



RESILIENCE  
**LOOKS LIKE  
THIS**

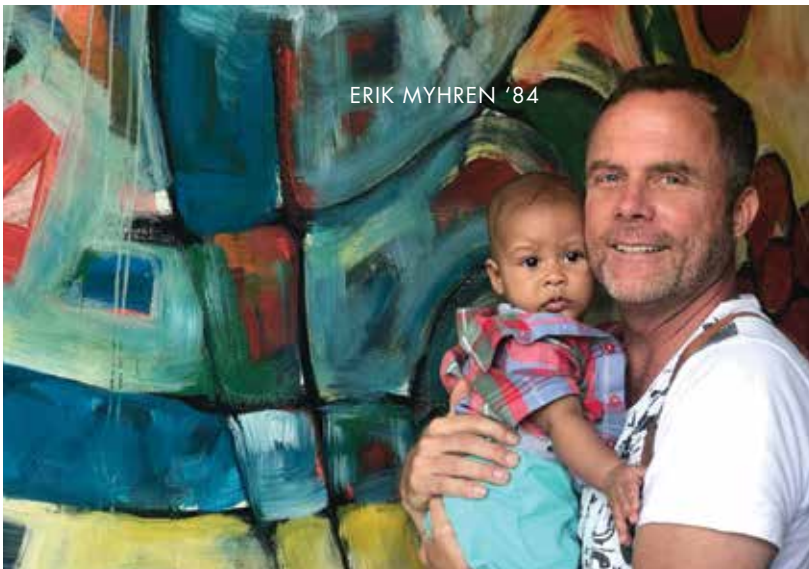
BY JAN THOMAS '76

*Graduates burst into the world excited,  
inspired and flush with plans and potential.  
But sooner or later, for almost everyone,  
something goes wrong.*

Photo Courtesy of Eleanor Polcy '06

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS **Erik Myhren '84** WILL TELL YOU—a point he wants to be perfectly clear—is that he is not his illness. He is not the Crohn's Disease or the arthritis or gout. He is not the ulcerative colitis that destroyed his large intestine; he is not the avascular necrosis that almost killed one of his bones.

What he is, is a quasi expat currently living in Colorado roughly four months of the year and in Uganda the rest. He is a traveler who once moved to Kenya carrying only a backpack, and he is a father twice over, first to Joe, whom he adopted in 2003 when Joe was 13, and then to Elijah, his biological son, who was born in 2017. He is godfather to **Trevon Hamlet '14** and the 2008 KDS Distinguished Alumni award recipient. He is a son, brother and uncle, a philanthropist, a former teacher and a former coach.



ERIK MYHREN '84

That's an impressive resume for someone whose life took a harsh turn not long after graduating from high school.

"Stress and anxiety are big factors in my health. It's the way I'm made, I guess," Myhren says. "Intestinal disease first showed up during freshman finals at Southern Cal. By the time I was a senior, I was really quite ill. I weighed 105-110 pounds and didn't even make it to graduation."

Instead of marching with his college cohort, Myhren drove home after his last class and entered the hospital the next day.

"I couldn't keep weight on," he says. "They would hospitalize me. I would gain about 10 pounds. They would send me home, and the weight would

disappear again. I couldn't work. Sometimes I would go to the grocery store with my mom or watch my younger brother play sports at South High. That, plus a lot of surgeries, was my life for the next several years."

Myhren became one of roughly 90 million Americans living with a chronic illness and was immersed in a roller coaster existence that researchers Lieke van Houtum, Mieke Rijken and Peter Groenewegen describe as "not a 'one moment stressful life event', but a continuous process of balancing the demands of the illness and the demands of everyday life."

Making it from one day to the next required both a dedicated support team—and a major attitude change.

"I believe the people we surround ourselves with are an important piece of resilience," he says, "it's gained through real-life experience. I don't think it can be taught or trained."

In time, Myhren moved to Albuquerque to sell advertising for the local Fox affiliate. While he loved figuring out ratings, it didn't take long before he realized he wasn't cut out for sales.

