

Author James LaVeck: Second Chapters; How I Reinvented Myself In The Second Chapter Of My Life



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Be authentically yourself. Intuitively, I knew this. I learned to be authentically myself when dealing with friends and family. As throughout most of my career, I expected that I needed to present “a brand” to the outside world. After writing the book, and with it as personal as it is, it was evident that my “brand” was being authentically me. My story resonates with people because it is honest and raw, writing about myself AND my dead husbands as flawed human beings.

Many successful people reinvented themselves in a later period in their life. Jeff Bezos worked in Wall Street before he reinvented himself and started Amazon. Sara Blakely sold office supplies before she started Spanx. Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson was a

WWE wrestler before he became a successful actor and filmmaker. Arnold Schwarzenegger went from a bodybuilder, to an actor to a Governor. McDonald's founder Ray Croc was a milkshake-device salesman before starting the McDonalds franchise in his 50's.

How does one reinvent themselves? What hurdles have to be overcome to take life in a new direction? How do you overcome those challenges? How do you ignore the naysayers? How do you push through the paralyzing fear?

In this series called "Second Chapters; How I Reinvented Myself In The Second Chapter Of My Life " we are interviewing successful people who reinvented themselves in a second chapter in life, to share their story and help empower others.

As a part of this interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing James LaVeck.

*James LaVeck has spent the greater part of his life consulting with financial institutions and providing project management services. A fan of the arts, he has helped produce two movies and a classical-crossover album. He is also an author and coach who wrote his memoir, *Life After Losses: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Life*, released in January 2021.*

5 Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me Before Bec...



Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we start, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

Thank you for the opportunity! I was born the middle child of a decidedly middle-class family in Southern California. My mother was an immigrant from Germany who shared stories of American paratroopers during WWII landing in her front yard with chocolate; my father was an American soldier stationed in Wiesbaden, across the river from my mother’s hometown. I write about my first loss being my father and remembering him packing up his bar glasses before leaving. That is one of my earliest memories. From there, it all seems so... ordinary. My mom did the best she could to raise three kids as a single parent, working multiple jobs and instilling in us the “immigrants: we get things done” work ethic. When she felt there was no other choice, we were on public assistance getting food stamps, government cheese, and peanut butter. But for her, this was a hand up. We needed help when my father didn’t pay child support. I think back now and wonder what life would have been like without that social safety net.

Around the 4th grade, I discovered I had a crush on my teacher. I imagine many nine-year-old children develop crushes, but my teacher was a man. I didn’t have a word for it back then, but I knew the feeling.

As children of divorce, we were shuttled back and forth between households until I entered the 6th grade, and our father pretty much dropped out of our lives. I heard from him many years later, as he claimed to be dying and wanting to reconcile. He was a stranger to me by that point, and reconciliation wasn’t needed for my happiness.

I held my secret as I grew up, praying for it to go away. I immersed myself in religious dogma, trying multiple churches well into high school to avoid admitting to myself those feelings I felt in the 4th grade. Add to this a rural location, the early 1980’s, and the introduction of AIDS to the national conversation. My teen years were highly conflicted, yet I managed to graduate, tied with two others, at the top of my class before going to college.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I'm not sure I necessarily have a "favorite," but there are a few life lessons that have stuck with me.

When I first started my career as a consultant, we had a VP that gave the new hires a rousing welcome speech to the company using a visual aid. It was a green, flexible character from a TV show I watched as a kid. "You have to be a Gumby," he announced. "You have to be flexible to meet the needs of the customer and the project," he said while demonstrating Gumby's flexibility. It struck me as a metaphor for life.

The other best life lesson I got was "it gets easier," and its relative "it gets better." The first time I heard this and really listened was a few days after my first husband died in 1995. I was at a grief support group, and this short, older woman approached me with her big, bright eyes and told me, "it gets easier." She smiled as she said it, and all I could think was this woman did not have a single clue about what was going on! "Good lord, woman!" I wanted to scream at her. "My husband is DEAD!" At that moment, I didn't believe it would "get easier." Still, through the years after our first encounter and her being part of my life as I worked through recovery, I found that it really did "get easier." The pain never went away, but it did get easier.

And years later, when the Trevor Project launched the "It Gets Better" campaign, it rang true. The difficulties we face are, most of the time, temporary. We just need to have faith that "this too, shall pass," and things WILL get better.

