



Mallory Weggemann, Paralympic gold medalist, on the power of vulnerability

[Transcript](#)

Mike Kearney:

What would you do if you were to wake up in the hospital after a common epidural procedure to find out that you are paralyzed from the waist down? How would you react, especially at the young age of 19? Would you be able to find purpose in life, let alone a deeper, more meaningful cause?

I've been on a quest to find people who define what resilience really means. And two years ago, I had the opportunity to hear an incredible story from Mallory Weggemann, a young woman who overcame being paralyzed during college, only to find purpose in Paralympic swimming and giving back to others by sharing her story and truly demonstrating what it means to be resilient.

Mallory Weggemann: If by sharing my story, I can help one other person navigate through life, if I can use my experience and the muck that my family and I had to find our way through and use that to help somebody else, then to me, that kind of answered my why and it made it worth it. I started realizing that I believe everything happens for a reason. And moving on, for me, was the most important part. And as I moved on, I felt like I had more closure and understanding of the why. And sometimes, for me, it was as simple as “everything happens for a reason” and “this is where my life is maybe meant to be.” And that was enough for me.

Mike Kearney:

Welcome to [Resilient](#), where we hear stories from leaders on risk, disruption, and crisis and what it means to truly be resilient. And we get those stories by meeting our guests on their home turf. My name's Mike Kearney, the leader of Deloitte's Strategic Risk Practice. And today, I am sitting in Colorado Springs. I woke up this morning—if you could almost picture it—I woke up, I opened up my drapes, and I had the most beautiful view of this mountain, only to find out that it's Pike's Peak. And it was glamorous.

And you know, I started to think about my conversation with Mallory. And as I indicated just a few seconds ago, you know, I had a chance to see her speak a

couple years ago and she is what embodies being resilient. So I cannot wait to hear what she has to say. So without further ado, let's jump into my conversation with Mallory Weggemann from the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs.

Mike Kearney: I think your story is a case study in resilience. Everybody has got a different way of talking about resilience or defining it. What does resilience mean to you?

Mallory Weggemann: I think for me, resiliency is really about kind of that will to never give up, right, and never give in. And that doesn't mean that you don't have your moments of kind of weakness, as I say. And by having moments of weakness, it doesn't make us weak, it just makes us human. That's part of the deal.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: But for me, resiliency is really handling those life adversities with that grace and that ability to face the challenge at hand head-on and not steer away from it. And understand that life is going to happen and there are going to be hardships but you have to find a way to keep trekking through and not give up or give in to the circumstances around you.

Mike Kearney: So let's go back to where you started.

Mallory Weggemann: Okay.

Mike Kearney: Let's hear your story before—we'll talk about the event, but let's— where did you grow up, what did you like, what were you passionate about when you were a kid? Tell us about who Mallory is.

Mallory Weggemann: Oh goodness. I grew up in Minnesota. I was actually born in Kansas, so I can't say born and raised in Minnesota, but we moved there when I was an infant. So I was raised in Minnesota, grew up there my entire life. I'm the baby of three girls. I'm very, very close with my family, and I've been a lifelong swimmer, competitively. I started competing when I was, oh gosh, 7 years old. My two older sisters swam competitively and so I just kind of got naturally thrown into the sport because I was always at the pool with them. And that was kind of my—that was my big passion outside of school and friends and—

Mike Kearney: You were passionate about school? I may need to have you talk to my kids.

Mallory Weggemann: No, I wouldn't say I disliked school but I wouldn't say that that was like my number one thing as a kid. I loved being a social butterfly. And I was a swimmer and, you know, I took school seriously, but it wasn't the end all be all for me—which is maybe bad to admit but I don't know. I don't think that stuff defines you, it kind of makes it out to where you're going to end up in life.

Mike Kearney: I could not agree more. So how about role models. Did you have any role models growing up?

Mallory Weggemann: I did. I know this sounds kinda corny, probably, but I think my biggest role models were my parents. We had a lot of life happen when I was a kid and mom and dad stuck through it all. And they are the ones that really taught me the values I needed to get through life and they truly led by example. And they really created an environment for my sisters and me to thrive in.

And you know, our lives brought a lot of hardship early on for my family. I mean, my parents, in general, didn't start off in what you would call maybe the traditional way. They got married very young. My dad graduated college with two kids and, you know, just kind of found a way early on to make sure he was supporting the family. And my mom was working as a nurse and they just kind of kept their journey going and they provided a really, really nice life for my sisters and I. And we were very fortunate in that. But they had their fair share of hardships. And watching them go through that and how they handled it, I think, was really motivating for me as a kid and young adult and being able to look up to that and have those constant role models in my life.

Mike Kearney: So one of the things I remember you talked about when I heard you speak, but then I think you talk about it all the time, so I'm going to use this quote because I think it's fantastic—it's about your dad. You said that every night when he tucked you in, he would say, "You're the best, you can make a difference, and you can change the world." And I guess what I'm curious of is, what did you think about that at the time and has it changed over time?

Mallory Weggemann: It definitely has. One of the things in our family, growing up as a kid, that was always—there were two things that always happened in our house. We ate dinner as a family every night, no ifs, ands or buts. Didn't matter what sports schedules were, we always found a way to sit down at the table as a family. And then my parents always tucked us into bed. And so when mom and dad tucked us in and we did our bedtime prayers—we did the whole bit—and then dad would finish off with the quote, and his words were, "You're the best, you can make a difference, and you can change the world."

And as a kid, I didn't really know what that meant, right.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: I mean, make a difference, change the world, that's pretty grandiose so I didn't understand how 7-year-old Mallory was going to make a difference and change the world—it just was kind of more than I could comprehend. And I'm sure as I got older, in my teenage years, we had the kind of, "Yeah, yeah, dad, I get it. I've heard it my whole life, just let me go to sleep," deal. You know, that's kind of how life goes at times.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I never really understood what those words meant. And after my injury in 2008, I started finding a way to grasp it a little bit better. I think I just had a little more time on my hands to think about life.

Mike Kearney: Sure.

Mallory Weggemann: Life was put into perspective very quickly when my injury happened, and we—for me, it was the realization of to make a difference and change the world, we simply just have to be our best and give our best. And some days we have more to give than others and that's okay. You know, some days it could be just the simple act of getting out of bed. That's all we have that day because life is just really hard and that's fine. But every day we have to find that courage to at least give what we have, and by doing so, we will inherently make a difference and change the world.

And I think the other thing I learned from that quote was the power of community and having two people in my life that loved me and believed in me so much that every day, no matter what happened in life, no matter how good or bad the day may have been, they ended the day believing in me enough to tell me that I was the best. And to tell me that I could make a difference and I could change the world. And the power of having people in your life that really, to their core, believe in you that much, it really changes how you're able to feel about yourself and how you kind of conquer the world around you.

Mike Kearney: So let's go back to 2008, why were you in the hospital in the first place? So I know you had an epidural, but if you could just take us back to that time.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Like, why did you even go into the hospital in the first place, if you could share that with us?

Mallory Weggemann: So, January 21st, 2008 was Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I had the day off from class. I had just graduated high school in June of 2007 and I was receiving these outpatient—they were outpatient injections. So it was a clinic across the street from the hospital and I was going in for what was to be my third and final injection for back pain. I had a condition called postherpetic neuralgia, which probably means nothing to most people. The long and short is it was just a residual condition from shingles—and I somehow got shingles the fall of my senior year of high school, but as a result, I had just horrific back pain.

And so I was going in on January 21st for my third and final injection. My dad took me in that day and my mom was working actually across the street where

she's a nurse. And it didn't go how it was supposed to. I was supposed to walk in that morning perfectly fine and I would walk home that afternoon perfectly fine.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I walked in that morning and I never walked out. I was admitted to the hospital that afternoon and I returned home six weeks later completely wheelchair bound and the rest was history. It was a very tough moment in time. My dad and I have become very close as a result. He was in the room when it happened.

Mike Kearney: Did he know something was going wrong when it happened or—?

