



# the COMEBACK KING

By LIZ DAVIS

*To inspirational author, speaker and singer Willie Jolley, every challenge is a valuable gift, and every setback contains the makings of a comeback.*

**A LITTLE OVER 20 YEARS AGO,** motivational speaker and author Willie Jolley was an award-winning jazz singer who made his living as a nightclub feature performer. One autumn evening, just after Jolley had delivered two exceptional performances in a row, the nightclub owner called him into the office and promptly let him go, citing the club's need to cut the significant cost of a high-caliber singer like him, not to mention his backing band. Though Jolley couldn't have realized it at the time, this bitter pill was actually the beginning of unimaginable future success.

Today, Washington, D.C.-based Jolley is the author of the inspirational titles *It Only Takes a Minute to Change Your Life* and *A Setback Is a Setup for a Comeback*. His new book, *Turn Setbacks into Greenbacks*, was due out in January. He delivers rousing, heartfelt motivational programs to the likes of GM, Walmart, Verizon and Chevron, and he's taken his talent for speaking around the world. He hosts *The Willie Jolley Weekend Show* on XM Radio and has a daily radio feature called "The Magnificent Motivational Minute," which is syndicated in more than 50 markets. He's also been named one of the top speakers in the world by Toastmasters International. But Willie Jolley didn't always know he'd end up here.

"All of this happened because I got fired and replaced by a karaoke machine," Jolley says, laughing. He's not exaggerating for comedic effect, either. That's really how he began his transformative journey. One big disappointment was the catalyst that would eventually enable him to inspire people all over the world.

## **CHANGE YOUR THINKING**

Getting fired stunned and devastated Jolley, and he felt betrayed after all he'd done to help the club succeed and expand its clientele.

He could have held onto his resentment and disappointment, but he didn't. In *A Setback Is a Setup for a Comeback*, he writes, "From that very moment, I started changing my life." He made a conscious choice to adopt a positive outlook and to focus on opportunities. Because he accepted responsibility for his own success and happiness, and because he was tirelessly proactive, opportunities began to appear. He writes, "I decided to change my thinking, change my actions, and change my results: to stop 'waiting for breaks' and start 'making my breaks.'"

Jolley still considers changing one's mind and choosing a positive perspective as the first and most important step to making a comeback. He says, "The moment you make that decision to change your mind and go in a new direction, that is the moment you change your life. Everything else follows from that. If you can change your thinking, you truly can change everything around you."

After being fired, and with only \$200 in his pocket, Willie Jolley chose to accept every opportunity and challenge that presented itself. He didn't know how it would all add up, but he was determined to turn adversity into assets.

## BE WILLING TO WORK, AND TO WAIT

Jolley took a job with a drug-prevention program for at-risk youths that combined music, drama and the arts with an uplifting message of hope. "I had to give speeches to kids in tough neighborhoods, and I guess because of my background as a performer, people really seemed to like them," he says. "One thing led to another, and by word of mouth, I kept getting invitations to speak at different companies, teachers' associations and churches. Then Les Brown heard me speak, and he liked the way I mixed music and motivation. So he invited me to be part of the Music and Motivation Tour that he was doing with Gladys Knight."

By doing whatever was in front of him, and responding with enthusiasm and gratitude to every chance he got, Willie Jolley was starting to build a thriving, meaningful career. But none of this happened overnight.

Many people make the mistake of giving up too soon, because they don't understand that persistence over time is what makes big things happen.

"We live in a society where we've been conditioned to expect instant gratification.

Instant rice, instant cash, quick loans over the phone. We'll stand in front of the microwave and say,



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## Talk to People

One of the points I share with audiences is that they must TTP: talk to people. When I got started speaking, I had a 5-foot rule: If someone was within 5 feet of me, I was going to talk to them. I remember a time when I stood at the subway in Washington, D.C., and gave out my little "ugly" fliers. I call the fliers "ugly" because they were not fancy or professionally reproduced, but they were the best I could do at the moment. So I went with what I had to work with, because it was critical that I get my business going, and I needed to get it going quickly.

I stood at the subway and handed out those ugly little fliers. Some people looked at the fliers and then ditched them in the trash, but some took them and read them. A few weeks later, I got a call from a government agency and the woman on the phone booked me to speak for her organization. I asked her how she had heard about me, and she said that someone on her team had taken a flier at the subway, and when they were looking for a speaker, they decided to use me. I believe that you must make a commitment to TTP. Let people know who you are and what you can do to bring value to the marketplace. Once you TTP, I recommend you TTMP—talk to more people!