You have been blessed with much success. In your opinion, what are the top three qualities that you possess that have helped you accomplish so much? If you can, please share a story or example for each.

I have been very fortunate in my career, where it has allowed me to do and experience many things in this world.

I think the first quality I have is a level of fearlessness. When I transitioned from a safe career into consulting, I did so with the hope and belief that the change I so desperately needed in my life would come from that decision. I had been widowed for two years, and I determined I needed some massive change in my life to force myself to move out of my comfortable rut. I believed this change would be beneficial, and it was.

The second quality comes back to my first Life Lesson: I'm flexible. I learned from being widowed at a young age (I was 28) that a long life is not guaranteed. I learned to be flexible in my thought and actions while still maintaining those things I could control. This "Yes, and" mentality opened my eyes to seeing the world through different lenses and challenging my own beliefs at times. In those challenges, I was forced to decide where I would find the truth; and what was important enough for me to focus on.

The third quality is that I'm not afraid to work. Whether I need to learn something new to apply to a project or whether I need to put in the hours to complete a project, I'm doing it. My immigrant mother taught me about work ethic and doing what you say you're going to do. Writing and publishing *Life After Losses* was a perfect example of this. I'd never attempted to publish a book before, so I had to learn what was involved. I talked to coaches and read books and I worked on plans I'd never done before. I learned the subtlety of marketing ad copy and how one or two words could make or break an ad.

Let's now shift to the main part of our discussion about 'Second Chapters'. Can you tell our readers about your career experience before your Second Chapter?

I spent about ten years working in the financial services industry, starting as a mail/supply clerk at a credit union in Santa Barbara. Within several months, I was promoted to a part-time teller, then full-time. I was later made responsible for the accounting and data processing functions. I learned about the technology used for the job. I created courses to teach our staff on using the technology we had more efficiently.

I moved on to a Savings and Loan that was a nightmarish landscape after the Resolution Trust Corporation took it over. Still, the opportunity to learn more was incredible. I moved to a local community bank, where I eventually became the AVP for Loan Servicing and Investor Reporting. In doing this job, I once again learned the technology. I found more efficient ways to work, turning the department into a profit center that the soon-to-be troubled bank needed to sell.

I returned to my roots in a credit union as the Loan Servicing and Collections Manager. Once again, I was involved in defining processes and procedures and using the technology on-site to be more efficient. The opportunity came about for me to move into consulting. The focus was marrying the technology to business processes, specifically lending and servicing, to financial institutions. I spent over 10 years in that consulting

position before joining a friend and colleague in creating a boutique consulting firm. Our firm focused on smaller community banks but provided the same services we did to many bigger national banks.

When the financial crisis hit in 2008, we had no choice but to ride it out, eventually deciding to shutter the firm. I spent several months looking for work until I found a contract in New Orleans. I packed up and drove from Southern California to the Crescent City in three days. I found an apartment when I arrived and worked while my family was back home in California. Several months later, I was approached by a global company looking for someone to help expand their North America Banking division and define processes and technological requirements.

I worked with this group for several years, traveling worldwide, managing implementing solutions and projects using cutting-edge predictive analytics. I stopped in January 2014 when my second husband suddenly passed away, making me a single father. I found another team to work with at the same company that would allow me to work entirely remotely.

And how did you “reinvent yourself” in your Second Chapter?

My reinvention is still in progress. I’m taking skills I’ve learned over my career, plus my relatively unique story of being widowed twice by the time I was 47 to build a platform and business. I’ve written a book, started a blog, and am about to add a coaching element to help others find inspiration to heal from their loss.

Can you tell us about the specific trigger that made you decide that you were going to “take the plunge” and make your huge transition?

In October 2019, I had just celebrated the 20th anniversary of the ceremony I had with my second husband. I started thinking about my life and my journey and seeing many new members join an online support group for widowers. I saw so many parallels with my own journey that I felt ready to tell my story of loss and recovery in such a manner as to inspire others to heal.

I was working with a coach at the time, and I concluded I could start a book and blog and eventually take my unique story and message on the road to inspire. I then started writing my book, *Life After Losses: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Life*. I had started it nearly

a quarter-century before. It wasn't until now that I felt I had the maturity, skill, and loss lessons to apply to the story.

When we started locking down because of the pandemic and unable to go out to shows or concerts, I used that time to write and edit and research how to publish a book.

