

#45 - The Power of Grit with Cindy Ross and Todd Gladfelter

Donna Ferris: [00:00:00] Welcome to Bounce Back Stronger, the podcast that explores ways to find peace and purpose no matter what happens. Today, Cindy Ross and Todd Gladfelter are with us. Cindy is a well-known writer, veteran advocate, hiker, cyclist, and adventurer.

Her travels have taken her across the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, and the Continental Divide. But Cindy's story is larger than that. In 2021, after years of traveling the trails with her husband, Todd suffered a tragic accident, leaving him with a severe spinal cord injury that turned their lives upside down.

Despite this life-altering event, Cindy and Todd have shown extraordinary resilience, dedicating themselves to his recovery, with the same determination that carried them through thousands of miles of wilderness. Cindy and Todd, thank you so much for being on the podcast. It's a real honor to speak with you today.

Cindy Ross: Sure. Thank you for having us, Donna.

Donna Ferris: Maybe tell us a little bit [00:01:00] about the accident and how your health is today.

Todd Gladfelter: Well, my accident happened a little over two and a half years ago. I fell off a roof only seven feet and broke my neck.

So I went into the hospital. They did surgery. I was in the hospital for 10 days, and then I went into a live-in rehab facility for about 2 months, and I had virtually no movement on the right side and a little bit on my left side when I came out of the hospital.

By the time I left rehab, I was in a power chair. I could only help 50 percent to move from the wheelchair to a bed or another [00:02:00] surface. So I needed quite a bit of assistance. And then we had two months of home care, where nurses and therapists came in. And then the rest of it, which is what, two, two years about.

We're a little over two years. We've been going to outpatient at Good Shepherd in Allentown, which specializes in spinal cord. Since then, I've been up and

walking with a walker, and now I've been doing a lot of walking with a cane, but I need someone with me when I walk with the cane in case I trip.

So I've made quite a bit. of recovery. My left side is really good. The right side is moving, but the right hand, the grip is minimal. It's like [00:03:00] 15 pounds. The left side is almost normal. So I've gained a lot back, but I expect to continue gaining.

That's amazing. I've been watching the progress on Facebook. I remember. Hearing from Kevin when this happened, and it's miraculous.

Todd Gladfelter: Yeah, I don't know, you talked about hiking the Appalachian Trail, hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide when we did that through from Canada to Mexico with our kids when they were 1 and 3 with llamas.

I mean, that was daunting and a lot of work. But man, and then building our house, the log house, from scratch, over four years. You know, I didn't even know how to mix a batch of cement. We did every job, electrical, plumbing. I mean, all those seem like [00:04:00] big things, but this, without a doubt, makes everything else easy.

The amount of work I put into this recovery is like more work than all those put together.

Donna Ferris: Which is just saying something. Do you think that that all of those achievements though gave you the grit to do what you've been doing?

Todd Gladfelter: Oh, without a doubt.

Yeah, you just take one day at a time and, and, you know, hike, hike to the next campsite, or when you're building a house you put one log up and it's like one log is nothing, but it's one log and the next day another log and same thing here, you know, most days you see nothing but in a week, you know, that finger now that didn't [00:05:00] move is moving a half an inch, which seems little but it's big.

Donna Ferris: It's really huge. And you know, the day by day of it, but also through those other experiences and also Cindy, what you've seen with veterans too, and their recovery, it gives you maybe the knowledge that it's possible.

Cindy Ross: Well, the problem with the veterans is so many go up and down and in and out.

I mean, we lost five to suicide in 10 years that we've been working with them. And one time I said to my one veteran friend, I said, geez, he was doing so well. And he goes, we're all doing well until we're not. So they slide backwards, go into, You know, the way they tried to mask their issues, whether it's alcohol or drugs, and then they've got to climb out of their [00:06:00] hole.

And so their recovery and their resilience isn't the same as this because. We don't have an addiction problem. So, and we don't have past trauma except for his accident. So a lot of the veterans have dealt with, you know, childhood trauma before they even went, went to war. So they've got tremendous amounts of stuff in their past.

They don't have the tremendous resources to draw from that. We do because up until he fell for 60, some years. We had a really healthy, good, happy life. And so, you know, we, it was the first time I, I lost my parents at a young, when they were young in their fifties.

And I guess that was trauma, but [00:07:00] we never had trauma at all until this, which is kind of unusual and certainly not the case for the veterans. I mean, they taught us that it's worth working hard. So many of them don't, don't have a lot of hope and it's hard for them to find it themselves.

