high school, following her passion, Cristina was accepted into the prestigious American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Manhattan, the oldest acting conservatory in the United States. It felt to her like she was on her way.

Then tragedy struck. Her older and only brother was killed in a car accident. Cristina was devastated, as were her parents. Though their life moved on and Cristina graduated from the Academy, the heartbreak of her brother’s death cast a shadow over the family. Eventually, it contributed to her parent’s divorce just Cristina was embarking on the difficult challenge of crafting a career on the stage. Though her mother eventually remarried, Cristina gradually found herself in the caregiver role for her mother.

While family matters continued, Cristina also realized - in uber-competitive New York City - her shyness was a greater obstacle than she thought it would be. For several years it would be bigger than the light inside her. It often prevented Cristina from speaking up for herself and speaking out about how good she was at her craft. It held her back from promoting herself as much as she could have and from letting others see her in the most advantageous light. In retrospect, Cristina thinks (like so many of us), she was “scared of not being accepted by other people or that they would find out I was not good enough, pretty enough, etc.”

In addition, Cristina was also [what she calls] “zaftig” – that is, she was plump. In fact, for a time Cristina considered pursuing opera, noticing how actors in operatic roles, like Puccini’s Tosca, usually had both incredible vocal skills *and* a Rubenesque shape.

So Cristina’s feelings about her body blended insecurity with shyness. They impacted her confidence and sometimes frustrated her acting and singing aspirations. But she persisted. Through the years, Cristina juggled various day jobs with auditions while she continued to study. More than once she hit “rock bottom” in her finances. She struggled with the rejection that is normal in the early stages of any career, but heightened in entertainment industry. Though she never thought about giving up, sometimes Cristina confesses, “I had fantasies that I would stop and have a “normal” life when the going got really rough but always, after a day or two, I would immediately return to trying to progress in my artistic endeavors...nothing made me stop dreaming the dream and actively pursuing it.”

Along the way, Cristina met a man with whom she fell in love. Cristina explains that he “was extremely extroverted, great with people, in many ways he taught me how to deal with people and watching him I learned how to “sparkle”, and not only on stage. He was also a father figure to me as he was many years older...which helped heal some of the gaps in my personal life. “

While the relationship was a blessing to her, it also had its sorrows. Her sweetheart became ill with a glioblastoma, a type of brain cancer. Cristina was his primary caregiver. During those years, she was often distracted from pursuing her art. Instead, she dealt with many difficult situations and often had to confront medical staff about life and death issues. While her sweetheart’s health never improved, the things she did to make sure he had quality of life had an interesting impact on Cristina. For the first time she learned to speak up with authority; she learned that speaking up won’t kill you but could, in fact, make others pay positive attention to you and your wants and needs. She also saw how people focus on their own interests and what is convenient for them, and that isn’t necessarily what’s best for you; she learned that sometimes you have to fight for what you want.

Gradually, though it was painful to watch her sweetheart deteriorate, the shyness that plagued her life slowly fell away. As it did, Cristina proudly admits, “I found myself with a new strength.” As difficult as that time of her life was, it was also a period of great personal growth.

Her journey continued after her sweetheart’s passing. Still, she struggled with feelings of self-worth around her singing and acting. Then, one Sunday at weekly Catholic Mass, Cristina heard - and not for the first time - the gospel story about the landowner who, before leaving for a long trip, gave three servants different talents (money). The first servant used his talents and doubled them. So did the second servant. But the third servant was fearful of taking the risk and buried his talent. When the landowner returned, he praised the first two servants but was so angered by the third servant for wasting his talent that he chastised him and kicked him out.

Though it was a story Cristina heard many times before, when she heard it that Sunday, it was with “new ears” and something shifted inside. Cristina realized how she let her personal fears burying her talent inside instead of using it to honor the One who gave it to her. It was a turning point

moment for Cristina. From that time on, Cristina decided never to let shyness or insecurity hide the talent that was her gift in life. Instead, Cristina says it was her “Ah Hah moment....it helped push me to a new level.....not to be shy or afraid but to let my light shine and indeed, I realized that God has given me an incredible healing force through my voice and it is my obligation to do whatever I can to bring it to as many people on this planet as I can... I am fearless in some ways now – strong and independent – and have become quite a self-promoter instead of a self-denier.”

Since then Cristina’s career has blossomed. She’s become an internationally known singer and has been invited to sing around the US and also Asia, the Middle East and Africa. And she was recently named one of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts most notable alumni, along with Cecil B. DeMille, Robert Redford, Danny Devito, and Anne Bancroft, among others.

To other women who have a dream but whose feelings of introversion or timidity get in the way, Cristina wants to give you this advice:

- 1 – Work Hard.** Be willing to master whatever it is you are choosing to do with your life. If it is singing, work to have a strong technique, acting...the same...writing, running a business, raising a family – whatever it is, don’t shirk the responsibility and hard work.
- 2 - Have faith.** Believe in yourself despite all odds or circumstances, and also possible negative comments from people that either don’t think you can succeed and/or don’t want you to. It’s part of your “mental” training to learn how to NOT believe this negativity when it comes at you. You need to believe in yourself to the nth degree. If you don’t have it now, have the willingness to work on that belief in any constructive way that works for you – read books, get therapy, do prayer work - whatever it takes to strengthen your faith in yourself, DO IT.
- 3 – Take Action.** I also found and still use to this day the “technique” of putting one foot in front of the other – realizing rationally what needs to be done and doing it one step at a time, even when you don’t feel like it, are emotionally upset, not feeling “up to par”, through family tragedies, *whatever*.....make a list and stick to it. You can make tremendous strides with this kind of discipline.

***BRAVA, Cristina!***

***You overcame an obstacle that sabotages many, many women.***

***Now, as your own light shines brightly,***

***you are helping other women to find the way to shine their lights too!***

Learn more about Cristina Fontanelli at [www.CristinaFontanelli.com](http://www.CristinaFontanelli.com) and hear her sing on YouTube. Save the Date for Cristina Fontanelli's Christmas in Italy™ in New York on December 11, 2011