"I was terrible at asking people for money, and I'm not a fan of television, so I guess selling TV ads was not a good fit for me," he jokes.

When his boss commented on how well he interacted with his coworkers' children and asked if he ever considered teaching, a new career path opened up. Fast forward several months, and he'd returned to Colorado, earned a master's degree in urban education from the University of Denver (DU) and started teaching at Hallett Academy, a public grade school in North Park Hill.

During the next 15 years, he taught fourth grade, coached grade-school basketball, soccer, ice hockey and lacrosse, drove students to-and-from events in a van he purchased, launched a nonprofit that exposed underserved children to a variety of cultural and athletic activities they might not experience otherwise, and co-founded City LAX, a nonprofit designed to use lacrosse to increase education, athletic and networking opportunities for promising, young inner city students.

Myhren's students blossomed. DU recognized his philanthropy with the Founders Day Ammi Hyde Award for Recent Graduate Achievement in 2012. Professional life and interests were finally matched. But then, on New Year's Day 2013, he woke to excruciating pain in his left knee. Years of prescribed

"A CONTINUOUS  
PROCESS OF BALANCING"



steroid use to counter intestinal disease, gout and arthritis led to avascular necrosis, an ailment where bone tissue dies due to lack of blood supply. By the time he recovered from surgery and from addiction to prescribed pain medication, he no longer had a job and he felt his nonprofit would be best served by merging with another organization.

“For 15 years, part of my identity was being a teacher, a coach and later a father, and part of my identity was being sick and being ill. Now I was healthy, but I had no attachments. My son was off living on his own. I had no job and no nonprofit,” he says.

Five years ago, Myhren jumped at the chance when a friend invited him to Kenya. He now spends most of his time in Africa in Uganda with his son, Elijah, and credits fresh food, an active lifestyle, mindfulness,

meditation—and a hearty dose of resilience—with sustaining good health since then.

“More than anything, I’m grateful for my experience, and the opportunity to grow so much and so quickly,” he says. “Eventually, life found a place for me where I could take the lessons I’ve learned and use them in a meaningful way. I’m so grateful to my mother for helping me understand that what’s meaningful *for me* shouldn’t have to be what the outside world values. I am also grateful for my dad’s patience and support while I searched for a career I loved. He chose a very different path for very different reasons, but he was able to respect me for what I chose, and his support allowed me to accomplish things that would have been impossible otherwise.”

NOTE TO SELF: BE KIND

In spite of many reports to the contrary, there are no definitive studies on the number of times workers will change careers during their lifetime—mainly, says the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “because no consensus has emerged on what constitutes a career change.”

“I’M GRATEFUL FOR MY EXPERIENCE”

What is known, however, is that even planning for major work transitions can be traumatic. “How do you decide which job? Should you retrain? What if you make a mistake?” journalist Emma Jacobs wrote in *Financial Times* last year.

Regaining your footing afterwards can be draining as well. In reflecting on the end of her 28-year ICU nursing career, **Terry Heaton** ’77 admits she was in a state of shock.

“It was a difficult job, but it was good because I made a difference in somebody’s life every day,” she says. “After I left, I struggled to find something that would be as interesting to me.”

She ultimately decided on real estate. Over the next few years, she purchased six rental homes and learned how to manage them through trial and error.

“It took a long time, and it definitely had a learning curve,” she says. “You make a mistake then look back and say, ‘Well, here’s where I messed up. Don’t do *that* again.’”

Finding the courage to try again after a setback is one Heaton honed over many years.

“A big experience happened shortly after graduation from high school,” she says. “I went to Whitman College, and my plan was to earn a degree in psychology. That’s what I was interested in. But then I realized it would be almost



Photo: Kent Denver School Yearbook

impossible to get a job unless I went to grad school and got a Ph.D., which was not something I wanted to do.”

Instead, Heaton drew on an aptitude for science that she discovered at Kent Denver, transferred to the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) after her sophomore year, completed her science requirements, and enrolled in UNC’s nursing school. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science-Nursing degree in 1983.

Unfortunately for her, America had a surplus of nurses at the time.

