

All About the **BOUNCE**

Darda Sales Shares Signature Stories

Photo by Shannon Nell

When Darda Sales dipped her foot into the world of competitive swimming she found her lane. But she didn't stay in just one lane. Never afraid to fail, for her, life is all about learning. She learned how to raise children as an above-knee amputee mom. A recent Western University Ph.D. graduate, her resume also reads researcher, coach, classifier and advocate for athletes with disabilities, particularly swimmers with her work at Swim Ontario. Darda recently shared some of her bounce-back life lessons learned in an interview with thrive publisher Jeff Tiessen.

thrive: *Let's start with motherhood. Tell me about your kids.*

Darda: I have three children. My son Dezmin Peter is 11 and my twin daughters Quinlyn and Maclyn are nine. My girls are active. They love to swim and play soccer. My son is a little bit more of a video games buff. Both my husband Brad and I were Paralympic athletes so we try to push him toward activity without being overbearing sports parents.

thrive: *Is there one most like you, and most like your husband?*

Darda: Maclyn is very determined when she sets her mind to something like me. She's quick to laugh and have a fun time and she is fearlessly competitive when the situation calls for it. Brad and Dezmin Peter are more deliberate, and focus on details, particularly in conversations. They like activity in spurts whereas me and my girls could just go all day, everyday.

thrive: *Sticking with being a mom, and an amputee mom, when you were expecting for the first time were there fears and worries specific to being an amputee?*

Darda: We had a few. My husband is also an amputee. I'm traumatic; he's congenital. There was a concern about the genetic component of my husband's disability. People were asking us if we were "going to find out." We said 'no' because if one of our children, or all our children, were born with limb loss or difference, we thought we'd be the perfect parents for them.

thrive: *Other concerns?*

Darda: I knew from other women that your centre of gravity changes, and you gain weight, and I was concerned what that would be like for me as an above-knee amputee. I spent time researching pregnancy

and lower limb amputation and had a midwife going through school to be a nurse at Western University in London with access to all the research databases. She found just one blog from a below-knee expectant mom. Essentially, there was no research on what to expect.

I talked to my prosthetist and said 'surely I'm not the first woman who is an above-knee amputee who wants to start a family. Do you have anyone I can talk to?' Again, the only person he could connect me to was a below-knee amputee. I knew it wasn't going to be the same experience as I was going to have.

There was nothing for me to refer to. I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to wear my prosthesis. What about balance? What about hopping and how that could affect how I carry my baby. There really were no answers. I wore my prosthesis until I was seven months pregnant. My husband said to me one day that that was enough because I wasn't walking properly which could cause me damage in the long run.

thrive: *Was a wheelchair never a consideration?*

Darda: Well, strangely, not really. Up to that point in my life I'd never used one. I became an amputee when I was three, in the 1980s, and was that kid whose mother was told that "as soon as you can get her into a prosthetic leg, she wears that prosthetic leg." Life for me was always getting up in the morning, putting on my leg and wearing it for 16 hours until I took it off at bedtime.

But now I had to find a wheelchair and learn how to move around in it, and learn how to care for a baby in it.

thrive: *How about challenges once your kids were born that would be unique from typical moms?*

Darda: The story begins before they were born actually. I was in labour for 56 hours with my son before having an emergency C-section. I wanted to have my girls naturally, but other circumstances prevented that. After two pregnancies, I was having issues with my hip on my amputation side and had an X-ray of my pelvis. I saw the problem immediately. I had an adult pelvis on my sound side, but it was child-sized on my amputated side. I only learned later that because I lost my limb before I went through puberty, and because my residual limb is so short and I didn't bear weight on it, the bone never grew.

Bones grow through weight-bearing and pressure. And I didn't have that. No wonder I couldn't have our son naturally. He just wasn't fitting through there. I'm now working with my physiatrist to make these things known.

Once they were born, and growing and developing, we did think about how we would run after them. I got a child backpack complete with a child leash as a registry gift (laughs). But kids want to feel safe. We just taught them early on that in certain situations their hand had to be on mine or Brad's.

thrive: *So, getting back on your feet so to speak after each birth, how long did it take?*

Darda: That was a concern too. How long would it be until I was back in my prosthesis? How was I going to look after my kids when I was not wearing my leg? My mindset at the time was that it was all about my prosthesis and not a wheelchair. But my wheelchair, in many ways, helped me be a better parent. In my wheelchair I can go for long walks with my kids. I can keep up with them when they're on their scooters. I could take them to the park with one on my lap or pushing the stroller. And still today, when going for a walk I'll use my wheelchair. I never did go back to being a prosthetic user exclusively.

