

The Journal News

A new chapter in her life

Family trouble prompts ex-IBM vice president to rethink goals

Julie Moran Alterio
The Journal News

Just about two years ago, Lisa J. Whaley sat in her Mercedes with the garage door closed and turned on the engine.

A week earlier, Whaley had forced her 14-year-old daughter, Kristin, to go with an escort to a wilderness camp in Utah, the last step after a year of upheaval over marijuana use, staying out all night and other misbehavior.

Separated from her husband, Jim, weak from a blood infection that had sapped 12 pounds from her 112-pound frame and worried about finding the money for the \$30,000-plus camping program, Whaley waited for the carbon monoxide.

Two thoughts intruded, giving her the courage to turn off the engine, call a hot line and live to write about her experience in a self-published memoir, "Reclaiming My Soul From the Lost and Found."

The first thought was for her 12-year-old daughter, Jennifer, who would have been the one to find her slumped behind the wheel after school. The second was for her role as a black woman vice president at IBM Corp.

"I couldn't help but think what all of my colleagues would say about me. My legacy at IBM would be, 'The bright and shining star who self-destructed. Maybe she didn't have what it takes after all,'" Whaley wrote.

Whaley said she is less worried today about people's opinions.

Whaley, 44, left behind a 22-year career at IBM this spring to pursue a new calling as a motivational speaker and life coach.

"I loved IBM," she said. "I didn't leave because I was unhappy, but because I really believe that every once in a while we are blessed to find our true purpose in life, and I found mine."

Whaley's life had started to unravel a year before her suicide attempt when she received an urgent phone call at her Somers office from Kristin's school.



Stuart Bayer/The Journal News
Lisa J. Whaley, left, shares piano time with her daughter Jennifer, 14, in their New Fairfield, Conn., home. The former IBM vice president is now a motivational speaker and life coach. "I finally feel like I'm building a professional career that is around my life," she said. "Before, I always felt like I was trying to fit my life around my career."

Just 13 at the time, Kristin was accused of selling marijuana.

Though officials couldn't find anyone who had actually purchased drugs from Kristin, the evidence of pot in her bag, a list of potential customers and a log of expected earnings was enough to get her kicked

out of school for a year and into a cycle of random drug tests, probation and therapy.

The turmoil placed a strain on her marriage, Whaley said, especially in combination with trips to Florida to care for her sick father and an underlying ailment there was never time to treat.

At work, Whaley was consumed with the details of IBM's sale of its hard-disk drive business to Hitachi. "I knew I was sick, but I was too busy to go to the doctor," she said. "So I kept going and going."

After the garage incident,

Please see WHALEY, 6D

The Journal News

Ex-exec writes new chapter

WHALEY, from 1D

Whaley knew she needed help. Taking a six-month leave of absence, she read a lot of self-help books.

"What I found is so many women are dying inside, but they don't talk about it because they are embarrassed or ashamed or worry about how it's going to affect their image," Whaley said.

She decided to write her own story — and reveal every painful truth of her journey from straight-A student and Miami Dolphins cheerleader to rising IBM executive and mom of a teen in trouble.

Family members who figure prominently in the book have given it positive reviews.

Kristin, who is 16 today and enrolled at a private boarding school in Connecticut, said the book has given her insight into her mother's feelings — even if she isn't thrilled about sharing the details.

"It's really hard sometimes because my friends and teachers want to read the book. There's a lot of personal things about me in there, but it's honest and it's true," Kristin said. "I give her a lot of respect."

Kristin said 112 days in the Utah mountains hiking 5 to 20 miles a day and learning to start a fire cured her of teen rebellions, including experiments with marijuana and the painkiller OxyContin.

Though she hopes to have a career herself, as a journalist, Kristin said she doubts whether she would have been as wild if her mom didn't work.

"I think if she was a stay-at-home mom, I wouldn't have gotten into any trouble at all," Kristin said.

Whaley's husband, Jim, with whom she has reconciled, said he was impressed that his wife was willing to give up IBM for her children. "I thought it was gutsy," he said. "She loved working there. She got a lot of validation and personal satisfaction and challenge and all of those things, and she walked away from it."

Mary Ann Barry, who was Whaley's administrative assistant in Somers, recalls how torn her boss was during the year before Kristin was sent to the wilderness camp.

"She knew that Kristin need her as a mom all the time, but in the

meantime, she had also gotten this vice president role, and that was also important to her," Barry said.

Barry said she's certain Whaley's new speaking career will flourish. Barry recalled a talk she heard Whaley give at an IBM diversity event.

"She has an unbelievable gift of getting across the emotions of what she wants to say," Barry said.

Whaley said she's sold about 2,000 copies of her book through her Web site (www.lifeworksynergy.com) and at speaking engagements.

About 200 copies have been ordered from Amazon.com as well, Whaley said.

Two years after what she calls her "seemingly perfect" life fell apart, Whaley said her marriage and children are healthier than before — and there's time in the day to pick Jennifer up in the afternoon from school in Katonah before heading home to New Fairfield, Conn.

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Book signing

Lisa J. Whaley will sign copies of "Reclaiming My Soul From the Lost and Found" (\$27.95) from 6 to 8:30 p.m. tomorrow at That Old Black Magic book store and gift shop, 163 Mamaroneck Ave., White Plains. Call 914-328-7212 for more information.

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