

Allen's Own

by Deborah DOVE



At first glance, the tiny, forty-year-old blonde woman with a pixie cut doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a top competitor on *American Ninja Warrior*, the popular NBC TV show where athletes tackle increasingly challenging obstacle courses in hopes of becoming an "American Ninja Warrior." But don't let appearances fool you. The Allen resident recently made a huge debut on the first episode of season ten, which aired May 30.

Karen Wiltin, who relocated to Allen from Colorado in 2015, has always been an athlete. She danced on the University of Colorado dance team and competed in numerous marathons and triathlons, even placing first in her age group in the Great Floridian, an Ironman Distance Triathlon, in 2008. However, when her daughters Etta and Mary, now six and four, were born, training took a backseat to motherhood. At least until last fall, when she took her girls to play at Obstacle Warrior Kids, a kid's play gym modeled after the *American Ninja Warrior* show.

"I was that dorky mom saying, 'Let me help you!'" Wiltin says with a laugh.

She discovered they had an adult gym in Dallas and signed up for classes one Saturday a week. She was excited about a new challenge, and Ninja's was appealing because it was something she could do while including her kids.

On a whim, she signed up to compete in a warriors-type obstacle course at the Texas State Fair, where she made it to the fourth obstacle out of six. Spurred on by her successful first "official" debut, she signed up for a competition at her gym in December and placed third overall in the women's division. She'd been training for less than three months.

Karen Wiltin has always been a huge fan of the show and, like the rest of America, had thought, I could do

that. When she learned the show was accepting applications until the beginning of January, she decided to go for it. To add impetus to her decision, the show would take place in Dallas right around her fortieth birthday. "What better way to celebrate?" she says.

She filled out an extensive application that asked for everything from her athletic background to her favorite Ninja on the show and the biggest moments of her life. She also submitted a video of herself conquering obstacles at the gym and footage of her with her family and at work, and she continued to train.

Contestants are only notified three to four weeks before the show, and she intended to be ready. Karsten Williams, a popular veteran on the show who lives locally, invited her to join his training team, called Tru Momentum, which helped Wiltin boost her training up a level and provided an amazing support team.

On March 3, Wiltin got the call she'd been waiting for. She'd been

chosen to compete on the show!

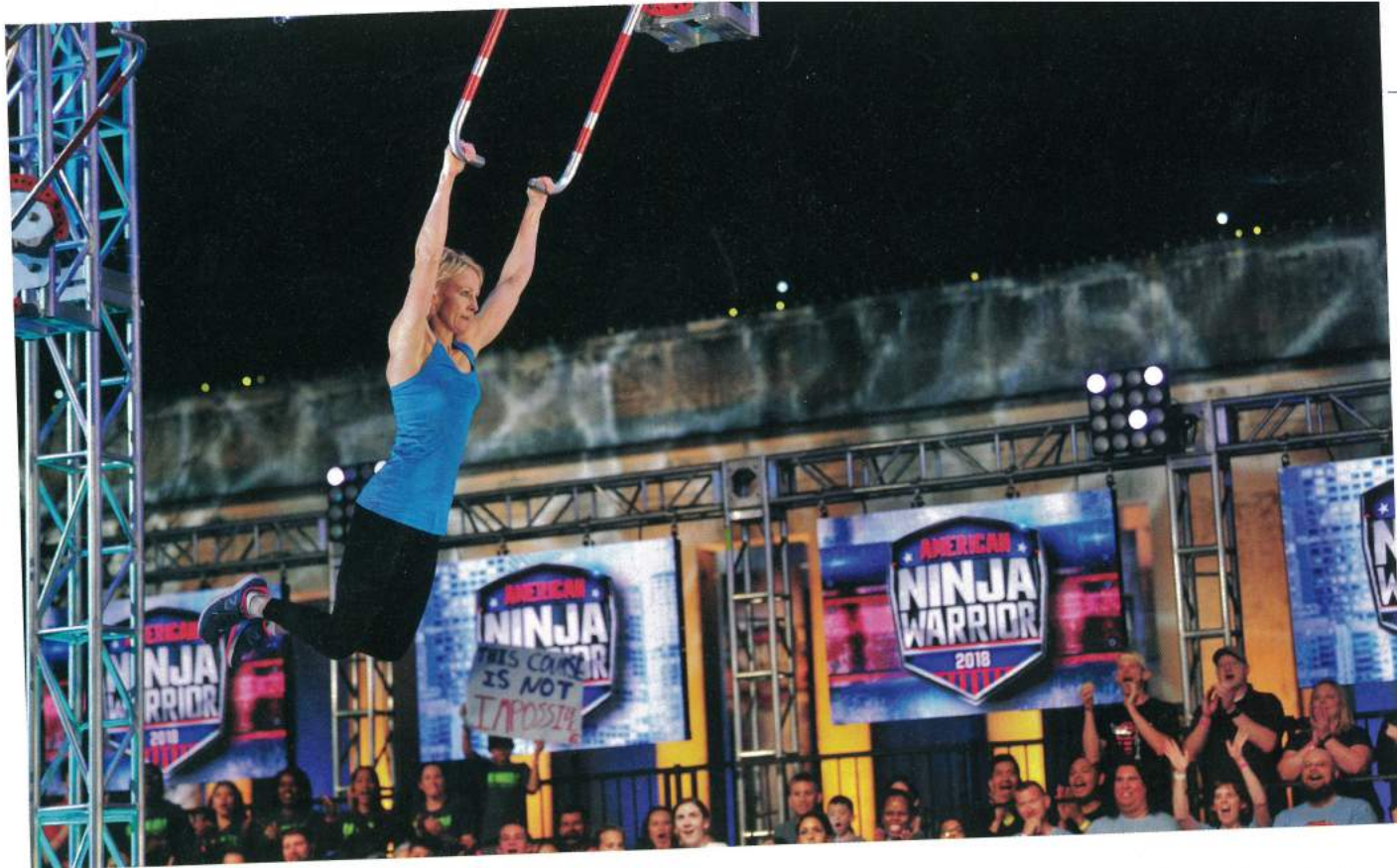
She was ecstatic. Roughly 100 athletes make each show, and out of that 100, only twenty to thirty are women.

