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An Amazing Race
How many of us can say that we won a contest and became a better person, physically, emotionally and spiritually because of it?

For Joyce Robinson Agu and her husband Uchenna Agu, it was more than just a contest. Up to that point it was the most challenging goal they had ever set for themselves. They were winners of CBS’s Amazing Race, Season 7.

A daring spirit, risk-taking attitude, and the thrill of excitement inspired them to enter the contest. Patience, teamwork, faith, humility, understanding and tolerance are what they learned during the contest. An unstoppable attitude is what they gained after winning.

From being stripped of their finances and belongings to begging for money to pay cab fare, this team had a cohesive attitude and the determination to win.

Do you have a winning attitude? What risks are you willing to take?

Agu enthusiastically talked about her life as an actress, and shared her experience about getting on the show, being a contender in the contest and receiving the ultimate prize as the winner.

Monica: You’ve had much success as an actress. Talk about some of the roles that you have taken and why you decided to play those roles. Did they lead to more successful roles?

Joyce: Well, I’ve always considered myself to be a very creative person, and so acting was something I always wanted to do, even though mom wanted me to go to school and get an education. But I did find some success in soap operas, which is strange. I was actually on The Bold and the Beautiful, and at one point – this is how old I am – I was on a black soap opera called Generations. I had a recurring role on that show.

So I kind of got my acting career going a little bit later in life, but in my first role I played a teenager. I played a 16-year-old girl, and it was great. It’s led me to other roles. I’ve done movies, I’ve done Coming to America, Demolition Man, and I was also on Star Trek: The Next Generation. That was a role in which I made recurring appearances.

It was a wonderful career. I was never truly famous for acting, and I decided to give it up when I got married and moved to Texas. I thought I would pursue another field and go in a different direction. I thought it was a great career at the time and it was fun while it lasted, but it was time to move on.

Strangely enough, of course, when the show The Amazing Race started, it brought me back to Hollywood. It’s strange how that happened.

Monica: What piqued your interest in The Amazing Race?

Joyce: Well, when I first watched the show, they were looking for people to be on the show. They were searching for people who wanted an adventure of a lifetime and who would be able to travel around the world. And when I saw it, I thought oh my god, this would be amazing – a really great way to travel around the world with someone else picking up the tab. I thought this would be a trip of a lifetime. I didn’t know that it would be the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I thought it was going to be the most amazing thing and it attracted me. Little did I know how difficult it would be to get on the show, but it was the beauty of the places that they were going and the idea that I could fulfill an item on my bucket list to be able to travel around the world.

Monica: What difficulties did you experience in trying to get on the show?

Joyce: Well, it’s funny because like so many things in life you have to show up, and I remember thinking I wanted to be on the show but I had no idea how I was going to do that.

We ended up applying on three different occasions to three different shows. The first time we sent the video and application in and we never heard from them.
The second time we sent it in we actually heard from them, and we got through the interview process. Once they interview you, they send you to Los Angeles to meet with network personnel, and you go through a two-week interview process.

At the end of the two weeks they decide whether you're in or not. They sent us home at the end of the second week. We were out of luck and out of our vacation time from our jobs. So we applied one more time — well, actually, they called us back and asked, "Are you still interested?" At that point my husband was thinking, "I'm done with this, because these people keep calling us back and we keep going through this process and they don't pick us."

We went back a third time, and we had to appear before network executives so that they could assess our personality. They want to see who you are, if you're going to fit in with the show, or bring anything to the show. The third time was the charm, so yes, it was a lengthy process. It probably took us about a year-and-a-half to actually get on the show.

**Monica:** What are the most unique challenges you encountered after you were selected for the show?

**Joyce:** There were many, but the first challenge I think was the reality of the show. The show on TV -- it looks so fun because you go to all these different locations around the world. You take on really cool challenges and there are also mental and physical challenges. But what you don't see is the time that it takes. Sometimes it could take 12 hours on a flight to get to the location, and after you get to the location, you still have to go through the challenge. Some of the challenges can take up to eight hours. What you see on TV may be a couple of minutes or a few seconds of the time that it actually takes.

The most difficult part is going to foreign countries and dealing with the cultural differences and the things that we, as Americans, take for granted, like language barriers. I never considered that to be a problem until I had to ask for directions from someone who didn't speak English. We shouldn't expect it but I believe, as Americans, we think that everyone should speak English.

Another challenge involved exchanging currencies. I remember being in some remote locations where some of the people had never seen American currency. If you haven't taken the time to exchange your currency while in their country, you're going to have difficulty making purchases and paying for services. They will not accept American currency. Having to drive on the opposite side of the street was an additional challenge. Also, in some countries people don't want to speak with you if you have a camera in their faces because when they see cameras, they may associate that with government
intervention or some other type of issue. No, people run away from the cameras and they don't want to be bothered.

