

# SUCCESS

What *Achievers* Read

## Your Personal Best: Montel Williams

The Power of Choice

Roger Brooks June 29, 2009



Courtesy of Montel Williams

**At 3 a.m., most people, even most highly successful people, are deep in sleep, resting for the next challenging day. Not Montel Williams. The Daytime Emmy-winning talk show host stays awake and alert late into the night, averaging only four hours of sleep. For him, maximizing every hour of every day is a necessity. He oversees**

**five businesses, a charitable foundation and a new syndicated radio talk show, with plans for new ventures in the works. All of this while battling multiple sclerosis, a disease that keeps him in almost constant pain.**

Williams admits he keeps busy to distract himself from health issues, but says the rush he gets from multitasking is what drives him. “I hate to say it like this, but I’m like a crack addict with [my companies],” he says. “I’m an information junkie.” Williams’ new radio show, *Montel Across America*, debuted on Air America Media in April. Stations have been adding his show ever since, helping thrust Williams back into the American consciousness, a fact that is essential to the viability of his other ventures.

The majority of Williams’ business interests grew out of his string of *New York Times* best-selling motivational books aimed at helping people live life to the fullest. His “Living Well” empire now includes a food processor and a pain relief product, and will soon include self-help tutorials and a members-only organization designed to help others live healthy, active, successful lives. He also recently launched a series of one-day symposiums, led by Williams and select speakers, designed to bring his books and Web site to life. “This isn’t just for people who are ill,” Williams says, referring to his fight with MS. “This message is for everyone. We’re the only animals with the gift of choice. Animals react on instincts, but we make decisions based on evaluation.

You have a choice; you can give up or do something to better yourself. I'm not special; anyone can do this."

Williams may not think of himself as special, but the one-time Marine and Navy officer has overcome more than his share of adversity on his way to a successful media career. In 1998, a congenital birth defect stopped his heart for several minutes before doctors could revive him. He was diagnosed with MS in 1999 but kept it hidden for several months, fearing it would negatively affect his career. Then, in the winter of 2008, CBS TV unexpectedly canceled his talk show after Williams made comments critical of the media's coverage of the Iraq war while appearing on *Fox & Friends*.

The abrupt end to his 17-year, Emmy-winning show was a difficult blow, but one Williams was able to deal with, thanks to his outlook on life and his battle with a debilitating disease. "Life is dynamic, not static," he says. "You rise one day and fall the next."

For Williams, the end of the program's run paled in comparison to battling multiple sclerosis. "It's been a roller coaster with MS. I've had bad days that made me want to take my life. Initially, I looked at this as the final nail in my coffin.... I questioned my values and asked *why me*, just like everyone does."

But every time he was discouraged, Williams kept going back to the first rule he lives by for guidance. "I alone define who I am. I own that definition. The doctor defined me as someone who would be in a wheelchair in three years, but I've not been in one yet. Maybe that doctor isn't as smart as he thinks he is."

More than anything, Williams credits the tenets of his Living Well value system for his success in dealing with MS. He pored over medical journals, learning everything he could about the disease and any new treatments available. A fire began to grow inside Williams, who says his 22-year military career taught him to always "take the hill and never retreat."

Despite almost constant neurological pain in his legs and feet, he eschews heavy painkillers, preferring to use positive thinking to cope. His decade-long fight has been an evolving collaboration of exercise, determination and mental toughness.

“Melding my symptoms into my daily life—I’ve had to regain the energy and stamina to work and be productive— was difficult, but I have MS; MS does not have me,” he says. “The second I saw that, I found ways to mitigate the emotional and physical symptoms.” Each of the obstacles he’s faced has led Williams to this moment. The cancellation of his television show led to his national radio program. His battle with MS gave him the desire to help others make the most of themselves and become productive members of society. “The Living Well method is about paying attention to the impediments in your life,” he says. “If you can meet your own needs and contribute to society, that’s what Living Well is. I want to give everyone the tools to succeed personally, financially and physically.”

Williams’ captivated followers have bought his books by the thousands. Many are searching for financial freedom, others are looking for happiness, and some see him as an inspiration in a fight against a disease that has no cure. “Whether you’re a television celebrity or a garbage man, we all relate to things the same way. People can relate to the obstacles I’ve faced. I’ve had people call or write to me to say I gave a voice to something they could not articulate. If you can help someone with the gift you’ve been given, you’re obligated to help that person. If you don’t help, I think you end up losing that gift.”

People follow the Living Well creed for a variety of reasons, but Williams says everyone is searching to satisfy the same fundamental need, whether they know it or not—happiness. “Happiness is elusive,” he says fervently. “Since the dawn of man, people have searched for it; it’s truly the Holy Grail.” So just what defines happiness? “It’s the drive to be successful even when you’re knocked off course. It’s building and nurturing strong relationships. If that’s what happiness is to you, those things are achievable.

There are simple exercises you can do that will have you looking forward to walking out your front door.”

The program certainly works for Williams, who attacks life with a ferocity few can match, but even he warns fans that not every day will be perfect. But he never lets the pain in his legs detract from his long term goals and dreams. “If I can wake up and say I accomplished something yesterday, that’s a good feeling,” he says. “I’m not special—it’s a conscious decision to ignore my pain and focus on the rest. We all have the power to do that.”

His sights always set on the future, Williams expects to grow the marketing and product segments of his Living Well franchise in the coming months and years. Banks once hesitant to invest such relatively “small” amounts (think several million dollars) into his business are now calling, he says, looking for less capital-heavy opportunities. Even Williams himself can’t say where it will all lead. “If I want to do 10 companies, I’ll do 10; stop me!”

In addition to new efforts for his MS foundation, Williams, who estimates spending nearly \$3,000 a month on medication to treat his MS, is increasingly focusing on his growing partnership with insurance companies to offer medications at a reduced cost for uninsured or underinsured citizens. He knows the challenges they face and, while programs like his go a long way toward easing their financial burden, Williams can’t resist encouraging them to take matters into their own hands. “Adversity is a trampoline, an opportunity to springboard toward success.”