What did you do to discover that you had a new skillset inside of you that you haven't been maximizing? How did you find that and how did you ultimately overcome the barriers to help manifest those powers?

I'd always written, but I'd never taken that skill to this point of publishing a book and a blog. As a people-manager at times in my career, I'd typically focus on coaching others to get where they wanted to go with their careers. Combining the writing and coaching took some inspiration. I never thought there would be much interest in my little story and sharing with others to find ways to heal. As I'd mentioned, I'd been working with a coach that helped put it in perspective. The most significant barrier I faced was just focusing on doing it.

How are things going with this new initiative? We would love to hear some specific examples or stories.

It's actually felt pretty amazing connecting to so many people in such a short time. When I first built the website and social media pages, I didn't have a following other than friends and family. I've more than quintupled the number of subscribers for the weekly blog through various social media postings. I've connected with everyone across the spectrum: gay, straight, old, young, religious, or not.

During my book release week, my book's ebook version was ranked #1 Best Seller in three Amazon Categories and #1 New Release in two. I sold several signed books from my website and have been ecstatic about the reviews.

But one of the best things I've found so uplifting is the personal notes that I've received from people who have lost someone in their life. They have taken the time to write to me and ask questions. One, in particular, struck me in the amount of loss and suffering this person went through. They were afraid that it would trigger a response they weren't ready for if they read my book. I suggested the book may do that, and if they weren't prepared to deal with those emotions just yet, and with the help of their therapist, they

may want to hold off on reading it. I then shared some additional information I thought was helpful.

Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

The obvious and cliché answer is my mother, as she's always been there as my cheerleader in life.

But, outside of the immediate family, one of my longest and dearest friends, Jessy Zamorano. She hired me for that Community Bank position I mentioned earlier. She saw something in me that she helped foster growth. Through the shared turmoil of eliminating my job and my team, we became great friends.

She was there when I lost my first husband. A few months later, she lost her partner, Dodge. We supported and consoled each other with many late-night phone calls and shared tears.

Her insistence and persistence helped me get my first consulting job, and it was with her that we built our boutique consulting firm several years later. I write about this in the book, but when I needed a massive life change in late 1997, she suggested I apply for a consultant position. She worked at a company based in Little Rock, Arkansas, that provided system-specific business process consulting. I sent in my resume to her boss and was given the "thanks, but no thanks" brush off.

Jessy wasn't having any of it. She went to the VP, Andrew was his name, and insisted that he meet with me in person; that he couldn't really tell anything about me or my abilities by reading a resume. He agreed to meet and had flown out to LAX to meet with a customer, and I had one opportunity to drive down, meet him, and sell myself. After that meeting, I was offered the position, and it wouldn't have happened had she not stepped in, and I wouldn't have had the successful career I've had without it.

Jessy was also there when my second husband and I met, married, and had children. She was our choice to take care of the kids should anything happen to us, and she was there for me when he died, too. Through many of my most challenging and uplifting moments, Jessy has been there as a constant friend.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started in this new direction?

The whole process of getting a book published and turned into a best seller for a week has to be among the most interesting things I've experienced.

I mentioned I have been working with a coach. He's been working with other coaches, so when I decided that this was the next course of action, he got me in touch with one of his clients that coaches authors on getting published. I worked with her, followed much of her advice, and she connected me to an editor. I sent the editor a pitch to see if she would be interested in helping edit the manuscript. I didn't know anything about her, but I later found out she's a more aged, straight, devout Catholic. She connected with my story of losing two same-gender spouses. She gave fantastic feedback on the manuscript and honed the best story-telling technique to move the story forward.

After this step, I realized I was on the right path with a universal story that could reach many people.

Did you ever struggle with believing in yourself? If so, how did you overcome that limiting belief about yourself? Can you share a story or example?

I spent months second-guessing whether I could sell a book that was part memoir, part self-help, but neither fully. I saw those online widowers all having the same conversations when new men joined the group. I looked back on the feedback I'd received from others as I asked them to provide testimonials. It became clearer that I could sell a book about this, and people would even buy it.