Mallory Weggemann: It wasn't a right away thing for us. It's not until you look back, kind of hindsight is 20/20, where you—where we could put two and two together and know the moment it happened.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: But he was at the head of the procedure table and I was laying on my stomach, and I remember they had me bending my legs up, my knees, to kinda gauge weakness in them. Because with an epidural injection, even for pain, you still get the weakness and loss of feeling and all of that, but then it comes back a few hours later. And I remember my legs dropping very suddenly, and you know, in that moment it was just, oh, the epidural is working. They'll move me into the recovery room, wait a few hours, it'll wear off, we'll go home.

And my mom had been with me for the other two, and so my dad had never seen the injection. He didn't know, right. And we waited and we waited and a couple hours went by and nothing had come back. And then he got on the phone with mom, who is obviously a nurse. She was a labor and delivery nurse for the majority of her career, so she's seen plenty of them.

Mike Kearney: So she has been through a lot of epidurals, yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And things weren't adding up. They admitted me to the hospital across the street, and I think we all kind of hoped I'd wake up the next morning fine and it just was taking longer to wear off. And I woke up the next morning and was still in the same state I went to bed. And that was kind of the start of that journey and how to figure out life in a wheelchair and life as a spinal cord injury.

Mike Kearney: What was the first—so when you woke up the next morning and you figured out, wow, something is different, it's not going to change, what was the first thing that went through your mind, do you remember or—?

Mallory Weggemann: Maybe tomorrow it'll come back.

Mike Kearney: Maybe, wow.

Mallory Weggemann: Like, I think for about two weeks, it was the—

Mike Kearney: So you had some hope.

Mallory Weggemann: I was just going to wait every day, and when I even got—so I was on a medical floor for a few weeks and then I went to the inpatient rehab floor. And even when I went into inpatient rehab, I had a really hard time coming to terms with the fact that I would go home in a wheelchair.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I was convinced that I would still walk out somehow, you know. It was this kind of—for a long time, it felt like this wait-and-see game. It wasn't this abrupt accident where—I mean it was, but our response that we were getting was kind of—

Mike Kearney: You had hope, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah, it was that hope and that belief that, you know, maybe it'll come back, maybe something will change, maybe it'll finally wear off. You know, the longest injection of your life, right, five weeks later it'll wear off. But that never happened. And then we kind of started moving that hope to the hope for how do we build my life back.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And how do we not lose hope in me walking again, but kind of transition that and put that energy toward just creating a life for me—whether I'm in a wheelchair or not.

Mike Kearney: So I read—and I forget exactly where I read this—but I read that you spent a lot of time reflecting on why. How did you ultimately—and maybe this is your life—like how did you ultimately answer that question?

Mallory Weggemann: The “why?”

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Oh gosh, that's always a hard question. I think when life happens, I feel like we all kind of find ourselves asking the why.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And the “What if?” and the “Why me?” was kind of a question that I skirted around for a few months—quite some time, actually—after my injury and it would come in ebbs and flows. I think initially it was a constant question and then it would kind of go away and a few months later it would creep back up. And I had a hard time figuring out the answer to that for quite some time.

And it wasn't really until I started to get my life back on track that I realized—you know, I started swimming again and I got back into the classroom. And in

2011, I started speaking. And I started realizing that, you know, if by sharing my story I can help one other person navigate through life, if I can use my experience and the muck that my family and I had to find our way through, and use that to help somebody else, then to me that kind of answered my “Why?” and it made it worth it. I started realizing that I believe everything happens for a reason.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And although it was really hard in the days, weeks, and months to follow, it has built me into the person I am today. And I also realized you can't look back wondering “What if?” You may not always get a very solid answer to your question of why and sometimes you have to find it for yourself and create that answer. And moving on for me was the most important part. And as I moved on, I felt like I had more closure and understanding of the “Why?” And sometimes, for me, it was as simple as “Everything happens for a reason” and “This is where my life is maybe meant to be.” And that was enough for me.

Mike Kearney: So let's move to the swimming—the positive piece.

Mallory Weggemann: Yes.

Mike Kearney: And so was it three or four months after that you decided to get in the pool?

Mallory Weggemann: Two and a half months.

Mike Kearney: Two and a half months.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: Really quick.

Mike Kearney: Why? I know I just asked you the why question—

Mallory Weggemann: Why? Yeah.

Mike Kearney: But what compelled you? So you're an avid swimmer when you were younger. Now you're going to get back in the pool.

Mallory Weggemann: Yep.

Mike Kearney: What compelled you to do that?

Mallory Weggemann: You know, it's funny. I didn't know about the Paralympic movement at all growing up. I didn't know the Paralympics existed. I knew nothing about adaptive sports. I really didn't know anybody with a physical disability. And so when I was paralyzed, my family and I assumed that I would never swim again. We didn't think that swimming was something I would do. And then we heard

about the Paralympics through a newspaper article. The first weekend in 2008, of April—it was that Saturday, whatever that date was, like the 5th or 6th of April. My sister was reading our local paper in Minneapolis, the *Star Trib*, and they had an article about the Paralympic swimming trials for the 2008 Beijing Games. And they were being held at the University of Minnesota.

And so, you know, we started researching what are the Paralympics and learning about them. And obviously, we had all grown up swimming. So my sister was like, well, let's go to the pool tonight, let's check it out, see what it's all about. So we went and I met a gentleman who ended up being my coach going into 2012. And then we met him that night at the pool and I kind of got exposed to some of the individuals that had just been named to the US team going for Beijing and really kind of was able to understand and see firsthand what Paralympic swimming really was about.

And so long and short was, that was Saturday night, and Monday afternoon dad took me back to the pool.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And I got back in for the first time. It wasn't an easy journey into the water. I didn't bring my suit on the first day of practice, so I showed up Monday, no suit in hand. One of my high school teammates was now a Minnesota Gopher and she had a suit on her, of course—they have extra suits. The Gophers had just finished practice and the club was getting ready to get in. So she brought a suit out and gave it to me and told me to change and I went out.

But interestingly enough, when I was first paralyzed, in rehab at the hospital, they brought me into the pool for pool therapy and I hated it. I cried every time I got in the water. It was this realization of the one place that I grew up knowing my entire life and feeling like home became my biggest fear because I couldn't feel or control my own body in a place that, for so long, was as second nature as walking used to be.

And so I actually—some time, probably seven, eight weeks after my injury—said I'd never get in the water again. And then April 8th rolls around and I'm at a pool trying to put a suit on and muster up the courage to get—and not just a four foot, 95-degree therapy pool, but an eight-lane 50-meter competition pool.

Mike Kearney: Well, that's what I was going to ask you. Is the context of the pool different, though, when it's around—?

Mallory Weggemann: I think it was.

Mike Kearney: Physical therapy versus a place that you had been before?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And I think that's what it came down to. This wasn't me trying to figure out how to get better—

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: This was me just trying to find a way to move forward.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And so I got in the water that day, and within like four or five strokes, I remember feeling at home with the water. And that black line became the one constant in my life that, despite everything that was going on, hadn't seemed to change. And there we were and I went back to that pool every day.

Mike Kearney: Can I ask you, so Paralympic swimming, I get it.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: But I think there is different—are there different levels? Or how, for somebody that's never been exposed to it, how should we think about it?

Mallory Weggemann: So when you think Paralympic swimming, right, if you are a Paralympic swimmer, I would say that means you are either a Paralympic hopeful or a Paralympian.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: Not every person with a disability who swims is a Paralympic swimmer, just like not every person without a disability who swims is an Olympic swimmer.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: So that's kind of the context that I talk about it. There is disabled sport, adaptive sports, however you want to kind of refer to that as. So when I first started, I was just a swimmer swimming and it wasn't until 2009, about a year later, I made the US national team. And in August of 2009, I started breaking my first world records. And at that time I then became a Paralympic hopeful for the 2012 games. And obviously, after the London 2012 Games, I became a Paralympian.

So that's kind of—it's very similar to non-adaptive sport, how it's kind of set up. You know, you are a swimmer or a track and field athlete and you don't really get that kind of Olympic title in front of you until you're either an Olympic hopeful or you are an Olympian. Same goes, I would say, for a Paralympic sport.

