

'I needed to live life the way I want'

Traumatic events prompted these inspiring women to change the course of their lives – they tell new their incredible stories

Attacks made Sarah rethink

Former lawyer Sarah Aspinall, 47, lives in Hertfordshire with her husband Omar, 49, and her two children. On her 30th birthday in New York she was mugged at gunpoint, before another terrifying attack took place back home in London. The events changed her life and she now runs her own dance school, Breaking Ballet.

'Celebrating my 30th birthday should have been a happy memory to cherish forever, but it's one that still holds terrifying memories. It also changed the course of my life forever.

I went to New York for a three-night milestone birthday celebration with my bestie. We had a great hotel and we did the *Sex And The City* tour – we just had a really great time. On our last day, we were a bit hungover so went for an early dinner and decided to walk home.

It was a dark October evening, around 6.30pm. I became aware of someone saying something to my friend and realised that she had stopped.

I looked up and he was holding a gun up at us. He was very jittery, had his hood up, and was clearly high. He demanded our money but we didn't have any – he didn't believe us.

My friend scrambled together \$1.50 and a Macy's shopping card but I got quite angry. I didn't want to empty my bag because my passport was in there.

He didn't believe I had nothing and turned the gun to my head at point-blank range. I got my wallet out to show him I was being genuine. He was agitated, then made us turn



Sarah had always turned to ballet

our backs to him. Doing so slowly, we held hands and really believed our time was up.

We both closed our eyes, when suddenly he changed his mind and told us to turn back around and walk – he said, "Keep walking, and don't look back." Luckily, this meant in the direction of our hotel. Within 30 seconds we were inside, running to reception to call the police.

The whole experience was terrifying – they never caught the guy. I've never felt safe in America and I've never been back since.

There was trouble at home, too, though.

She made a life-changing decision

Still jet-lagged from New York, I finished work and walked my usual route home through the ticket offices at the Tower of London when I spotted a group of young guys. I instantly didn't feel right but it was too late.

One grabbed hold of me and pushed me up against the ticket office and was fumbling around with his hands, touching everywhere. There were so many of them and nothing I could do except scream at him to get off. I kned him between the legs but he just laughed.

'We held hands and believed our time was up'

I felt shaken and vulnerable – I wasn't in an unsafe area of New York any more. I was back home where I live and I'd never had a problem before. I needed some time off work, and during this time I questioned everything. The hectic life I was living as a lawyer wasn't what I wanted.

BALLET WAS MY ESCAPE

I had always loved ballet since the age of two – it was my escape as a painfully shy child. It was the first time I could express

myself through movement. I was offered a prestigious ballet scholarship when I was 14 but my mum was against the idea of my moving away from home so young.

My maternal grandfather was a judge and I was fascinated by the legal system. Law became the obvious choice for me. It's an easy career in the sense that the path is laid out for you.

You do the degree, law school, a training contract for two years, you get a job and then you work your way up the ladder. There



Her love of ballet began as a child

aren't too many decisions to make as long as you tick all the boxes.

I had already questioned my life in corporate law long before my horrific experiences. During my time in London on a training contract my dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, deteriorating rapidly. I went into the office on a Monday and didn't leave until Thursday night – I hadn't slept in four days and my flatmate would bring me fresh clothes and I'd shower at the gym. That weekend doubtful thoughts started percolating. I thought, "What the hell have I got myself into here?"

UNIVERSE WAS NUDGING ME

I qualified as a lawyer in September 1999 and my dad passed away in 2002. Those few years were hard and I knew this lifestyle wasn't great for my mental wellbeing. That's when I started finding things that would stimulate my mind, and I turned back to ballet and dance throughout working life.

The universe had been nudging me away from law with long hours and unhappiness, but the prospect of a near-death experience was the walloping I needed. I knew I needed to live my life the way I want. My values were health and family yet my career wouldn't allow time for them.

I wanted to go back to my ballet roots to teach others and now my business is thriving. I'm helping women future-proof their bodies and I'd love to help children. Movement helped me, but not PE, not sport – it was expressive movement, so I'd like to put together a programme for schools to help with attendance.

Breaking Ballet helps women have more self-awareness, and for children it helps them understand how to feel empowered as they learn to compute their feelings.

As a young girl I was faced with a decision – go to ballet school or go to law school – I ended up doing both.

ALI GRAVES

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