“There were people in my class who decided to wait it out and do waitressing and things like that. I thought, ‘No. I want to be a nurse. I’ve gone to school for this,’” she says. “I started applying to hospitals around the country and ended up in Council Bluffs, Iowa.”

She returned to Colorado when nursing positions opened and eventually accepted a job at St. Joseph Hospital where her father, a physician, was chief of anesthesiology.

“I worked in a number of different departments, but my goal was to be an ICU nurse. That’s what I really wanted,” she says. “Waiting was frustrating, but my mother, who was also a physician, said to use this as a time to learn. She wisely said, ‘You have to know what normal looks like before you can recognize abnormal.’ And she was



Photo: Kent Denver

right. I had to spend time with less sick patients, so I could learn.”

Nursing was fulfilling in many ways, but there was one aspect that proved difficult.

“I’m very vocal,” Heaton says. “If something doesn’t look right, I say something. The nursing culture does not encourage that. The older you get, the more

important it is to be authentic to yourself. If you are in a situation that doesn’t allow you to do that, then ultimately, it’s not a fit anymore.”

If she were advising other alumni considering career changes, Heaton says finding ways to increase resiliency is vital.

“In my case, that meant being kind to myself and taking time to figure out what I do well,” she says. “Two of my core competencies are being able to read people and work with them. That’s what you want in nursing—and in property management. Managing finances are another core competency. That’s definitely important in my second career.”

“IF SOMETHING DOESN’T LOOK RIGHT, I SAY SOMETHING.”

#### TAKE A CHANCE ON ME

Resilience may not have been a buzzword when **Eleanor “Ellie” Poley ’06** graduated from Kent Denver, but for a young woman embarking on a career in computer engineering in the early 2000s, it was definitely a good trait to have.

“My interest in computer science—and my experience studying and working in a male-dominated profession—began at Kent Denver,” Poley says. “I was always interested in and good at math and science, but as I started getting into high school, math, in particular, felt less tangible and practical than it had been. I was still good at it. I still enjoyed it, but it wasn’t as rewarding to me.”

When her ninth-grade English class was told to create websites for poets they’d researched, she jumped at the chance to dabble in technology.

“We went to the computer lab in the Gates building, which I think had just been finished that year,” she says. “This was before blogs and social media. You had to use code to express yourself on the web. I remember feeling the



TERRY HEATON '77

Photo courtesy Jeffrey Labriola



ELEANOR "ELLIE" POLEY '06

Photos Courtesy of Eleanor Poley '06

raw power of being able to publish a website and express myself in that way, and that's what motivated me to get started."

Technology opened a door to creative expression for Poley, but she quickly grew frustrated with the limitations of available software.

"I learned to code because I wanted to touch the internals of how this process worked," she says. "I didn't want my web authoring

experience to be mediated by publishing software. I started teaching myself HTML and CSS then eventually started pursuing those studies more formally in school. I took Michael Ehrenfried's AP Computer Science in my junior year and the second level my senior year."

Poley was a member of the Technology Club during the school year and worked as an Information and Innovation Team (IIT) intern during the summer. In both cases, she was almost always the only girl.

The gender ratio was the same in her computer science classes at Knox College.

"I decided to major in computer science mostly because I appreciated and respected the faculty in that

department. I felt they supported me, gave me challenges and individualized feedback," she says.

As she continues to build her career, Poley makes corporate environment and culture a priority.

"I decided not to accept some job opportunities because I got a tangible feeling that, not only was the gender balance very skewed, but people were not as kind and respectful as I would expect them to be," she says. "I have chosen to work on teams and in environments where there is a basic level of dignity.

"I think resilience for me has been about taking care of myself and staying surrounded by people who support me both personally and professionally," she adds. "When I was willing to set aside ideas of what the right path should look like or what the mold should look like and just listen to myself and focus on what I needed, that served me well."

If she were to give advice to Kent Denver students interested in exploring opportunities through the school's new Rollins Institute for Technology and Design, Poley would suggest they look carefully at how technology affects the world.