Another thing that people don't know is that whenever you ask for directions or stop to try to talk to someone, your camera crew has to get that person's approval to have that shown on TV -- a release form. And everything has to be shown on TV because it shows your quest and it shows the route you've taken to get where you are. Oftentimes there's a language barrier with regard to the release form. They are hesitant to sign anything, because some people think they're signing their lives away.

There are mental and physical challenges. The objective is to get to the next stop without being eliminated. Usually the last team gets eliminated. Occasionally they do something called a fast-forward, which basically allows you to do something that they've conjured up. It's usually really physically or mentally tough, and if you complete this challenge, then you can usually skip the other challenges and go straight to the pit stop, which most times puts you in first place. Well, at one point, we decided to go for it because we had been coming in very close to last for most of the race at that point. We were in Jodhpur, India. We went to a location in India where we had to find a person who was sitting on the edge of a river in the mountains, and he was sitting in front of a temple.

The challenge noted that in India, for good luck and good fortune, people will shave their heads once in their lifetime. In order to complete this task you must shave your head. That was my biggest fear ever.

My husband was already bald, but all eyes were on me. Everyone was wondering what I was going to do because I not only had long hair, I had extensions and I had big hair. So the idea that I would shave my head for a TV show just horrified me, but I said, "Just do it. I'm not going to think about it anymore." But as soon as they began cutting my hair, and they started cutting it right from the front, my feelings were hurt. I kept thinking wow, they could have started from the back then, maybe, I could have changed my mind if I decided to do that. But they started right in the front and they started with scissors, and before I knew it, everything had been chopped off and then a razor was used. I was shiny and bald, just like my husband.

Then I thought, oh my god, it's just hair, it will grow back. I thought about a saying: for good fortune and good luck, people do this once in a lifetime. And I thought, you know what, just relinquish all that you hold on to, all the ideals about who you are, it's just hair and you are more than just your hair.

It had a strange effect on me after my head was shaved because afterwards, my husband said, "Wow, you suddenly became like a soldier." He said, "I've never seen you this way." I had never felt that strong before. I felt like I could do anything.

Monica: With the lesson that you learned from that one experience in shaving your head, what inspirational message can you offer other women?

Joyce: I'd say that you can increase physical results through your mental fitness. I think that mentally you're stronger than the exterior that you present to the world. I felt that I was no longer going to hide behind being a weak female. I felt that everything I am, I have to present to the world. There's no reason for you to live for other people's expectations. I felt like, why not be the powerful woman that I am. Who cares if it offends someone? Some men are intimidated by very strong women. I know I personally used that to my advantage. I don't want to intimidate anyone. I want them to help me, I want to get promoted, and I want to move ahead. Sometimes, even with other women, you may feel intimidated because you don't want to offend people. But I thought, why do I care about other people's perception of me, because then I'm living through their eyes, I'm not living up to my potential. I say be who you are, with no apologies for being yourself.

Monica: Compared to the challenges that you faced, how does that affect your views regarding the adversities experienced by the people in the countries you visited?
Joyce: What I feel is that as Americans, when we go to other countries, we feel superior because some of the places we visit aren’t as advanced as we are in America. And it’s so easy to say this sucks, or we have the best answer to everything. But what I realized is that in some countries they don’t have the diseases that we have, they don’t have some of the issues that we have, because in America we create so many issues that we develop other problems. So I respect them and their cultures for what they are.

Monica: How has working together as husband and wife impacted your relationship?

Joyce: Well, we are divorced, but when we were on the show -- before we went on the show we really thought that -- we weren’t sure if we were going to stay together, because we had gone through the demise of the companies that we worked for. Our careers were crumbling and we were trying to figure out how we were going to overcome our difficulties.

So it affected our relationship a little, and I think by the time we went on the Race, we couldn’t decide if we were going to stay together, or not. But when we were on the Race it was really strange how amazingly perfect we worked together. We respected each other and we didn’t blame each other for the choices that were made. It was almost like when you’re at home, it’s easy to be nitpicky about all the things that you have in your controlled world. But when we were experiencing new things together, we clung to each other. We looked to each other and thought, should we do this or shouldn’t we do that – it was amazing, our teamwork. We had such camaraderie that people thought, oh, my god, these guys are such a great couple.

So we felt that we could maintain this perfect partnership because we worked so well together, and it really helped us move ahead in the game. Of course, when you return home, you return to your normal habits and creature comforts.

Monica: Near the end of the race, the two of you had to ask for money to pay the taxi driver. What was going through your mind at the time? Did you think someone else might win?

Joyce: Well, before we even got there, (for people who didn’t see the show during our particular season) if you came in last and it was a non-elimination round -- which they do maybe once or twice on the show -- on our show the penalty we had to pay was to give up our money, our clothes and all of our belongings. So we were traveling with a plastic bag with our passports, our medications and no money. Boy, I can really relate to people who have come from absolutely nothing, because when they took that...
away, we thought, okay, you're taking everything away, but you didn't take our brains and you didn't take our hearts.