They have so many challenges and most of the guys that we work with are, are, you know, they're in their 30s. So they went through Iraq and Afghanistan and, you know, they have their, their moral issue problems, not. You know, just that their bodies were blown up. You know, they've got that too.

Yeah. I mean, working with the veterans, of course, helps us do the work that we need to do just because we might see one veteran, and he went into rehab five different times and then, he came back and he keeps trying. So that's hopeful for [00:08:00] us because we have bad days and sometimes setbacks and things like that.

Donna Ferris: One thing that's interesting, though the work that you did with them with the trails being outside and in their case, I think it sounds like

Cindy Ross: Yes, absolutely. That's how we raised our kids. And that's why we started the nonprofit is because we knew how good nature is for you and how

much it helps you recover and be happy and peaceful and everything else. We, already knew that from raising our kids that way and ourselves.

And that's why we started the non profit. And we saw, of course, the good results, the positive things that happened when we took our vets out there. Todd and I were talking about that before he called, that our lifestyle and where we live and what we do with our time has, has given us the most strength to be resilient.

And that's what we share with the veterans. Most of them don't have [00:09:00] that in their lives. Like we have it all day long.

Donna Ferris: And what are some of those things?

Todd Gladfelter: Well, we live on 12 acres and half of it's in the woods and half of it's pasture, so we have deer and it's just a beautiful place to live.

And even when it's raining or snowing, we have a sunroom and we have our stationary bikes out there, so even if we can't go outside, we can at least go out there and exercise, and you see the snow falling. Now, I would rather be out there shoveling snow or plowing snow because I love that kind of stuff.

I just love the work. That's one of the hardest things with my disability is not being able to work. I do work on my body, but I [00:10:00] can't work Yeah. And that's hard, but just being able to see the beauty here. We drive out the driveway and there's a deer and two fawn in our orchard. And we don't have to go far...

Cindy Ross: I mean, the Blue Mountain and Hawk Mountain sanctuaries are right here, and we use those trails. We always used those trails, but we use them to help Todd recover because they have an amazing adaptable, accessible trail up there. And we have a wonderful bike trail. The Schuylkill river bike trail is 10 minutes from the house and we're on that all the time on Todd's adaptive trike.

You know, we have our lifestyle. I mean, we have a huge garden that we still, I mean, Todd and I were stripping basil and make pesto before you called. So all those components of our life help us. get more strength to keep working at [00:11:00] this.

Donna Ferris: Are those kind of tenants of a life that you would recommend?

This has given you a simpler life, and what are the benefits of that?

Todd Gladfelter: We started out like that. As soon as we got married, we started gardening and we've been doing it now for over 40 years. So we had it like, perfected basically until I got hurt. Now it's like got downscaled considerably.

Cindy Ross: Well, we were long-distance backpackers starting out, and we loved that lifestyle, which we couldn't maintain 12 months out of the year. We decided that we wanted to recreate a lifestyle that was as close to that as we could, which meant we had our freedom and our independence to conduct the day the way we wanted to, whether it was work for money or work around the house or work on the property.

And so we built a log home from scratch and [00:12:00] had no debt ever. We never had a mortgage. And so we were never tied to bills like that. And so that's why we lived a simple life to begin with is because we didn't want the bank telling us we had to go to work doing a job we didn't love or whatever.

So we set ourselves up for this simple living. Because besides the fact that we loved it, we just never wanted to go in debt and be shackled to that. We wanted to have our freedom, which is what we, we found when we started long-distance hiking when we were really young.

Donna Ferris: And how did you decide that? I mean, that is the road less taken for sure these days. And I admire it incredibly.

Cindy Ross: Every person who likes the Appalachian Trail comes off the trail feeling like that and wanting to change their life.

Donna Ferris: Oh, wow.

Todd Gladfelter: Well, back in the 80s, there was a back-to-the-land movement, and there was the Nearing's, Helen and Scott Nearing. So we read a [00:13:00] lot about them and, and saw how they lived and modeled our lives after they mean, we've been self-employed most of our lives. I had a family. A few full-time jobs actually when we were building the house, I was working night shift full time and I would work during the day on the house and I used to say I went to work at night to rest because it was a lot, you know.

Cindy Ross: I haven't had a full-time job since I was 21. That was my last full-time job, working in an iron ore mine with 800 men a mile down under the ground.