My residual limb never returned to its pre-pregnancy shape and my baby hip is starting to bare some wear and tear. My plan was to have the babies, lose the weight and jump back into my leg. But that's not what ended up happening.

thrive: *For amputees who resist using a wheelchair even for convenience at times or even for better access ironically, what do you say now about that?*

Darda: I'm fortunate to have both. There are times when my prosthesis is so helpful. I can go to a friend's house that is not accessible. For carrying groceries, I put on my leg. But I have the option of the chair to use for activity when my leg is not fitting well. I feel weird sometimes about it, almost like I'm double dipping.

The culture that I grew up in, with the idea that you must wear a prosthesis, I now believe limited me in some ways. A wheelchair would have been good for going for walks with my friends. Hop in my chair, push myself there and join them.



Photo courtesy of Darda Sales

thrive: *You refer to the importance of activity in your life and your family's life a lot.*

Darda: I was blessed with the ability to be a high-performance athlete, but activity in general is so important for all of us, including amputees. If I want to keep walking, I have to keep moving. Being active and keeping myself strong will determine how long I can keep walking with a prosthesis. Physical activity is a stress reliever for me too! I like the way I feel when I'm feeling strong. For me it is a lifestyle thing. My personality is a competitive one, but it's so important for me on a day-to-day basis to be active.

thrive: *Let's talk about that competitive personality and where it took you athletically.*

Darda: When I was really young I met three Paralympians who really inspired me. I can remember where I was but I don't remember who they were. I was nine years old and it was my very first swim meet.

They were getting ready to represent Canada at the 1992 Paralympics in Barcelona. I knew nothing about competitive swimming and they recognized that I knew nothing. They gave me my first cap and goggles. They were so excited about being Paralympians and that got me excited. 'Yeah I'd like to do that too.' But I had no concept as a nine-year-old what that really meant. But I learned quickly.

In 2000, at the Paralympic Games in Sydney, my relay team won the gold medal in the 4x100 medley. I swam freestyle and the anchor leg. Then Athens in 2004. Silver in the same event. I didn't medal in Beijing four years later



Photo courtesy of Canadian Paralympic Committee

and compartment syndrome in my forearm prevented me from competing in 2012 at the Paralympics in London. And that was the end of my swimming career. Shortly after that I was pregnant with my son.

thrive: *But that wasn't the end of your Paralympic story, was it?*

Darda: Basketball came after my first child. I knew I needed something to keep active. I didn't want to just sit on the couch. I had friends who played wheelchair basketball. I was so terrible at it at first, but I loved the challenge because it was so different than swimming. I was learning every day. I liked the team aspect, but I didn't like the team aspect... I deal well with my own mistakes but not so much with others'.

My strength from swimming translated to quickness on the court. My coach encouraged me to try out for the national team which I didn't make the first time, but kept training and trying. I then had my girls and used wheelchair basketball to get back in shape after my pregnancy. Five months later I made the national team. I competed at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio on the Women's National Wheelchair Basketball Team where we placed fifth. We won the World Championships two years prior in 2014. After Rio, it was time to move on from competitive sports.

thrive: *You said earlier that your husband was an elite athlete as well. Did you meet Brad through swimming?*

Darda: Well, yes and no. It's complicated (laughs). Brad was a national swimmer as well. Our families first met when we were four years old at a War Amps' CHAMP swimming lesson program at Parkwood Hospital in London. Our families used to go to those things. Our parents kind of knew each other but that was the extent of it.

We both qualified for nationals many years later. My mom and I were on the plane flying from Toronto to Regina when she noticed the boy sitting behind us, who looked so familiar. It was Brad. We hadn't connected for about 10 years. We were both new to the national scene at the same time and both came from small clubs. We just started hanging out together and here we are. I grew up in Sarnia. He grew up in Woodstock. So, we kind of met when we were four and then on a plane and then in the pool. See what I mean about being complicated?

thrive: *What makes you happy?*

Darda: When I feel like I'm making a difference. Feeling that I'm having an impact. Professionally, that's why I keep doing what I do. I love to see change. And I'm not worn down by the fight yet. I'm still very optimistic and hopeful. And I get enough glimmers of success to keep me going. Anything worth doing is going to be hard. Sometimes you have to look really hard for the reward though. But it's worth it.

thrive: *How about frustrations? Let's call them your pet peeves.*

Darda: Where do I begin (laughs)? Let's stick to my amputee life. Uninformed parents. I hate that whisper and grab thing. It drives me bananas.