Becoming a coach and "personality" has been slightly more challenging. Part of the fear in going into coaching is that I'm an introvert by nature. I'm constantly second-guessing my ability to relate with others; it takes me time and familiarity with others to make those connections be effortless. In order to address this, I started taking acting classes as a way to tap into various parts within me and to bring my authentic-self closer to the surface. This has been an incredible experience in listening, communication and introspection. My acting coach and I were both stunned to learn that I actually have some talent in the art form. Maybe that's the third chapter in my life.

In my own work I usually encourage my clients to ask for support before they embark on something new. How did you create your support system before you moved to your new chapter?

I worked with my coach and a small handful of others, taking their knowledge and skills to create a business model for themselves. We were a mastermind of sorts that made suggestions to each other and supported each other on our journeys toward our new chapters.

Starting a new chapter usually means getting out of your comfort zone, how did you do that? Can you share a story or example of that?

The entire process of writing about myself was an exercise in getting out of my comfort zone. Sharing the book with friends and family, and putting it out to the public, and my community, got me out of my comfort zone.

You have to realize, I grew up as a gay teen in the 1980s. It was challenging to be out for many years (and it still is difficult in some places in the world). I wound up working in a conservative business (financial institutions), and being open about myself at the time could have been detrimental to my career. So, while I never lied about my personal life, I left my personal life outside of work. I never talked about my life at work, never forced myself to use gender-neutral terms. I wasn't totally in the closet, but I also wasn't out. Who I was at work defined me at work, not who I was at home, and this lasted for a mindset for a number of years.

My employer didn't realize I had a husband until he died, and this was still in 2014. My team didn't know because I never mentioned it. And now, I have heard from current and former colleagues that have read the book, and I'm as out as I can be. Some details in the book surprised my friends and family. Deciding how far to go and how much truth to put in the book was me pushing aside part of my comfort zone.

Fantastic. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 things I wish someone told me before I started leading my organization” and why? Please share a story or example for each.

1. There is an audience. When I first started writing, I didn't target my audience. Who was I trying to reach? Widows and widowers? Men? Women? Gay? Straight?

Finding my unique avatar of who would benefit from *Life After Losses* and who would connect more was difficult to determine. I'm not sure I ever fully nailed down my perfect avatar because I've heard back from various people I would never have expected to hear from, and in doing so, I realized... there is an audience.

2. Be authentically yourself. Intuitively, I knew this. I learned to be authentically myself when dealing with friends and family. As throughout most of my career, I expected that I needed to present "a brand" to the outside world. After writing the book, and with it as personal as it is, it was evident that my "brand" was being authentically me. My story resonates with people because it is honest and raw, writing about myself AND my dead husbands as flawed human beings.
3. Have faith. Whether it's faith in a higher power, faith in others, or faith that the sun will rise and set each day, we need to have something to believe in. I wasn't sure, but I thought my story would help inspire people. I wrote with the faith and belief that it would; that the honesty and practicality would come through.
4. Keep the content fresh. The book was the first step... and it was a doozy! But it couldn't be the only thing that would maintain audience engagement. I had to think of ways to increase the content and value to my audience, so I added a blog to my site to supplement the book's messages. I didn't feel the need to make the book twice as long to satisfy a publisher or an agent. I told the story that needed to be told in the book.
5. Block and guard your time. I've known this from the corporate world but was only moderately successful in managing to do so. Now that I'm transitioning to more creative activity, I find it's becoming more critical to save time on my calendar to a) write, b) run the business, and c) focus on my well-being, mentally and physically. If someone wants my time that I've already booked, I have no problem saying, "I am booked at that time; however, I have _____ open. How's that?"

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?

I hope to inspire people to find their way to healing from grief. We all will be faced with loss, and with over half a million lost to COVID in the US alone, it's becoming more evident that many of us are now facing loss. And we face these losses as people, not as

polarized demographics; we face these losses as human beings, and it's something we all have in common. If I could inspire a movement, it would help people recognize that we are more similar than we are not; our differences shouldn't define us.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them. :-)

I would have to say I would LOVE to have a private breakfast or lunch with Cher. Talk about someone who can reinvent themselves and, with each incarnation, be just as successful as she wants to be! What drives her every day to be successful? How does she decide to reinvent herself? And how does she know it's going to work (other than because she's Cher)? How many "second chapters" can she have?

How can our readers further follow your work online?

The primary site to find me is <https://jlaveck.com>. Details about the book and blog are available on the website as are links to all the social pages I'm participating in.

Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued success and good health!

Thank you so much for the opportunity!

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