Donna Ferris: Was that why it was your last job?

Cindy Ross: No. I went to art school then, and it was like, all right, I want to paint, and then I decided to be a writer.

So I went to work in an iron ore mine to raise money to go to art school. My parents didn't want me to be a professional artist; they wanted me to be an art teacher, so that's what I had to do.

Donna Ferris: So [00:14:00] you've done what you want to do and it's turned out pretty well. I think that's pretty impressive.

Cindy Ross: Unless you're really born into a lifestyle that is incredible poverty or whatever, everybody has choices that they can make in their lives and the freedom to do that. And we think we picked really good choices, and we know a lot of people that wish they would have picked different choices.

You know, a lot of people don't accept the responsibility that their lives are up to them and that they can switch it up anytime they want to, no matter how old they are.

Donna Ferris: That's right. There's that great Fitzgerald quote that he basically says, if you don't like the way it is today, I hope you have the courage to change it. He says it much more eloquently, and it's a very long paragraph. It's basically what he says. That's well, well said. So it really, it's almost all that you've experienced to the day of your accident almost prepared you [00:15:00] for how you would overcome it. Does that resonate?

Todd Gladfelter: I don't know. All I can say is that I feel like we were living life to the fullest. A lot of people used to say, oh, I wish we could live like that because we'd travel. All the time during the year and to me, when I got up and I could go work, whether it was in the garden or I was a chainsaw carving artist.

Eight years before my accident, that was my full-time job, and I couldn't wait. When I woke up in the morning, I was like, "Get the clothes on, get out there, and start the saws up." Because every day was like Saturday. I just wanted to work and do my art.

And so yeah, I was in love with getting up and working around the homestead, doing my work, and that's when the accident happened. I'm [00:16:00] glad I didn't wait until I retired to do the things that. Most people wait until they retire to do, because now that we've been in rehab, we see people way younger, little kids, but people in their twenties.

Or in worse shape. And it's like, man, at least I had 60 years of doing what I wanted to do.

Donna Ferris: That's incredible. Well, it feels like you did a lot of things that, that most people don't do, so you, you had a lot of experiences. And it sounds like you are getting back to your art at least that's what I saw.

Todd Gladfelter: Yeah, it's just so much slower. What used to take me half an hour takes me eight hours.

Cindy Ross: Well, that's a little exaggerated.

Todd Gladfelter: It's just part of part of it, but

Cindy Ross: Well, I used to have all day to do my work and now I'm lucky I get about an [00:17:00] hour a day and I have to decide, do I want to go for a walk out in nature? Or do I want to write a paragraph or a magazine story? And I mean, I just don't have any time at all anymore.

He's got all kinds of time. I can do it, but can't find the time to do it. We both have different frustrations.

Donna Ferris: Somewhere in the middle is the place.

Cindy Ross: It's better than it was two years ago. Two years ago, it was unbelievably hard.

Your first year of a spinal cord injury, trying to figure out a new life. I mean, he still hasn't accepted his injury. You know, he hasn't turned the page and, you know, we're moving forward. We're going to be doing a big bike trip next year to raise awareness for the need for accessible nature for the disabled; we're riding our bikes across the country and [00:18:00] bring in some veterans doing a whole media thing.

It's called the Great American Rail Trail. So, we're gearing up for that and bought a little tiny 12-foot RV to hold his trike in because he rides a recumbent

trike. So it isn't like we're not, you know, going forward. We start new things, but it's just not at the level we're used to. I know as a cross-country trip sounds like a big level.

Donna Ferris: Well, it sounds like a wonderful project.

What was it called again?

Cindy Ross: The trail is called the Great American Rail Trail; when it is completed, it'll be 3700 miles. It goes from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State to DC, and 2000 miles have been built already. So we will be starting in early May next spring, and we will do the Great Allegheny Passage in the C& O Canal, which goes from Pittsburgh to D.C., and then we'll [00:19:00] do Ohio, and then we'll go out and do the Midwest. So we're going to make our way across the country starting in early May next year.

Donna Ferris: And there's a book in that.

Cindy Ross: Well, that'll be the last chapter of the book about recovery. Because the book is going to be called The Road to Recovery, so this is, this is the actual road.

Donna Ferris: You have a memoir, and you've already finished out your ending. I love that so much.