"I'd already made it just getting the call," she says. "Regardless of how I did, I had already won. That was my accomplishment. I was brave enough to try out. Here I am, thirty-nine years old, starting this new chapter of my life."

At the time, she didn't anticipate the positive impact being on the show would have on everything in her life—her family, her marriage and her community. Her girls became infatuated with *Ninja Warriors* and wanted to try the things their mom did. Her husband built her a ninja gym in their media room, outfitted with adjustable monkey bars, peg boards, softballs to swing from, num-chuks, balance obstacles and more. She trained at home, at a rock climbing gym, at the park while her kids played and with Tru Momentum.

It was finally the big day. On the





evening of March 25, Wiltin arrived at the *American Ninja Warrior* course set up at Fair Park in Dallas along with

her cheering squad, which included friends, family, her husband and her girls, wearing “My mommy is a Ninja Warrior” shirts.

Wiltin, like all the other athletes, had no idea what to expect, as the set is closed until the competition begins. In each city qualifier, there are six obstacles, two of which are always the same—the Floating Steps, which is the first obstacle, and the Warped Wall, which is the last obstacle. In fact, “it’s guaranteed there will be an obstacle that is brand new and has never been on the show before,” says Wiltin. In the Dallas qualifiers, the second obstacle, “Catch and Release,” and the fourth obstacle, “the Tuning Forks,” were brand new.

Wiltin was placed in the first of two groups that would compete, starting at 9 p.m. Although she was supposed to be the eighth athlete to run, a last-minute change moved her up to sixth.

Confident in her skills to do well on the course, but aware that nerves often get the best of even the most experienced athletes and takes them out on the first obstacle, Wiltin felt a wave of relief as she completed the

Floating Steps. She easily made it through the second and third obstacles, as well as the fourth, a balance obstacle that took out many of the competitors.

Unfortunately, Wiltin fell on the third transition of the fifth obstacle, Crank It Up (which incidentally no woman has ever completed during qualifiers), but she’d gone far enough—and fast enough—to land her in first place among the females and twenty-fifth overall, and with secure a place in the Dallas city finals.

Unfortunately, the city finals took place the next night, which didn’t allow much time to prepare mentally, or logistically.


“I didn’t have childcare. I didn’t have a cheering section lined up for the next night,” she remembers with a laugh.

While many of the competitors went home or to a hotel to sleep and prepare for the next event, Wiltin had mom responsibilities.

At press time, Wiltin was not at liberty to disclose how she fared at city finals, as it didn’t air until July 16. However, she had been able to watch the Dallas qualifiers and

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experience seeing her daughter's faces as she completed her run, the pure joy on her own face, and the amazing outpouring of support that followed as a result.

"There was overwhelming feedback after the season premiere," says Wiltin.

Because of her successful run, Wiltin was one of a handful of contestants who was featured in a home interview that aired as part of the episode, which showed a behind-the-scenes look at a day in Wiltin's life—working out, playing with her kids, cooking dinner and going to her

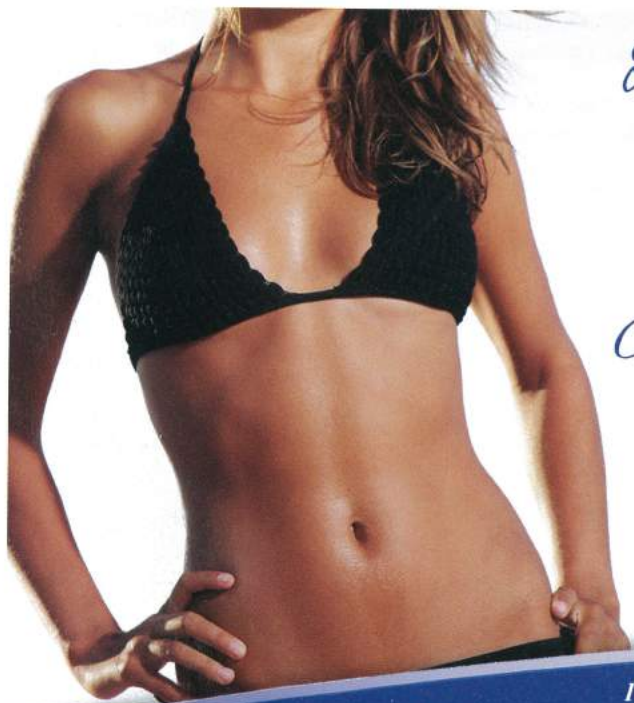
job as a physician's assistant to a pediatric craniofacial plastic surgeon.

After the show aired, parents of children who'd had craniofacial surgery who had seen clips of Wiltin at work sent her pictures of their children. Women in their thirties and older from as far as Hong Kong contacted her, telling her she was an inspiration for showing them what was still possible. But, the biggest thing for Wiltin was the impact it had on her own kids.

"My kids saw how hard I worked. They saw me fall and get back up again," she says. "One of the reasons I did this was to teach my girls how to be courageous, how to be brave and go after their dreams and believe in themselves."

In the process, she inspired a country. "It's never too late to write a new chapter in your life. You're never too old. Be bold. Be courageous!" ❖

Deborah Dove is a freelance writer from Allen.



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