Mike Kearney: So one of the things I read too—I am going to drop so many quotes that you should know very well—but you said that swimming is your safe haven. And the question I have is, is it because it's physical activity or something greater than that, do you think?

Mallory Weggemann: I think it's a little bit of both.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: I think, for me, initially it became my safe haven in the fact that emotionally and mentally I needed a place where I felt like I could physically excel. I was so dependent on everybody around me to get through everyday life. Simple tasks that three months prior I didn't think twice about became massive undertakings—getting on clothes, dressing myself, transferring myself. I couldn't drive. I mean I couldn't do any of the stuff I used to do. I lost all independence and in the water that didn't seem to matter. I could move forward on my own and that was a really powerful thing.

And I think for me, initially when I got in the water too, I was still trying to understand what living life with a physical disability in our society meant. And I felt like at that point in my life, I had a lot of people telling me—because I was now physically disabled—I wasn't capable of X, Y and Z. And I didn't like that. I couldn't understand how one moment now made me so different. And so, for me, swimming was a way to prove that I was physically capable. And it kind of broke the mold of that stereotype of what a physical disability stereotypically means.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And so that was really powerful. Now, fast forward eight years that I've been swimming and it still is my safe haven—and it was before my paralysis too. And I think some of that too is, just mentally and emotionally, there is something spiritual to me about life over that black line. And the comfort I feel on a good day, on a bad day, when I'm going through life trying to find answers to things, or when I simply don't want to think about anything at all, that black line gives me the power to do any of that.

Mike Kearney: And the black line you're referring to, for the nonswimmers, is the line that goes from one end to the—

Mallory Weggemann: The line at the bottom of the pool, yep.

Mike Kearney: That's cool.

Mallory Weggemann: That little black line.

Mike Kearney: So tell us about—there's so much we could get into. So I'd love to hear kind of the highs and lows of your swimming career.

Mallory Weggemann: Okay. Oh, gosh.

Mike Kearney: I know that we could have an entire like separate podcast on all the good stuff.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: And I really want to hit Rio because there's some really compelling stuff that you've talked about.

Mallory Weggemann: Yes.

Mike Kearney: But maybe set it up. You said that you became—what was the word you use, a Paralympic or Paralympian—?

Mallory Weggemann: Paralympic hopeful.

Mike Kearney: Hopeful in 2009, right?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: So I got back in the water in 2008—April 2008. And by, I think it was actually on my birthday in—so end of March 2009—I competed in a meet and was named to our national team. And so life kind of fast forwarded from there. August 2009, I—

Mike Kearney: Was that your goal? For that year running up to that, or were you kind of just going—?

Mallory Weggemann: I thought it'd be really cool to make it to the trials for London 2012.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And I remember saying that to my sister that night that we went to the pool just to check it out. It was like, this would be neat to get back in the water and see if I could make it here in four years.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And then I got back in the water and realized I was actually not bad at this and my body had that muscle memory and knew how to swim like it did my entire life and I was doing pretty well. So it kind of was, yes, but not—I never thought it'd happen that fast.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: So I made the national team by August of 2009. So we're going on the highs because the road to London was a lot of highs.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: I broke my first three world records and I was named to my first international competition—and that would be Short Course Worlds in November of 2009 in Rio de Janeiro. And I brought home five gold medals from that meet.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And then I hit the ground running for training right when I got back for Worlds in 2010, which were long course Worlds. So that's the length that you race in the Games, and those were in Eindhoven. And I swam all nine events you can swim in Paralympic swimming—so it's seven individuals and two relays—and I won eight golds and one silver.

I came home from that meet and, of course, the competitor in me focused solely on the silver because I saw that as my failure of the meets, as horrible as that may sound. And so that silver burned a hole in my swim bag when I got on that plane coming back to the states from The Netherlands. And that's all I thought about for a year. I trained for the 100 backstroke, and by 2011, international competition rolled around and I won nine golds in nine events and broke the world record in 100 backstroke and was number one in the world in every event going into the London 2012 Games. So my career was on fire from the moment I got in the water all the way up until three days before the London 2012 Games.

Mike Kearney: So what happened? I think I know, but tell us what happened then.

Mallory Weggemann: Three days before the Games started, I got pulled in for a classification appointment. So in Paralympic swimming, specifically, we have ten physical classes and then three visual classes. So one through 10, one is the most severe of the impairments, 10 is the least severe of the impairments. And I was a seven my entire career at that point. I typically—you do a bench test where they check out your muscle strength on a bench and then they bring you into the water and kind of watch how your body reacts to the water.

Mike Kearney: So there's somebody responsible for the classification?

Mallory Weggemann: Yes.

Mike Kearney: You don't just come up with it, right?

Mallory Weggemann: No, no.

Mike Kearney: Yeah, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Somebody determines this.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And I had always been, with my physical capabilities, a six on the bench. But by the time I got in the water, since I had such a good body awareness, from a competitive standpoint, I always ended up as a seven in the water.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: So I was a seven my whole career but there was really no way I could go down and there was certainly no way I could go up.

Mike Kearney: To an eight? Like, an 8 was not even kind of—yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. Nobody was bound to wheelchairs in their everyday life as an eight. Most people walked, everybody kicked, everybody could do flip turns. So we were, like, there's absolutely no way—

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: As a complete spinal cord injury, I couldn't become an eight until I did. And three days before the Games, when they pulled me in for my appointment, they moved me up to the eight class.

Mike Kearney: So, just for somebody who is not involved in this world at all, why three days before?

Mallory Weggemann: So that was just when my appointment was. We were in Germany for team camp and they had some review appointments going on a few days before the Games started. They actually did it there in London at the pool and it was my first day actually wheeling into the London Aquatic Center—you know, that pool I probably dreamed of at that point for four years.

Mike Kearney: Four years, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And that's when the reclassification happened. And we went in thinking it was just semantics. Cross a few T's, dot a few I's, nothing would change. And then we fought for those 72 hours, an appeal process, and I found out in a few hours before opening ceremonies that we lost the appeal and I would not be racing in that 100-meter backstroke the next morning. My events changed, the days I was to race changed. I had never raced the girls that I was now racing.

Mike Kearney: So even timing, which is important, right, like when you're—

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah, from a taper standpoint.

Mike Kearney: When you're scheduled. Yep, yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And how you prepare for getting your body to peak at the right time.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: So all of that changed. And it was difficult. But I think, ultimately, I realized that by being there, I would still return home a Paralympian. And the competitor in me—after opening ceremonies, I went back and I analyzed the world rankings and figured out how fast are the girls that I now have to race, what do they go? And I kind of deemed September 2nd, 2012, as my day. That was what I decided. And it was day three of competition and it was the 50-meter freestyle. So one lap splash and dash, I was like, “I think I can handle that.”

And I remember going in that morning for prelims, convinced in my head that I would be the number one seed going into finals, to kind of prove that I was on the map again. Because I went into the Games as a prospect for nine of nine gold medals, and after my reclassification, I had nothing more than a question mark next to my name. And I wanted to prove that I was still a force to be reckoned with in the water. I went into finals and I was seeded fifth. And I was in lane two and nobody considered me to be in medal contention—I still thought I was.

And I remember right before I went into that ready room where they stage us for 30 minutes, my teammate pulled my headphone off my ear and he said, “Go shock the world.” And that was all I thought about in that ready room. And I listened to my one song I always listen to before I race on repeat, it's a rap song called *All I Do is Win*.

Mike Kearney: I was going to say, you have to tell us what—

Mallory Weggemann: And I pumped my ego up as high as it can go, because I truly believe if you go into that ready room with any doubt, you might as well not show up in the first place. And I went out to the blocks and I got on the block of lane two and stared down that black line on the bottom of the pool. And amongst 20,000 spectators, my world went silent and I knew I was ready. And then I remember diving in, and at the 25-meter mark, I took my one and only breath. And then I saw the feet of the girl in lane three. I was in about fifth or sixth place at that point and I buried my head and I just thought of everything my coach and I had trained for. And when I hit the wall, I saw one light go off on my block and that signified that I had just won gold.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And I remember looking back at the race, and it wasn't until about five meters from the wall that I even put myself in medal contention. And it wasn't about until the last two meters that I started to pull ahead and win the race. I mean it came down to the final last couple of strokes. And it was kind of that realization of the fact that it's never too late to go after what you want and you can't give up. I mean I could have easily mentally just said, at the 25-meter mark when I saw her feet—

Mike Kearney: I'm done, yep.