Cindy Ross: When he gets to the end, the recovery will be over. That's it, honey. Next year, at the end of the fall, you'll be totally better. I get my life back and you get your life back. (laughter)

Donna Ferris: If you had to say three things that helped you get through this two and a half years, and you know, you guys are amazing in terms of just your demeanor, your upbeat, you're planning new things, [00:20:00] you're raising awareness, it's, it's really inspiring. What three things do you think got you here?

Todd Gladfelter: For me, number one, it's Cindy, because she keeps me up and she does everything, you know, 99 percent of the stuff around here now. But the other big things are, you know, since I got hurt in almost two and a three-quarter years, I've had, I don't know, 50 some therapists or something. But I can handpick maybe four or five therapists that I might have had for a week or a month or several months that really made a connection and propelled me forward.

You know, the majority [00:21:00] of the therapists have you for an hour. They're on their computers. They give you a task, and then they send you off. And you're like, man, I could have been at home and worked just as hard and got just as much out. But there are some unbelievable therapists. And when they connect with you, they can make leaps and bounds in your progress.

Cindy Ross: He's getting released from Good Shepherd Rehab in two weeks, and we're going on to Alvernia University in Reading because his favorite physical therapist left to become a professor there. So he started a program where we're going to be going in twice a week to help the doctorate students learn how to be physical therapists.

So they're going to practice on Todd.

Donna Ferris: Oh, wow.

Cindy Ross: That'll be neat. But besides that, it's the community that we built in our lives. Because I have so many people that come in [00:22:00] to help us. I mean, probably Donna, in every day, there's at least two, sometimes four different people that, like today, our friend Dennis was here, and he helped start Todd's chainsaws to sell some of his biggest saws.

He blocked out some really big chunks of wood so he could start carving. After we hang up with you, we're going up to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, where our good friend takes him. He's got this idea. Todd's been to South Lookout. But he wants to get them to North Lookout, which is over tremendous rocks, and it's three-quarters of a mile one way, but he's picking his way across.

He works with Todd every week. And then this evening, we're going down to Leeser Lake County Park, and this organization called Team River Runners have an adaptive kayak day where they usually work with veterans, but they are inviting spinal cord injury people to come along. No matter what your level of injury, they're going to get you in a boat.

[00:23:00] So every day is like that. We have people coming to help us and do things and help us in our lives. And I mean, there are quite a few veterans that have come back to help us. Now we have a ranger who comes every week. And I reimburse him, but he's here for 6 hours every week to work with Todd, and so the community that we built and the friends that we have.

So many of them, Donna, look at their lives, and they think, well, if my life, as I know, it was taken from me like that, I would want someone to help me recover

too. So, you know, we just had a lot of people in our lives that we cared about. And so they're coming back. And, you know, I have a couple of girlfriends that said, you know, my husband hasn't been that nice to me for the last 40 years.

If this happens to him, he's gone in a nursing home. So, you know, I tell my friends. Put your money in the bank and develop your relationships, [00:24:00] care about other people and be there for other people because we're all going to need, you know, a hand up sometimes in our lives. And if you never lifted someone else up, there's not going to be hardly anybody there for you.

So it's a lesson in how you conduct your lives because we didn't spend 65 years thinking about that. Oh, I'm going to be nice and care about our friends because we might need them someday, but that's how it works. Anyway, you know, you're there for people, they're there for you. So we should be living like that anyway.

But, you know, my husband was a very quiet, introverted person who didn't consider himself very social. And he just loves it when people are here, whether they're here to help or they bring a meal or they're just stopping in. It really helps him with his attitude about keeping at it. So, people are really important in your life, and it's important to nurture those relationships [00:25:00].

I would lose my mind if I had to do it. Everything physically and mentally to keep him up. But, you know, friends come in. It's like, you know, he's yours for an hour. Now you guys do your thing, and I can hang up the wash or whatever.

Donna Ferris: And that's a good point. I mean, I think there are a lot of people who listen and are caregivers. What's the self-care that you're giving yourself? I mean, you're finding time for yourself, but it's like an hour that you get, maybe.

Cindy Ross: We live outside. I like to go for a walk every day because I like the whole action of moving that helps me and calms me down and makes me happy.

Sometimes I don't get out till 10 o'clock and I'll go down our dirt driveway and stay on dirt roads at night. It's fine. But. I have to go for a walk every day. I'm writing more now. And I started painting again. I went to school to be a landscape painter at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and I started to paint again.