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*Excerpt from Turn Setbacks Into Greenbacks: 7 Secrets for Going Up in Down Times. John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2010. This material is reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons Inc.*





# A Setback Is a Setup for a Comeback

by Willie Jolley

When you have experienced a setback, you must take a moment to look objectively at the situation. One of the best ways to do this is to ask questions. You must first ask questions of yourself; then be willing to ask for help. At some points in our lives, we all need help.

One of the keys to success is to ask questions. You must ask lots of questions to not only figure out your options, but also to figure out what is the best move for you. First, ask yourself what your options are. Open your mind and start jotting down the answers. At first, you might try to tell yourself that you have no options, like when people say, "I had to do it; I had no other choice." Friends, you always have a choice. Remember, in life you always have a choice; it may not be comfortable, but you have a choice.

Second, after you ask questions of yourself, then you must ask questions of others. One of the most important strategies for turning a setback into a setup for a comeback and achieving success is to ask a lot of questions.

I ask myself for advice, and I recommend that you do the same. I say, "Willie, I need your advice. I have a problem, and I need your help. If you were me, what would you do in this situation?" I then proceed to give myself advice that I couldn't seem to come up with just a few minutes earlier. Why is that? When you ask yourself questions, you are brainstorming with yourself. It truly is amazing what creative ideas are already within you. You just need some new ways to tap into that great, unlimited pool of possibilities.

You also need to be willing to ask others for help. Ask friends, family, associates, and even people you don't know. Ask for help, advice, information and suggestions. You never know where you will get the answers, but you must ask the question in order to get the answers.

*Excerpt from A Setback Is a Setup for a Comeback. St. Martin's Press, 1999.*

'Hurry up!' We expect everything quickly, but life just doesn't work like that," Jolley says. "We have to learn to be patiently impatient. So plant the seed, water it, help it along and do what you can to fertilize it. Be willing to work and to ask, 'What can I do to get better?' But you must also understand that good things take time."

## LET YOUR TRIALS TRANSFORM YOU

Jolley knows that not only do good things take time, but they also take faith. And how do you develop faith? He believes faith is built and strengthened by making it through tough times.

To illustrate his point, he talks about a study cited in his new book. In the study, four frogs were submerged in a bucket of water filled all the way to the top. After a predetermined length of time, the frogs were allowed access to the air again. In the second phase of the experiment, another four frogs were brought in, and both groups were again submerged, with no access to air, but for a slightly longer period of time.

Jolley explains the results, and their significance: "All the frogs in the second group drowned, because they gave up hope. They had never been in a trying situation like this, and they didn't know that, sooner or later, they'd be able to take a breath. The frogs in the first group had been through something similar, though, and they all survived because they held on just a little longer."



**"IF YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR THINKING, YOU CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING AROUND YOU."**

That's the value of struggles and tough times, the circumstances we are often quick to label as unfair or just bad luck. "I'm so thankful for those tough experiences, for losing my job, for being broke and busted and disgusted, with nothing to hold onto but my faith and a dream," Jolley says. "If you've already been through a challenge in your life, the next time you come up against adversity, you're less likely to be afraid. If you never have challenges, you can never find out just what you're capable of."

## IT'S A MATTER OF ATTITUDE AND HOPEFULNESS

Jolley's books, speeches and songs are filled with compelling stories and anecdotes that illustrate the particulars of creating a successful, happy life. But all his simple, time-honored talking points have the same foundation: that real success begins the moment you *choose* a hopeful perspective—when you change your mind, and thereby, your life. "Success is a matter of hopefulness, of expectation," he says. "As a speaker, it is my job to keep people in that hopeful state of mind, to keep people encouraged, because there is nothing more pitiful than a person who has no hope."

Willie Jolley has achieved great success in sharing his life story with others, and it all started because he didn't succumb to bitterness and failure in the wake of his own setbacks. Moreover, he actually found in those setbacks his greatest strengths and assets, and now he finds fulfillment in sharing his hard-earned wisdom with others. "It took hard work, desire, determination and continuous learning to build this career. And if I can do it, I know you can do it, too! You just need to know what to do and how to do it." **S**