Here's a good example of what I much prefer. This summer I was

walking into the library. I'm wearing shorts and a little kid comes running up behind me with, "Hey you, why are you wearing that?" I said I got in a farm accident when I was little and this is how I walk now. His mom came trotting behind him offering to explain that her son asked her why I had that leg and she told him she didn't know and suggested he ask me. That's perfect. That's what I like. I want people to be curious in a respectful manner. Yes my leg looks different. I know. It's fine to recognize that. I would much rather that than the parent who grabs the kid and says don't look. How can you not see that I'm walking on a post. But personal questions... not so much. My personal business is none of someone else's business.

thrive: *Why do you think this is still so difficult for some in our society?*

Darda: I think we're still afraid of "the different." As much as our society is moving toward inclusion, bodily or functional difference can still be uncomfortable for some unfortunately. There is still this ideal of what a "normal" body looks like... two full legs, two full arms, you see where you're going, you stand up tall and you speak clearly. It's an expectation. Outside of that, it makes us uncomfortable.

Another reason too I think, is that we tried to hide it for so long. For centuries. If you had an impairment or a functional difference you tried to cover it, or stayed at home and didn't go out in public and you weren't considered to be a contributing member of society. That is shifting. We're seeing more people with differences in positions of leadership, and in the media.

The other thing, for me, is that 80-90% of the population has not experienced a significant impairment. Of course, we want them to be more accepting but we need to give them some grace when it comes to understanding the 10-20% of us.

thrive: *How do your kids respond to questions from strangers or schoolmates?*

Darda: They've only ever known me as an amputee of course. My kids sometimes see themselves as my ambassador. My girls especially. They take pride in talking about my robot leg and that I got in a farm accident. They try to head things off at the pass before they get to me. They do get offended and defend me when kids at school are "stating the obvious" in some shape or form.

When my kids draw pictures of me they draw me with one leg. I'd be upset if they didn't. That would mean they aren't accepting of me for who I am. And that would mean they would not be accepting of other people for who they are, and that would be a problem for me. But we'll see what happens when they're high-school age... they'll be too cool to defend me!

thrive: *You are so articulate and so passionate about all that you do and you share that as a motivational speaker. What's your signature message?*

Darda: It's evolved over the years, but for me 'it's all in the bounce.' It's not how you fall, but how you come back that truly matters. There were so many situations in my life where things didn't go as expected but coming back from those produced amazing things. People don't remember how you fall; they remember how you come back. That's what I draw from my experiences to share with audiences.

thrive: *Not everyone might have that same bounce as you do?*

Darda: Everyone goes through tough times at times, whether you have a disability or not. How do we learn from that? I'm totally fine as a mature adult to fail at things. What's important is learning from it. The only time you fail is when you fail to learn. That's what I instill in my kids too. That's how I coach my athletes

as well. We can learn something from every situation. That's what's in the bounce. I'm a professional bouncer you might say (laughs).

thrive: *For your amputee sisters, those who have undergone an amputation in adult life and didn't hit the adult world running like you did being a child amputee, what advice do you have?*

Darda: Connect with the amputee community and learn from others who have lived experiences similar to what you are about to. Medical professionals are great and play an important role. But those who are living it are those who are going to be able to give you those day-to-day secrets and nuggets that make life easier. And they will be able to truly empathize with you. They know about bad days. They know that it sucks to wear a

prosthesis some days. They get it. They can help you learn how to live life better. They'll encourage you.

But this goes, really, for all amputees. There is so much we all don't know. And even though we have the Internet, the answers are not all there. Pull strength from those who are living it. Ask questions of them that you may not be able to ask elsewhere.

We are allowed to have bad days.

Sometimes, we in the disability community try to put on a brave face all the time because we don't want to be seen as complainers. We want to be seen as functionally able, so we can't complain.



Photo by Shannon Nell

That's not reality. Finding people who are empathetic is so important. When they tell you, "Yeah I've been there but there are better days ahead," they know it and it's true.

An advertisement for Ocean Insider Club's Online Adaptive Fitness program. On the left, a woman with a prosthetic leg is sitting on a patterned rug in a gym, performing a sit-up. The background shows gym equipment and a logo for Ocean Insider Club. On the right, a blue gradient background contains the text "ONLINE ADAPTIVE FITNESS" in large, bold, white letters. Below this, a dark blue button says "START TRAINING TODAY". Further down, white text describes the program as an exclusive online fitness resource with tailored exercise and workout programs. At the bottom, the website URL "www.oceaninsiderclub.com" is provided.

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