And that's really brought me a lot of [00:26:00] joy too. So, as he gets better and better, I have more and more time to take care of myself. I like to cook, so stuff

like that isn't a chore, and he has to do the dishes every night. Now he can do that; the more he recovers, the more I have to do what I want to do.

Donna Ferris: I love that.

Cindy Ross: It really helps me.

It's kind of a self thing. We always said that about backpacking, though too. We take our kids out across the Rocky Mountains for 3000 miles because we want to go backpacking. We're not just trying to open up our kids' minds to the whole big natural world. Part of it was selfish too...

Donna Ferris: But you modeled it too. What did your kids end up doing?

Cindy Ross: Well, Bryce is an illustrator. He's an artist. And Sierra she's a geographer and an anthropologist. She has a little 1 year old now, who we're just in love with. So both of them actually live in cities now, but Sierra's moving to the [00:27:00] Massanutten Mountains in the Shenandoah and Bryce lives in Philadelphia, but they do really both enjoy hiking and biking and stuff like that still.

Donna Ferris: They took what worked for them.

Cindy Ross: And who knows what's ahead? Yeah. They got all the values, right?,

Donna Ferris: Yeah. There you go. a lot of folks can't say that. So as we start to tie up, what did I miss? What should I have asked?

Or what would you like to share before we close

Cindy Ross: One thing that Todd and I were talking about was how people could look at their lives and help them design them to deliver a simpler, closer nature lifestyle. And we really said that people might have to change their relationship to money. Money and acquiring things can't be up high in and what you think you need, because that just requires you to work harder at a job that you might not like at all.

And [00:28:00] then you spend more of your time doing that than you do, watching sunsets and going for a paddle or things like that. So, Todd and I never, never strove to make a lot of money. We just wanted enough so that we could live the way we wanted to not be in debt. And I mean, when we traveled

with the kids and I've been to 65 countries as a travel writer and they, they went to 24 before they even went to college, we could go to another country for a month and only spend a thousand or two thousand.

We even found a campground in downtown Rome. So we always traveled really simply whether we hiked or biked across Spain, on the Camino or whatever. So we didn't need a lot. You know, people used to say, like Todd said, you know, boy, I wish I could afford that. It's like we live really simple. Any money that we make, it goes to travel.

And you know, we don't go out to dinner. People we can spend a lot of money living like that. We, [00:29:00] I don't want to go out to eat cause we have all this wonderful, organic tasty food in the garden. So I think that helps with your resiliency. Not having to spend all that time and energy trying to figure out how you're going to make more money so that you can have more things which you think are going to make you happy, which really, in the end, don't.

So I think if we had any advice, maybe redesign your relationship with money and what really is important to you. We learned that right from the get-go as long-distance hikers. I was 24, and Todd was 19 when we hiked the Appalachian Trail. So if we had any doubts, if money was important to us, that trail made us change our minds.

That's not what buys you happiness. Or time. I mean, it's a time stealer trying to make a lot of money.

Donna Ferris: So Todd, did you want to share anything before we close?

Todd Gladfelter: No, I [00:30:00] think that's pretty much our lives in a nutshell. I mean, we never had a television. So, I mean, we're really creative people. So our kids are raised without one. So, yeah, we just are always outside. I mean, it isn't like we're working or it isn't like we're playing. They all mold together sometimes. And, you know, our work is kind of like our play, too.

Cindy Ross: I guess that's an important thing, especially for young people that might be listening to try to design their lives and figuring out a way to make a living doing what they love to do. And then it never feels like work too.

Donna Ferris: I just love the idea of working and playing and that it never feels like either, it is what you need to do to.

Cindy Ross: It's life. [00:31:00]

Donna Ferris: It's your life. It's amazing. Well, I thank you so much for the inspiration and for the time today.

This has been a wonderful conversation, at least for me.

Cindy Ross: We enjoyed ourselves.

Donna Ferris: Well, thank you so, so much. It's been a joy.

Cindy Ross: Thank you, Donna. Thanks.

Donna Ferris: That's all for today. If you want to learn more about Cindy and Todd, those links will be in the show notes. Thank you so much for listening. I hope this episode was helpful. If it was, please subscribe, drop a review, or share it with your friends and family.

That's the best way to get it into the hands of those who may benefit. And if my daughters Sienna and Sylvie are listening, I want you to know how proud I am of you. And I love you so much.

Bye now.