Mallory Weggemann: That's too big of a gap to make up in a 50, there's no way, I'm done. And I could've started checking out. And sometimes you have to dig deep and you have to fight for it. And that race, for me, is kind of what that signified amongst all the craziness, just fighting the fight.

Mike Kearney: So did that one medal matter more or make a bigger impact on you than maybe the nine?

Mallory Weggemann: 100 percent.

Mike Kearney: Yeah. That's pretty cool.

Mallory Weggemann: I think that that 50-meter gold medal, it carries a lot of weight. And I think for me, the biggest realization too is the community behind it and the people that got me there. Because there were multiple stages throughout the journey and where I wanted to give up, where it was just too hard. I mean, I had a successful career all the way to the London 2012 Games, but that doesn't mean it was all roses. It's tough work doing that and you have your days where you question why are you doing this still, why are you literally beating your body down every day you go to that pool, and what's it for, what's the purpose?

I was very fortunate going to the Games that I had people in my life that truly believed in me. And on the days where I didn't have it left anymore, they gave me that strength to fight for it. And I think for me, that's what that gold medal is about. Because I've realized I could be the best athlete in the world, but without the people in my life, I would have never made it to that point.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And so—

Mike Kearney: Did you ever find out why they moved your classification?

Mallory Weggemann: You know, I didn't, and it's—classification is very, very, very difficult in the sport and it's not a perfect process, I'll be honest, as an athlete. And there's a lot of room for improvement. It's also a hard process to perfect, right. There's a lot of moving parts. But I think for me, ultimately, my closure for that is the fact that I love to swim, I love to race, I love the adrenaline rush, I love the training, I love pushing my body, and I love the sport. And for me, I have a lot of love and respect for the Paralympic movement as a whole because ultimately it brought me back to life after my injury. And being exposed to disability sport and the Paralympics as a whole had a lot to do with my healing process after my injury.

So as hard as the classification was, and as hard as it still is some days, I know that there's so much more about the sport movement than just classification.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And for me, that's why I still do it. I've realized with time and age that there are politics and there are things that we don't understand in everything in life.

Mike Kearney: Right, things out of your control, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And sometimes you just have to let go and control what you can and realize why you're doing it in the first place. And that just has to be enough. And if it's not, then maybe it's your time to be done.

Mike Kearney: So my biggest takeaway from your London Games is that you potentially were going to sweep, and in the end, you walk away with one gold medal. But it means more to you because you had to overcome an obstacle that you didn't see going in.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: And I think there's a lot there.

Mallory Weggemann: Well, and it's interesting, as an athlete, it taught me a lot about mental fortitude. When you get to a Games, all of my competitors at that point had put the four years in.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: We had all trained day in and day out. We had all killed our bodies. We had all done everything we needed to do. We were all more than physically capable of coming away with that gold medal. But for me, it really taught me about the mental component of sport. You know, we so often think about the physical nature of athletics and what it physically takes but we forget that when you actually get to competition, it's like 80 percent mental and 20 percent physical at that point. It's about who wants it the most, who is willing to hurt the most, who is willing to dig the deepest in that moment in time for that race.

And everything changed. Every single thing that my coach and I planned for, for the year leading into the Games, completely went up in the air when that happened. And on paper, there was no reason that I should have left with that gold medal. But it came down to that mental fortitude. And I think, for me, that was a really cool takeaway from a perspective standpoint—as an athlete, just realizing, I knew that I had the physical strength, but then truly realizing in the moment that it mattered, that I had the mental fortitude and the grit and the resiliency to just go out and do it was really neat.

Mike Kearney: Just to do it. I love that. That word grit, I think, is the best word in the English language. Let's move to Rio. And I'm going to reference a blog post, I think it's only a couple of months old.

Mallory Weggemann: Yep.

Mike Kearney: So you said in a—you talked in your September blog post about the challenging journey to Rio and that you learned that there is far more to the journey than medals. And you have a quote that you say, "Life is defined by the fight, the heart, the passion, the grit, the determination, the journey, and most of all, the community. The very people that gave me the courage and strength to fight for this dream in the first place."

And I was originally going to ask you, but that London story is so awesome, but it seems like almost in some respects what you went through—and I'd love for you to share the story. Rio probably made a bigger impact on you than many other competitions. Can you share that with us?

Mallory Weggemann: Rio, hands down, was one of the most difficult and rewarding competitions of my life. In March of 2014—March 5th—I had a very, very, very severe injury. A shower bench in a hotel in New York broke in the middle of my shower and dropped me to the ground. And I came down, all of my weight—majority on my left arm. And, as a result, have sustained permanent nerve damage. They say almost as much as 75 percent function in the left arm is gone.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: I no longer have range of motion in my wrist. I don't have grip strength. My pinkie and ring finger have no range of motion left in them. I have lost, you know, tricep, bicep—the whole bit—strength. I mean the arm is—it's toast. And, unfortunately, I also have hypersensitivity with this nerve damage. So unfortunately, I'm not numb like I am with my paralysis. I am hyper, hyper sensitive. So the softest of touch hurts. The feeling of the water on my skin hurts. Everything hurts.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And so that's a really tough thing to work around as well. I was out of the water for six months. I didn't think I would ever be able to get back in. I thought that I was going to have to retire. I thought my dream of Rio was gone. And I didn't know what life looked like without swimming because, at that point in my life, I had grieved my paralysis with, first of all, two strong arms—

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And, second of all, following a black line and using that as my place to figure life out when I needed it.

Mike Kearney: And now you potentially lost that.

Mallory Weggemann: And now I had lost that. Or so I thought.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And I remember reaching out to my high school swim coach. He hadn't coached me since I was an able-bodied swimmer in high school.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And actually my fiancé—boyfriend at the time—was the one who called him and said, “We need your help, Mal has got to get back in the water.” And so we set up a time to meet—and Steve had the summer off because he's a teacher—and we got in the water and I could swim all of like 30 minutes the first day. And we only swam a couple days a week. And we, at that point, thought my arm was going to get better. And then we realized it wasn't ever going to get better. And we slowly but surely decided that we were going to make a go for Rio and it was a crazy dream. All the way up until April of 2016, I was doubting whether or not I'd be able to make that team come July 5th, if I was going to be named. And I had no idea if I was gonna be able to do it.

Mike Kearney: Were you still in that same classification or did they change it?

Mallory Weggemann: Still in the eight class and now down an arm.

Mike Kearney: Oh geez.

Mallory Weggemann: So I had an uphill battle, to say the least, and it was really tough. I mean we got to a point where we're training, I literally would push myself so far every day that I would end practice throwing up, for lack of—there is no other way to say it.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: I was puking because I was in so much pain and my body was just shutting down. And that was part of the deal, though, I realized. I had kind of made a pact when I got back in the water that I would see the journey through and as long as I gave everything I had, as long as I gave it my best each and every day throughout it, whether or not I was named to the team on July 5th, 2016, I would know I gave it everything I had. And so trials rolled around and started off very, very rocky. It was the last weekend of June, first weekend of July, and we came through. And sure enough, on—I'm sorry, it was July 3rd that I was named.

Sure enough, on July 3rd, we had our team naming and I was named to the team. And it was really funny how they did it. They had all of us athletes go into a ballroom at the hotel but our family and coaches weren't allowed in. And it was just like a rollcall, alphabetical order, and you just sat there and waited. We don't have the instantaneous response that you get at the Olympic swimming trials, where the top two automatically are going, it's all this equation. So you find out the next day after the meet is over, as we're sitting in this ballroom.

Mike Kearney: What did you think going in, like, 50/50? Or where was your mind?

Mallory Weggemann: I thought I had a really strong chance because the night before the final session in my 200 IM, I swam a time that put me fifth in the world. So the only way to guarantee, knowing 100 percent you're on that team, is if you're top three in the world, medal potential.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: I was pretty solid that I would be named. But, nonetheless, there was still a lot of anxiety given the journey going in.