"When people are drawing students into this field, they often get them


really excited about the tools and the tinkering side of it. They'll say, 'Look what you can do.' Or, 'Look at this robot. It's so cool,'" she says. "What I wish someone had helped me see when I was younger was that what's most exciting

"PEOPLE WERE NOT AS KIND AND RESPECTFUL AS I WOULD EXPECT THEM TO BE "

about this discipline is the impact you can have on the world. You can shape humanity for better or for



Photo: Kent Denver School Yearbook

worse. People often don't spend enough time thinking about the empathy they need to bring to their profession to both serve people and approach their work in an ethical way. As engineers, we hold a lot of power. I would encourage students to use this opportunity to dream big about what they want to do. Maybe there's a political cause they want to support. Maybe they want to provide humanitarian relief. Maybe they want to change how people record music. Maybe they want to open doors for creative expression. Those are the kind of dreams they could be dreaming." 



## How to Build Your Resilience Muscles >

There's a time and place for grit—that eyes down; teeth-clenched; never, ever, ever give up attitude you need



Want to learn more? Download the KDS Resilience Reading List at [kentdenver.org/alumni](http://kentdenver.org/alumni)

to achieve the most challenging goals—but when setbacks happen, and they will, you need resilience to rebound. Here, alumni share their thoughts on how build resilience.

“We can get so caught up in the routine and monotony of our lives that we fail to **appreciate the little, beautiful things** going on around us at every moment. I think it's when we are at our lowest, that we can become truly present in a way we never knew existed.” —**Erik Myhren '84**

“You have to get to the point where you can **step back and problem-solve**. Sometimes you can't do that right away; you have to just **take care of your needs. Pay attention to yourself**, to what your core competencies are.” —**Terry Heaton '77**

“It was hard for me, as someone who has to be very logical and analytical and intellectual in my work, to realize that the best way to move forward was to turn off my rational brain a little bit. I'm still going to listen to it. I'm still going to make my itemized pro-and-con decision list, but I also need to **listen to intuition sometimes** as well.” —**Eleanor “Ellie” Poley '06**

“Once you **learn that failure is the greatest teacher**, you will not be slowed down by your mistakes.” —**Caroline Kurtz Rassenfoss '78**

“Getting used to taking unfiltered, stinging criticism (when you deserve it) is one of the hardest things to do, but it's also the most rewarding, personally, in the long run. Once you **realize the power of being able to see yourself through other people's eyes**, new, exciting options open up in your day-to-day interactions.” —**Mike Larkin '91**

“I've spoken a lot with my students over the years about having what Stanford University Psychology professor Carol Dweck calls a ‘growth mindset.’ Through this, and in trusting the process of learning, I remind myself that **while I may not be good at something I care about now, in seeking challenge and embracing my mistakes, I will be someday.**” —**Greg Chalfin '04**

“In a world so focused on instant information, instant gratification and instant results, it's easy to become overwhelmed with all that's immediately before you. Someone once said, ‘missing the forest for the trees.’ **Finding resilience requires a greater focus on the long view of life.** Building the strong foundation for your goals is important, but so too is always keeping that distant goal in clear view and staying on your intended path.” —**Eric Mosley '77**

“We do not walk through life in an isolated bubble, and we are constantly impacting one another with our thoughts, actions and words. It is through these interactions (both positive and negative) that we develop into the people that we are, and oftentimes this process requires resiliency. Rather than backing down in times of adversity, if we can **find our voices to not only teach tolerance but also acceptance**, then perhaps our world will become a more just and kind place.” —**Christina Fakharzadeh '94**

“Without difficult times I don't think we would ever appreciate the good ones. Fortunately, life is fluid. Nothing ever remains constant. No matter the circumstance, we can **be sure there will be change ahead.**” —**Erik Myhren '84**

“There are people in your life who make an impact. They will say something or do something that either makes you look at things differently or makes you make a choice. **Find the courage to make tough decisions.** For instance, I've made the choice, on occasion, to end a friendship because I thought I was being disrespectful to myself to continue it.” —**Terry Heaton '77**