So we still had a belief that we could win, even though it was difficult, because the other teams were given about $250 and we had zero dollars. We had to travel from one point to another. It was about a 250-mile round-trip and they were able to ride, while we had to walk and find other means of travel. We became very humble, thankful and grateful because we had to rely on the kindness of others. We had to talk to people and appeal to their human side. Boy that was the most humiliating thing. At one point, my husband offered his wedding ring. He was told, "I don't want your ring. I need cash. I've got to pay bills. I have a family." So we thought at that point we had a choice. We could have finished the race, or we could stay there and try to earn the money, which was crazy, because we didn't know whether we were first or last.

But we decided to stay there and attempt to beg for the money. One guy actually told us, "Begging ain't the way to do it, brother." And that's where it became interesting for me. I developed a different viewpoint, and now when I see people begging on the streets, I wonder about their story. You never know what their story is. I knew people had no idea what my story was, but I couldn't explain why I needed cash. I remember there was a lady who was watching us from her apartment window above, and she must have been watching for a while. Any cars that pulled up, we'd try to get them to give us a couple of dollars, and we'd get a couple here and there.

The lady came down the stairs and she asked why we were raising funds. We couldn't disclose that we were doing a show, but we could tell her we were in a race. We said we're in a race, we can't pay our cab fare, and we need a few more dollars. She gave us -- I don't remember if it was $20 or $40 but whatever it was, that was all we needed to pay the guy, and it was awesome because when this lady showed up, it changed everything. Then we were able to run in and, like I said, we didn't know whether we were first or second or third, but we got there and we were told that after 40,000 miles and 25 countries, you guys are the winners of the race. It was awesome.

It was the most amazing feeling ever because it was one of the first times where I felt that I had truly completed something. I stuck to my intentions, even though throughout the race there were many times when I thought I can't do this anymore. I can't go on. I want to quit, I want to stop because this is too painful and this is too hard. I am too hungry. I didn't like being broke, I didn't like being bald and I didn't like being dirty.

I didn't like the way people looked at me. I remember some people told our production personnel that we stunk. We were dirty and we had to get on a plane smelling and looking bad.

At that point I was bald and wearing a scarf on my head. I'm sure I looked more like a street person. It was very humiliating. From the whole experience I realized the things that you don't need in your life to be successful. We had nothing and we still managed through the kindness of others, through good karma, because we always tried to make sure that we didn't hurt people along the way.

All you need is your brain, your thoughts, your intentions, your drive and desires, and you would be surprised what you can come up with. So it was a real testament to willpower and the power of your intentions. It was an awesome lesson.

Monica: How are you applying some of those lessons that you learned from the race to your life experiences today?

Joyce: Well -- and it's funny, because life is difficult. I know all the things that I've learned and I know all the things that have made me successful and somewhere along the way, like my relationship, things have changed. I haven't stayed with that belief. But now what I am doing is writing a book and we're beginning to do motivational speaking to tell people how you can come from nowhere, you can do it with nothing and yet you can live in the present, in the now. You don't have to wait for another time to be happy. You don't have to wait to have a lot of stuff before you can be happy. I
am becoming the person that I want to be. So what the Race has taught me is to extend my beliefs, my imagination and knowledge. It has expanded my awareness.

Monica: It has opened up an entirely new world for you.

Joyce: It really has. It really has, and you don't know what you don't know. So make it your business, make it a point to get out there and learn what else is in your world. The world is so much larger than the little things that we ask for, the little things that we are hoping to change.

Monica: If you had to sum up your experience and what you gained from The Amazing Race, what would it be?

Joyce: I would say that my complete and total awareness in my small world has just expanded. I've gained a new appreciation for the world, for my life and I feel that the possibilities are endless. So my life is much more exciting now. I love traveling and I love considering the other possibilities that may be out there when you stretch your limits. I'm still growing. When you get to the end of your rope, when you reach your bottom, then obviously you need to do something different. You have to change your thought process. You have to try something outside of your comfort zone. At that point, you need to grow.

Sometimes we become focused on trying to resolve issues by using the same thought process that caused the problem. At that point, it's time to look at things differently. I think that's the time you have to say okay, I've got to step outside of my world. Read something, learn how others are doing things, or just talk to people. Sometimes we get stuck in our own way of doing things when there's outside information available that can help us.

Live fully and beyond your fears. I think that fears keep people stuck. I know that I still have fears, but sometimes you have to expose yourself and not be afraid to be uncomfortable. Comfort is overrated sometimes.

You've got to have a goal. You've got to have something that you're looking forward to, something that you're aiming for.

So you don't always have to know the answers to how you're going to accomplish something, you just need to have the desire and the intent. Once you do, it's amazing how things will change. So I say have a plan, have an intention and whether or not you know how to achieve something, or whether or not you know how to get where you want to go, things will change. ✡