Mike Kearney: Sure.

Mallory Weggemann: And so I remember being named and going out. And I had my T-shirt in hand, my Team USA shirt, because we were getting ready to go to the park for the media. And my coach and my family and my fiancé were there and they saw me and they just all burst into tears.

Mike Kearney: Just broke down, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: I mean my coach, especially, is the last person in that group I expected to see cry. I knew my fiancé would, I knew my parents would, I knew I would.

Mike Kearney: And was that still the same high school coach?

Mallory Weggemann: It's my—so he's not the coach that coached me going into London, he is the one who got me back in the water after my arm injury.

Mike Kearney: Yeah, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Yes.

Mike Kearney: Your old high school coach.

Mallory Weggemann: My old high school coach.

Mike Kearney: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: He actually was my very first club coach when I was seven.

Mike Kearney: He continued—oh wow.

Mallory Weggemann: He was my teacher in elementary school. He coached my older sisters and myself in high school and then he helped me get back in the water after my arm injury.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And so it was a pretty remarkable trials experience. And then we went into Rio. And I went into Rio with the thought that if I didn't medal, if I didn't, you know, make a shot at defending my gold in the 50 free or come away with a medal of any kind, then it would have been a failure. At that point in my career, I had never not medaled.

Mike Kearney: Not medaled, right.

Mallory Weggemann: And Rio was really tough. My body didn't hold out the way I wanted it to. My arm, the past four or five months had progressively been getting worse. It came to a head, unfortunately, in Rio. And I remember the 50 free, toward the end of the program—I was swimming all seven individual events, which was a big feat. I had a few fifth-place finishes, but the 50 free—my bread and butter from London. I swam prelims and I had a great prelim swim, but I came out tenth and I didn't make finals.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And I was devastated. I was heartbroken, absolutely heartbroken. And I went into my final race on September 17th, it was my dad's birthday, and it was a 200 IM. I was in lane two, the same lane I was in when I won gold.

Mike Kearney: Is lane two not a good lane, for non-swimmers?

Mallory Weggemann: I love lane two now—

Mike Kearney: You do, now, okay.

Mallory Weggemann: After winning gold in lane two, lane two is my baby. That's like my good luck charm, right.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: But outside lanes traditionally—I like it.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: Some people prefer to be in the middle of the pool, lane four or five, but I was in lane two. And I think, for me, that moment was probably the highlight of my career. I think that moment was almost bigger than the gold medal, for me, from London. And I say that because when I went out to the blocks, I had nine people in the front row, 20 meters down the pool that stood up with all their American flag gear on. And they were cheering my name and it was my parents and my sisters and my fiancé and his parents and his sister and my coach. It was nine people strong and they were standing there cheering for me as I went on the last race.

And I thought I was going to come away with a medal that night and I finished the race with a career best time. I hadn't been that close to it since 2010 and since then I haven't got within eight seconds of the time that I went that night. But I got fifth place and I remember turning around and looking up and those same nine people were standing up in those stands, cheering for me. And when I looked up in front of me in the stairway of the stands, I saw my coach and he had both arms in the air and he had tears in his eyes. And I think it was—that

was what it was about, you know. There is no medal that would have made that moment any better than it already was.

Mike Kearney: What do you think—because you said you were very disappointed earlier on in those Games. What changed?

Mallory Weggemann: You know, I—

Mike Kearney: Because they would have been there, they were there before, right.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: Like, was there something—was it your mindset that changed or—?

Mallory Weggemann: I think it was realizing how far I'd come.

Mike Kearney: Yeah, like all in that one moment—

Mallory Weggemann: Two years prior, I didn't even think I would make it there. I thought I'd be retired. And even in April, when I was down there for the test event, I swam times at that meet that wouldn't have even put us on our team. And so, you know, I think there were moments throughout—my 100-meter breaststroke. I entered in the 100-meter breaststroke two weeks before trials. I wasn't even supposed to swim it. I hadn't swam breaststroke since 2012, until two weeks before trials, and I made the team in the 100 breaststroke.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: And then I went to the Games and swam it and came away with fifth. And I was like, oh! I mean, it was tenths off my best—a tenth of a second, to be exact—off my career best time. A time, again, that I hadn't touched since 2010. And so I think it was realizing that as hard as some of the events were, a lot of why I wasn't being able to perform in the way that I wanted to—my arm was shutting down and that I could not control. I can't control tremors, I can't control losing feeling and function in my arm, I can't control how my body is going to work from a neurological standpoint—I can't control that.

I can only control how I mentally approach the situation. And I had worked too hard to let my arm injury rob me from enjoying the experience and I just wanted to enjoy being on Team USA. I wanted to enjoy cheering on my teammates. I wanted to enjoy racing. I wanted to enjoy my time with my family and take the experience in for all that it is. And so as disappointed and heartbroken I was on some of those days, I think the just pure love and passion for the sport really kind of, I guess, won in that battle. It was hard some days but I was loving every moment of being there because not all that long ago I didn't think I would.

Mike Kearney: That is such an incredible story. I want to pivot, so almost kind of coming full circle, when we talked about what does resilience mean to Mallory?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: I have a bunch of questions on this. So a couple quotes—once again you're good for quotes. "It's not the moments that define us, it's how we respond," and then another one is, "We all have the ability to change the word," which we talked about. And one of the questions I have is, I think a lot of people, irrespective of disability, but just are stuck in this world in different circumstances. And I think they cognitively understand these quotes but are challenged to act. Meaning, you know what, it's like, oh, that's a great quote that inspires me. A great quote can inspire you but how do you move to action?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. That's a really good question. It's something, honestly, I feel like I've been thinking a lot about as of late, in the fact that we often find ourselves, like you said, stuck, right. We're going through life and it's all about just going through the movements. Right now, at this time in my life, I am supposed to be doing X, Y, or Z.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And we just kind of follow those movements but we don't really know why we're following the movements. We just are. You know, it's kind of at my stage in life—I'm 27, you get married, you buy a house, you start a family. You know, I mean we're in the height of wedding planning right now but, you know, it's interesting. I've thought about it even with wedding planning, right. You have—if you're engaged for a year, you go on Brides.com or any of the magazine sites—The Knot, you name it—and there is the checklist of when you're supposed to do everything.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: It's those movements, right. And so it's the whole question of are we simply just going through the movements or are we living with purpose? And that is—

Mike Kearney: That's what I was going to ask you, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: That is a hard thing to distinguish between sometimes, especially when we feel stuck. And if we're stuck, how do we find our purpose? And I don't know that there's a recipe. I don't know that there is, again, another list of items you have to follow to find your purpose. It's just purely taking the time to slow down, you know, and we all find these moments. I find them, where I just—I'm spinning a bit and you've got to force yourself to just stop and step back and slow down and take it in and ask yourself that why and think about your values or think about where you came from or why are you even doing what you're doing in the first place. When you started this on day one, why did you start it? Even if that was 10, 15, 20 years ago, why did you start it?

And I think being able to understand the why is what will help us have kind of that action plan to become unstuck and start finding our purpose and figuring out where we're at.

Mike Kearney: Do you think—so this is going to be an odd question, but I'm wondering if your injury compelled you to find your purpose maybe earlier than you would have. Is that true, do you think?

Mallory Weggemann: Oh, 100 percent. Oh yes.

Mike Kearney: So what about somebody that doesn't—and maybe it is, like you said, it's just stepping back and, you know, realizing what life is about. It's not just kind of this journey that's already been preordained for you. It's really thinking about what matters.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: But I guess, since that time, have you even adjusted your purpose again? Meaning, like—

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: The injury is what got you to think differently but what I'm trying to get at is—

Mallory Weggemann: I think you constantly do.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: I think you constantly have to adjust that purpose. I'll use an example for me in my swimming career right now. I've gone to two Paralympic Games, I'm a two-time Paralympian. That's all great and dandy. I'm going to go on for Tokyo 2020 for my third Games, but my purpose between now and 2020 is different than my purpose was between 2014 and 2016. My purpose going into Rio was all about redefining limitations.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And redefining what was possible, because in so many ways, it was literally seemingly impossible for me to come back from the injury that I had and make it to the Games.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: But now, going into 2020, my purpose is about—I'm getting older as an athlete and I don't want to wait until I retire to start having an impact on the sport that I love. I want to do it now. I want to leave the sport better than I found it, not wait until I leave to make it better. And so my purpose for 2020 is that. I mean, I still want to be a fierce competitor, but I want to take the time to mentor other athletes and to make sure that when I retire, whether it's after 2020 or 2024, that I know wholeheartedly that I did my part in making the sport better than it was when I found it.

