

# FIERCE:

## Five Minutes at a Time

Carolyn Colleen Bostrack shares her plan for moving through hard times.

BY LISA HEISE

Photo by Tiffany Brubaker Photography

**For many, the old adage** “One day at a time” is too much, says Carolyn Colleen Bostrack. Just getting through five minutes at a time is a victory. As a mother of three, a published author, a community leader, a motivational speaker and a thriving professional, Bostrack knows hard work. She knows struggle. She knows defeat and victory. She knows how to survive five minutes at a time.

Her story is about obstacles, she says. “Some people start life on the beach with their feet in the sand, and they journey through the mountains seeking that home place,” says Bostrack. “Me? I started way out in the current, or maybe even in some quicksand, just trying to get to the beach.” Today, as she approaches the completion of her doctoral dissertation, Bostrack reflects on her journey and the fulfillment she finds in guiding others on theirs.

“We all experience pain and struggle,” observes Bostrack. What sets some apart, she says, is “how we cope, how we get through the day and how we impact others.”

### A strategy for change

Bostrack begins her story in the middle by painting a picture of herself as a young adult holding her baby girl while standing in line at the Salvation Army, waiting for food. “I didn’t decide one day to stand in line at the Salvation Army,” she says. “The series of choices I made to that point got me there.” That series of choices, however, involved escaping an abusive marriage, breaking the cycle of poverty and setting out on her own with her daughter to create a better life.

It was there, standing in line, that Bostrack had a moment of clarity that would one day lead to the writing of her book, *F.I.E.R.C.E.: Transform Your Life in the Face of Adversity 5 Minutes at a Time*. “I had to use it as a way to push forward. One day at a time was too much. I could barely stay focused.”

Her FIERCE strategies carried Bostrack through many difficult years of managing full-time work, school and parenting, all while dealing with the demons of a past riddled with abuse. FIERCE is an acronym:

- **Focused breath:** Take a deep breath, face fear and focus.
- **Identify one goal:** Name three things required to achieve that goal.
- **Examine barriers to the goal:** Recognize the barriers you are creating through fear.
- **Reflect and visualize your truths:** Co-create your own reality.
- **Courage:** Recognize that you have the courage. That’s why you have come this far.
- **Engage:** Take action!





Carolyn Colleen Bostrack has overcome obstacles to achieve the things she wanted most: a positive life, a career she loves and a healthy family (Bronte, 18; Dylan, 7; and Elliott, 5; photo by The Studio).

## Moving forward

At times, as she struggled through college and single parenthood, it seemed to Bostrack that it might be easier to return to her marriage, a relationship built on emotional control where she wasn't even allowed to use the bathroom or shower alone. The extent of the abuse went well beyond emotional control into sexual assault, and beyond that into threats to kill Bostrack and their child. Her husband had manipulated her into alienating friends and family, and when she escaped, she felt alone except for the child in her arms. Her baby girl, Bronte, showed Bostrack what love really was, and Bostrack knew she needed to raise her in a home where love involved giving instead of taking, joy instead of dread.

## Redefining love

Misunderstanding the nature and definition of love was what had gotten her there in the first place. Her childhood, too, had been full of fear, beginning with an abusive mother who constantly reminded Bostrack of how much she had cost the family

as an adopted child. A teenage neighbor began molesting Bostrack when she was only four years old. The abuse lasted for two years. When Bostrack was older, her mother left the family and never returned, leaving Bostrack to raise her younger sister while their father traveled often for work. The messages sent to Bostrack about her own self-worth stayed with her, and she knows she is not alone in her experiences. A favorite passage from page 105 of her book reads:

"There is no fairytale ending for this journey, for many of these horrific memories will haunt us forever, but they do not have to define who we are. We can only ask ourselves to be better than we were the day before. The next five minutes are a new five minutes that belong to no one else but you."


Fast-forward to the present day: Bostrack's baby girl, Bronte, is 18 years old and poised to begin her freshman year of college, majoring in engineering and physics. Two younger sons—Dylan, 7, and Elliott, 5—complete Bostrack's family picture. When asked what she does for fun, she says with a warm smile, "I hang out with my kids."

## A goal to serve others

Today, Bostrack works as the program manager at Gundersen Health System's Cancer Center in La Crosse. She enters the lobby of Gundersen's East Building and is immediately greeted and embraced by parents, friends and patients alike. In the pediatric treatment area, a child plays video games with his mom. Bostrack waves at them and points to a dreamlike play area, beaming. "Look what we've done here." She remembers the moment she spoke with a friend who mentioned finding real fulfillment in her career. "I was perplexed because I had been working to make money to feed my family, nothing more, nothing less. I enjoyed my work, but it did not feed my passion." As she had with every challenge up until that point, Bostrack approached her next steps fiercely. Her goal was to serve others. In her current position, she helps people in a real and tangible way, advocating for patients and supporting families dealing with the ravages of a disease that becomes more pervasive every year.

## A positive impact

Carolyn Colleen Bostrack has navigated the currents, crossed the beach, climbed the mountains, dodged some major landslides and clawed her way straight through others. Her book is a raw, genuine, unapologetic exploration of her experiences and the lessons she has learned, along with some tangible strategies for anyone dealing with adversity. It can be purchased on Amazon and from Pearl Street Books in La Crosse. Proceeds from the purchase of Bostrack's book are donated to the Mental Health and Social Services fund at Gundersen Health System.

Sharing her story has not been easy, but Bostrack knew it was her next step. As she had relied on this community to help her fight toward the life she wanted for her children, she committed to giving back "to the community that believed in me. I would raise awareness and make a positive impact on a large scale. To do this, I needed to learn to be vulnerable and share the story I had kept a secret." 

*Lisa Heise is a local writer and educator who has climbed a few mountains herself. She believes in the power of sharing your story.*