

Finding My Grit in the Jungles of India - unpublished

I slowly inched my way to the edge of the cliff, my legs feeling like they were going to give way at any moment. Tears flowed down my face as my heart raced and I tried desperately to catch my breath.

“You don’t have to do this,” Sunjatha said, as she wrapped her arm around me, consoling me.

“No, I don’t,” I thought to myself, as I intentionally looked away from the edge. My fear of heights had never been so real.

“You’ll be fine. You’re going to do great!” David told me, a big grin on his face as he hooked the ropes to my harness.

When I came to India eight months earlier to work for an anti-trafficking NGO, I had no idea I would find myself on a staff retreat in the jungle, participating in various team building exercises -- like rappelling off a 60-foot rock. I don’t even like going down the escalator at the shopping mall!

From the time I knew about this retreat two months earlier, my mind was made up:

“There is no way I’m abseiling.”

“This is not what I signed up for.”

“Not doing it. You can’t make me.”

I sounded more like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum than a 42-year-old woman. But now, here I was, standing on the edge of the cliff with the ground looming 60 feet below.

No, I didn’t have to do this.

I’ve always been an overcomer and I knew if I backed down from this, I would regret it. I would regret letting fear win.

As David finished hooking me up and as Sunjatha continued to console me, I took a deep breath and through quivering lips and a shaky voice said aloud, “Yes, I have to do this.”

Slowly I began to inch myself backwards, lowering myself into a sitting position in the harness, as my legs pushed me out and I became vertical with the face of the cliff. I kept telling myself, “Just don’t look down.”

As I descended, David yelled out commands and words of encouragement.

“Keep your legs wide!” “You got this!” “You’re doing great!”

Soon my weak legs became strong, the tears ended, and I felt the fear subside. Then I realized something. I was smiling.

Halfway down David yelled for me to stop so he could take a picture. I used this moment to take in my surroundings -- and decided to look down. As I dangled 30 feet off the cliff, I saw my co-workers below, their smiles beaming up at me and the sound of their cheers echoing through the trees.

Moments later I reached the bottom, alive and well.

I came to India wanting to make a difference, but little did I know that India would change me. This beautiful and chaotic country doesn't allow you to forget your problems – it gives you the courage to face them.