And so in that example alone, your purposes are always changing. And it's changing with your life and where you're at and the stages you're in. And, you

know, if you have young children your purpose is different than maybe it is if you're now an empty-nester. And in your professional careers, it's different, you know, when you're just getting into the industry than now if you're a named partner or you've kind of climbed the ladder and made it into a different role and now you're more of a mentor and leader versus being the mentee. And so it's kind of this ever-evolving purpose that we have, but we constantly have to reassess that.

Mike Kearney: Do you think there's a linkage—since we're on purpose—from purpose to resilience?

Mallory Weggemann: Yes. I think knowing that you're living life with purpose allows you to be more resilient. I truly do.

Mike Kearney: Because you know what matters, meaning—

Mallory Weggemann: You know what matters.

Mike Kearney: You know what you're trying to bounce back from to a certain degree.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. You know what your values are, you know what you stand for, you know why you're doing what you're doing, which gives you more confidence to fight back and to have that resiliency. And I think even sometimes being resilient is what also helps us find our purpose. So it's kind of both ends of the spectrum. But I definitely think that there is a link between the two.

Mike Kearney: So I'm going to move to your ten tips on personal growth.

Mallory Weggemann: Oh yes.

Mike Kearney: And, you know what, I actually—so sometimes I have a love-hate relationship with top tens.

Mallory Weggemann: Yes, I agree.

Mike Kearney: For anybody that's out there, go read them, because I'm only going to talk about two of them. But they're really, really good. And the two that stood out to me was—the first one was no matter how hard it gets, remember that it always can be worse.

Mallory Weggemann: Yep.

Mike Kearney: Take the time that you need to grieve but move forward and remember to be thankful for what you have. And the question I have for you is, there is always somebody that has it worse. And I guess the question that I have is when you're at a low point in life, how can you cultivate gratitude or be thankful? That, I think, is a very difficult thing to do and you've shared some stories—not just the initial injury but some of the other setbacks. How were you able to cultivate gratitude or be thankful in those situations?

Mallory Weggemann: You know—and I know this sounds so silly and so simple—but it truly comes down to that choice. We have to consciously choose to see the good in any situation. And that is a personality component, that is just kind of part of who you are. You get two choices in life and you can either go down the negative path or you can follow the positive path. And if you go down the rabbit hole of the negative path, it's going to be really hard to get out of it.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I backup though and say there are times where all of us have moments where we literally cannot help but look at the negative because we feel so stuck, we feel helpless, we feel like we're spinning in circles—life is just too hard. And I say in those moments, and in—when I've been in those moments throughout these past nine years, especially, for me finding gratitude and having that grace and remembering who I am and what's important to me, I've done so by leaning on my family and the people that are important to me. And it's been those people that have helped lift me up and brought me back to where I need to be when I physically cannot do it alone. Because I don't think we're expected to do it alone. That's why we have loved ones and family members and mentors and coaches.

Mike Kearney: Absolutely.

Mallory Weggemann: We're not built to just tackle life as one person. We're built to have a community around us that helps us and lifts us up and celebrates the highs and helps us through the lows. And, in return, we are also expected to be the same for those people. And so I think for me, when life gets hard and you're trying find that gratitude and you can't do it alone, you have to lean on people around you.

Mike Kearney: Second quote—

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: "Remember, in any situation, it isn't the circumstances that define us, it's how we react to them that defines us." And we've touched on this a bit, but how do you change your mindset from really the situation to the solution? Any thoughts on that?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. You know, I have talked a lot about community. And I know it's kind of like beating the dog when it's down, right, when you keep talking about the same thing over and over again. But I really, truly think I can think of, I'll say, my arm injury—let's use this example.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: Probably harder to get through than my paralysis was, I'll be honest.

Mike Kearney: Really?

Mallory Weggemann: And I think that's because it was a buildup effect, in the fact that I got through my paralysis but my swimming is what helped me grieve. I had two strong arms, I figured out how to do life, I was 100 percent independent. I could do everything I used to do, just a little bit differently. And then my arm injury happened.

Mike Kearney: Well, I think it's also—

Mallory Weggemann: And now I only had one strong arm.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I'm like, now I literally, no matter how hard I try, there are just things I can't do with one arm.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: So the long and short in that scenario, finding a way to realize it's not those moments and circumstances that define you, it's how you react. And taking in the situation and finding that solution, I think for me, really, truly did come down to allowing myself to realize—and that, more so than my paralysis, forced me to realize that we are not at it alone. And in order for me to find a solution, I had to let people into my life. I had to be willing to ask for help. I had to let go of that pride and realize that it's okay to ask for help, it's okay to lean on people, and it's okay to have them help lift you up when you can't do it on your own. And so, for me, in all of these circumstances, that is where I have found the strength to start finding a solution. By leaning on the people in my life who know me and love me enough to remind me of what my values are.

Mike Kearney: What about—and my guess is you're going to link it to what you just shared. But did you ever have any doubters?

Mallory Weggemann: Oh, 100 percent, are you kidding me? We all have doubters. I still have doubters. I have people that think I'm crazy for—

Mike Kearney: They must propel you, though, in some ways, knowing you, right?

Mallory Weggemann: 100 percent.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: I actually—I mean, it's kind of corny, but I still journal and I still do all of that. And not long after trials, I had a journal that I was writing in and it was basically kind of like my thank you to everybody who said I wasn't going to be able to do it. Because there's no greater joy than proving people wrong sometimes, especially as a competitor. And I know for a fact when I came back from my arm injury, there are people that believed that I was foolish and that I should have never tried to come back and I was better off to retire. And I'm sure the fact that I didn't medal in Rio made some people happy, as horrible as that sounds. I'm sure it just kind of proved their point of, you know, I'm never going to be

able to be the athlete I once was.

But for me, I competed in Rio with grace and dignity and pride and everything it took to get there. And you have to focus on the people that lift you up and not the people that tear you down. And if you're going to focus on the people that tear you down, use it as motivation because there's no better motivation sometimes than a good doubter or two.

Mike Kearney: That's true. So you talk a lot about the power of journaling.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: How did that help you—how has that helped you over the last nine years? And, actually, even before we get into that—did you journal before?

Mallory Weggemann: I did a little bit but not a ton, not like I have since my injury.

Mike Kearney: And how has it helped you? And maybe any guidance or—like, how it's helped you and how it could potentially help others?

Mallory Weggemann: I think, for me, it really helped me slow down. It helped me stop. It helped me think about life and it helped get my emotions out—positive, negative, indifferent thoughts, whatever it may be—and it allowed me a place to go that was safe, that I could just put it on paper, get it out of my mind, and be done with it. Close my journal, go to bed. And I like that because some of my best thoughts have come out on paper. But also some of my most needed kind of—you know, the anger and the emotions I just needed to let go of have come out on paper too.

And you have to let go of that stuff. You can't just hold it in. But you also don't want to be the person that's going around airing your dirty laundry and being a negative Nancy and doing the whole bit to everybody in your life. And so you need a place where it can just be your own and swimming is that for me. But I also found a lot of healing in writing. And I kind of was able to get a lot of my thoughts out and find a lot of answers. But I think the biggest thing that it just forces me to do more than anything is just slow down.

Mike Kearney: You're a good writer, by the way. I love it.

Mallory Weggemann: Thank you.

Mike Kearney: How much of your journals translated into your blog?

Mallory Weggemann: A lot.

Mike Kearney: A lot.

Mallory Weggemann: I started journaling purely for myself.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: Journaling was never something that I ever envisioned sharing with anybody. It was a personal thing. It was kind of a spiritual healing thing. It was my version of therapy, quite honestly.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And I did that and it wasn't until 2011, when I went to give my first speech, that I finally shared a journal with my parents even. And I only did that because my dad was going to be in the audience of the speech and I was going to read it during my speech so I figured I'd give him the honor of hearing it first.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Right. But I realize, as I've read back, a lot of them were very kind of rhetorical and more thought-provoking. Not the Dear Diary, today I did this and this, you know. October 2008, I remember writing a journal that I've referenced in some speeches that was all about change. And I never thought that these journals would become public, but now that I've realized the power of writing and sharing a story, I've started sharing them a little bit more publicly. And a lot of my blogs, quite honestly, I just write them and to me it's a journal. And then I'm like, you know, this might be a good one to throw out there and share. There are only probably two or three that I've actually been given a pointed topic that I've then gone and started writing about that topic, which I'd love to do more of, but most of them are purely just me sitting down thinking about life and it turns into a blog.

Mike Kearney: How did you get into the speaking piece of it? Because I think that's pretty cool.

Mallory Weggemann: Dad threw me into it. Gosh, good old dad. So my dad works for an environmental consulting firm and he's one of the partners. And they, after my injury—you know, I knew a lot of dad's colleagues growing up—and when my paralysis happened, they really wrapped themselves around and were very, very supportive. We were very fortunate for that.

And then I was nominated for an ESPY in 2011. And so everyone got excited, you know, everyone's sending out mass emails and voting and all of this. And I ended up winning the ESPY, and that was a really big high in my career. And so afterwards, they had their partner meeting that September of 2011 and dad came home one day and said, you know, they wanted to know if you want to come out to Baltimore and just chit chat with a few folks—you know, very Minnesotan, chit chat.

Mike Kearney: Right, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And so we—I was like, sure, you know, I love your colleagues, whatever, I'll go to Baltimore, we'll do dinner, no big deal. Well, maybe about two weeks before—maybe more like a week and a half—dad dropped the bomb that I was actually talking to not just a few, but the 300 partners that would be present.

Who, let's keep in mind, probably 280 of them were men and I was a 22-year-old girl.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And I had a 90-minute keynote slot on stage.

Mike Kearney: 90 minutes.

Mallory Weggemann: And I was like, "What?"

Mike Kearney: He never told you—I mean 300 is one thing, but 90 minutes.

Mallory Weggemann: Oh, I thought I was going to dinner.

Mike Kearney: Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: I thought I was going to dinner and just saying hey to a few colleagues. I didn't think I was their keynote speaker. So I had never given a speech. I got a C-, D+, something crazy like that in high school speech class because I was terrified of public speaking. And I started reading journals when I wanted to figure out what I wanted to say and that's where this whole kind of thing evolved. And I think for me, what I found in my journals was the rawness and the common theme of talking about vulnerability. I decided to kind of—if they're going to give me the stage, I decided to try it out. And I felt like the most powerful way that I could share my story was by being vulnerable, especially, I feel like, in corporate America. You know, we're buttoned up and we kind of—we're closed in sometimes and I truly—

Mike Kearney: Sometimes?

Mallory Weggemann: Yes, I'm being—

Mike Kearney: Oh, you're being nice.

Mallory Weggemann: Sometimes.

Mike Kearney: Okay.

Mallory Weggemann: Sometimes, not all of the time. You know, you got casual Fridays nowadays, right?

Mike Kearney: I know.

Mallory Weggemann: No, I'm just kidding. But what I noticed was when we're vulnerable, we're the most connectable.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And so as a speaker, I felt like my job on stage isn't just to share my story, it's to have a conversation with the audience. And I know that I'm not receiving verbal feedback in this conversation, but it truly is a conversation. And the audience's

body language and their mannerisms, I can read that. And the audience actually does respond to you in a speech through their body language and I find that fascinating and I really read off of that in a speech.

And so I kind of—that's how I went about that first speech. And it went really well. I love kind of that feedback that I got through body language and just that communication aspect of realizing this is just a conversation about talking about life and getting people to kind of break down their barriers, be vulnerable, have them kind of be comfortable with the uncomfortable for a little bit and talk about some real life things that we're all dealing with.

Mike Kearney: What do you think—so now you've been doing it for five years. What do you think folks that you present to—or actually, I like how you used couched it as more of a conversation.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: It's actually not really a speaking engagement or a presentation, it's a conversation. What do you think they take away? Or have you gotten any feedback? And what I'm trying to do is connect your story to kind of what they take away in their life.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. You know, one of the really big things—and it's interesting because I feel like everybody is so different on what they end up taking out of this.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: But one thing I talk a lot about is in order to be, especially in corporations and speeches in that environment, I feel like I do hit on in order to be professionally successful, we have to take the time and put it back into our personal lives. And they feed into each other. If we are not personally successful and in a good place in our lives personally, we can't expect ourselves to be professionally successful. They don't—it doesn't work like that. You can't just go to work and forget about your problems.

And so one of the things that I do talk about, like I said, is a lot of that vulnerability. How do we get through the moments in life, how do we support each other—whether it's family members or colleagues—and how are we a team, how do we work as one, how do we allow ourselves to really lean on each other?

And one area that I get a lot of feedback is, I do talk about how—a belief that I have kind of come to realize since my paralysis is that we all have a disability. Everybody has that thing in life that they're struggling with, that thing that ultimately can paralyze them if they allow it to. And so for me, it's a physical disability, but for some it's mental, it's emotional, it's spiritual, it's familial, it's financial. It could be fear-based. I mean it's a million different things, but we all

have to figure out how do we navigate through that. How do we allow ourselves to get our disabilities and allow them to enable us and not disable us?

And that's a point, actually—last night I had a speech here. And the audience, when we talked about that, their body language completely shifted. You could see them—and I talked about how my disability as a wheelchair user is very evident. Everybody around me knows what I'm struggling with. But in that room, for instance, nobody knows what their peers are struggling with, what their colleagues or family members or loved ones are, unless they're vulnerable enough to talk about it. And in our society, that's kind of taboo. We don't talk about our problems.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: And it was interesting to see the shift in that audience, of how we started talking about disability and vulnerability and how we find ways to open up in a way that allows us to all be able to connect at a deeper level. Everyone was kind of like sitting back, looking around the room—and it was set up in a horseshoe. It was a small group. And it was interesting how the body language shifted. I always find that fascinating, and every audience is different—the takeaway, because a lot of themes are different.

Mike Kearney: You know, I think you've hit on something that I believe kind of to my core, and I don't know if I've used this in the podcast before. But I always say, you never know the devil somebody's dealing with.

Mallory Weggemann: Yep.

Mike Kearney: And I was going to ask you this earlier, but I moved passed it. But what guidance or what advice would you have for those people that maybe—and maybe you guys shared this last night. How can people get vulnerable? How can you try to understand that devil somebody else is dealing with or that unseen disability like you've talked about?

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah. I honestly think the biggest way is you just have to have grace.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: You have to have compassion and empathy and just slow down long enough to realize that, just like you have a bad day and you have stuff going on in your life, everyone else does too.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: You know, somebody may come into work one morning and you may be frustrated because you have a big project and one of your team members just doesn't seem like they have it together on that day. And instead of being quick

to jump to assume they didn't prep, maybe slow down and realize something may have happened last night or this morning in their life.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: Maybe there is a reason deeper than them just seeming a little disheveled as to why they're not prepared in that moment for whatever it is that's going on. And I think that just having that moment where we let ourselves slow down enough to have that grace will allow us to understand potentially what somebody else might be dealing with. And they may not ever tell you what they're dealing with, but just give them that—

Mike Kearney: Give them the space, yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: Give them that space and give them the benefit of the doubt.

Mike Kearney: You know what I find too—and I think this is what you're a master at, is telling your story. Because when you're vulnerable—and this is one of the things I try to do with my teams. I do not believe that you can live a life at work where you're kind of divorced from your personal life and what's going on. I just find that so silly, especially when I spend more time with my teams than my family. But I find—and I don't go all the way there—but if I share some of the challenges that I had growing up or at work or things that maybe I wouldn't normally want to air to a lot of people, then that opens them up to share their story as well.

Mallory Weggemann: Yep. Yeah, no, I really do. I believe in the power of vulnerability and the fact that I truly, truly do believe that it connects us at a deeper level. And especially when you're—I mean, you talk about in the professional setting. When we're working together as teams, we need to be able to be a cohesive unit that can really, really capture and get that task at hand taken care of. And if you're just kind of passing by the night and you're never actually on the same page because you don't understand their personality to the core, it's not going to work.

It's like my teammates, you know, that I race with. It's the same thing in the athletic world as it is the professional world. I know what my teammates need when they need it. They know what I need when I need it. And we're able to work as a team better by understanding people at a personal level.

Mike Kearney: So what's cool about your speaking role is you probably have been exposed to so many different types of leaders. And you've actually touched on all of these, so it's great that I wrote these in my questions. But when I think of you, I think of somebody that's authentic, optimistic, determined—now I'd actually put vulnerable on the list. But what do you think are the most important characteristics of leaders in this world? And it doesn't necessarily need to be just corporate—it could be anyone.

Mallory Weggemann: Anyone. I'm going to repeat the word, but I truly do think in order to be a good leader, you have to be willing to be vulnerable.

Mike Kearney: Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And you have to have, I believe, a level of compassion to really be able to understand where other people are coming from. And you have to have a little nature of being authoritative too. And having that authority, and not saying that you have the answer to everything, but sometimes being a leader means whether or not you're able to be the leader because you're questioning what's going on around you. You just—somebody has to be the decision maker and unfortunately, as the leader, oftentimes that falls on you, whether you like it or not. And somebody has to take that stance and help kind of bring the group under their wings a little bit and guide them through a tough time.

And so, I think of, even from a coaching standpoint and looking at—if I look at my relationship with my coach, in the sport, he is the leader of our program. And he is the one that kind of, at times, whether he is certain that it's going to work or not, I need to know that he had confidence in it. And being confident in the plan and the task and understanding that he may be questioning a few things but sometimes I need him to come across as though he has got it all under control.

Mike Kearney: I know what—yeah.

Mallory Weggemann: And that—

Mike Kearney: I know what you need to do, yep.

Mallory Weggemann: And sometimes you need that in a leader. But I really think that just that vulnerability and that compassion and ability to truly just slow down and understand what's going on around you. Because in order to lead a team, you have to know your team. I mean, you've got to know the personalities you're working with. You need to know the people to the core. Take an extra five minutes to know them. My coach knows, on certain days, he knows my personality. He knows I will keep pushing unless he stops me. And so some days he just has to stop me and say, "You know what, Mal, we're done, today. We're done. Going isn't going to do us any good, we're done for the day."

And I think the same thing goes in a professional setting, where, you know, if somebody seems to be having a rough day and they're just not productive in the workplace. If running is their thing, yoga is their thing, biking is their thing, whatever their thing is, just say, "You know what, it's been a long, hard day, why don't you just leave early today."

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: Let's just call it quits and come back tomorrow. And sometimes just having that gauge on your team.

Mike Kearney: On your people, yep. Final two questions. This has been so—I could have asked like 20 more questions but—

Mallory Weggemann: No, you're good.

Mike Kearney: This is awesome. What's next for you?

Mallory Weggemann: What's next? Oh gosh, the laundry list. I'm going back for 2020, that's the goal right now. I'm currently actually working on getting strong enough so I can walk down the aisle with my dad on December 30th. That's the big personal goal in my life.

Mike Kearney: Wow.

Mallory Weggemann: I'm going down to the Mayo Clinic twice a week right now working with my therapist, using custom leg braces and the whole bit, so I can walk down the aisle on my wedding day. Which is pretty exciting because my fiancé obviously came into my life after my injury and so there's a lot of people in that church that haven't seen me walk since 2008. And a lot of people that have never seen me walk.

And then I'm really enjoying having the time to devote to my speaking and my writing. And I'm working on getting ready to hopefully put a book out here in the next couple of years and—

Mike Kearney: That's what I was going to ask, when's the book coming? Yep.

Mallory Weggemann: So we've been working on it. I've learned to be patient because the story is still evolving and I really want to do it the right way. One thought, though, I have is that I will—I'll be publishing within the story that myself and my coauthor write, we will be also publishing my journals from throughout the years to really bring it back to that raw voice. Because I'm all about kind of that rawness throughout the story and making sure it maintains that integrity.

So the speaking, the swimming, the writing. I have been really getting passionate about advocacy as well. So kind of just helping change perception in our society of what disability really, truly is and helping—again, I want to be sure that when I leave the sport, I leave it better than I found it. And I think that sport has the ability to transcend and we can use the Paralympic movement as a way to really change the perception of what disability looks like in our society.

Mike Kearney: So let me—this is a long quote but I want to read it because I have one last question for you.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney:

Okay. So hopefully I can read it well. So the quote is, "For me, I feel lucky for what happened back in 2008 because, since that day, I've been able to appreciate life in a way that I never did before. I have found that happiness and joy in the simplest of moments and that is my hope for everyone else. That just for a minute they could slow down and look around and see the beauty in life because it is truly beautiful if we just allow ourselves to slow down and take it all in."

The question I have is, you know, in some respects, your journey sounds like it's a blessing, as crazy as that may sound. My question for you is, if you could go back to the pre-2008 Mallory, what advice would you have for yourself?

Mallory Weggemann: I think if I could go back to me before all of this, I would just remind myself to be patient with the process and that life works out. It always does. And to allow myself to truly take it all in because you never know when it's going to change. You don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, you don't know what twists and turns are going to be thrown your way. I mean, you just—there is no certainty and you just have to allow yourself to slow down, be patient, and enjoy the here and now and not constantly rush to the future.

Because I think so often it's what's the next task at hand or what's the next goal or where am I going to be next year, and we forget to think about what we're doing right now. And I think that's the biggest thing my paralysis has given me is the ability to just appreciate the moments for what they are.

Mike Kearney:

Well, and it also sounds like live in the moment as well.

Mallory Weggemann:

It is, yeah.

Mike Kearney:

Yeah.

Mallory Weggemann:

I mean—and this may sound really silly—but I'll say one of the biggest things that I miss about life before the injury, it's not the actual act of walking, it's not the big things, it's feeling my toes between the sands and feeling the waves wade in on my feet when I'm standing on the beach. But you know what, I could put my hand in the sand, and when I'm sitting on a beach, just remembering back to what that used to feel like and appreciating that moment. Because for me, that's a moment that I can try to recreate but it just won't ever be the same. And that's okay. And it doesn't necessarily make me sad, but it's the realization that it's not the big moments that you look back on and miss when life happens. It is the little moments, it's the simple moments.

It's the going for a run when, you know, that winter season turns to spring and it's 30 degrees out in Minnesota and everything is brown and melting and it feels like it's 80 because it's been negative 20. And everyone's going out for their first run of the season, and for some people, it's the only run they go on all season.

Mike Kearney: Right.

Mallory Weggemann: But it's just kind of that nostalgia and you know, missing being able to do some of those things—and those are the little things. So I think I would remind myself to be patient and just enjoy life for what it is.

Mike Kearney: That is such a great way to end it. And I think if we could all just spend a little more time living in the moment, being mindful, being patient, life would be so much better.

Mallory Weggemann: Yeah.

Mike Kearney: So—

Mallory Weggemann: I definitely agree.

Mike Kearney: Thank you.

Mallory Weggemann: Thank you so much.

Mike Kearney: This is awesome.

Mallory Weggemann: I appreciate it. This was great.

Mike Kearney: That was incredible. That is one of the most inspirational stories I've ever heard. You know, I've interviewed a lot of people, but to hear the personal journey, the personal struggles that Mallory has gone through was truly a once-in-a-lifetime conversation for me. It was very inspiring. And, you know what, I sit here and I wonder if I would have the strength to rise above, like Mallory has. Would I be able to find purpose in life? Would I be able to give back to others after going through a tragedy like that? It's something I'm going to think about.

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