

# Redefining Failure

## An Interview with Mitzi Perdue

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Mitzi Perdue holds degrees from Harvard University and George Washington University. She is a past President of the 35,000-member American Agri-Women and was one of the U.S. Delegates to the United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi. She's authored How To Make Your Family Business Last, and How To Communicate Values To Your Children – So They'll Love It. Perdue is the author of The I Want to EggScape Book, A Quick Guide To Successful Media Appearances, a biography of her husband, Frank Perdue, and six cookbooks, including The Farmers' Cookbook series and The Perdue Chicken Cookbook. She was a syndicated columnist for 22 years, first with Capitol News in California and then nationally with Scripps Howard.*



Mitzi Perdue

### Will you discuss your life journey?

I love being 84, and if anyone reading this worries about getting older, I'm here to share that it can be a really great gig. I wouldn't trade being my current age for being any other age, and I'll get to why as you read on. But first, what went before these 84 years?

My background before that is I'm the daughter of the Co-founder and President of the Sheraton Hotel chain, Ernest Henderson, and I'm the widow of chicken magnate, Frank Perdue. However, like many if not most women, I didn't want my identity to be completely defined by the men in my life. I wanted a career of my own and gave up 95 percent of my inheritance.

I had dreamed of being a writer from my earliest childhood, and in fact, I began keeping a diary at age 11. I kept the diary with the hope that the sheer act of writing and observing would help me develop fluency in writing. My dream did come true. By profession, I'm a journalist, and in the last three years, a war correspondent. I've had almost 300 published stories written from and about Ukraine. A fair percentage of these stories were based on interviews in bomb shelters in cities during active attacks. Quick comment on age: I'm living proof that a person doesn't have to lose their taste for adventure even as an octogenarian.

I also do public speaking, and in my career, I've had a syndicated TV show, a

syndicated radio show, and in the 1990s and part of the early 2000s, my weekly Scripps Howard column, *The Environment and You*, was the most widely syndicated environmental column in the country. Since what you're reading is written with the hope of being useful to you, I'd like to share with you some of what made those career successes possible. My big tip is: Redefine failure. The only real failure is not to try. I came up with that tip because of my own experience. I didn't start achieving any kind of writing

or public speaking success until almost my forties. Things changed for me in a single day. It came about because of a close friend with an IQ of more than 200. We'll call him Peter. Peter wanted to use all the knowledge and wisdom that he had acquired because of his phenomenal IQ, and he wanted to do this by writing a great book. He even had a title for it: *Life, an Owner's Manual*. By age 68, he had spent a lifetime collecting information and wisdom in preparation for writing his book. However, he hadn't started writing it. One day, I realized he never would

write his book. The reason, as I analyzed it, was that he was afraid the great book might not be a success. He continually planned to write his great book but never began, held back by fear of failure. He went to his grave 30 years later without writing the book.

Peter had done the one thing that guaranteed failure; he didn't put himself out there and try. On the day I realized that Peter wasn't going to write his book, I also realized that even though I had always wanted to write, I hadn't been submitting articles, and deep down, like Peter, I was immobilized by fear of failure. That day, I decided to redefine failure. For me, a rejection slip would be a badge of honor: it would be proof that I had put myself out on a limb and dared to try. Within days, I began submitting articles to magazines and newspapers, and within a year, after an abundance of either rejections or no answers, I not only got a newspaper column, I got syndicated. That's been the story of my life ever since. I fail continuously, but as I view it, each failure puts me further along the road to success; in the act of trying and giving it my all, I've honed skills, made contacts, taken classes, studied books, attended conferences, all



Knollwood Estate (above and opposite page)





in the service of getting better at my craft. Redefining failure has been a pay-off deal for me. It's meant a syndicated newspaper column with Scripps Howard, a syndicated radio show on the Coast to Coast Radio Network, and a syndicated TV show sponsored by DuPont.

I've mentioned how I had always wanted to be a writer, but in fact, I had also yearned to be a speaker. The problem was, I had a genuine phobia of public speaking, a phobia just as strong as a phobia of snakes or spiders. Oh, and up until almost my 40s, I was so shy that it was painfully difficult for me to enter a room of strangers. How did I change from being shy to someone who enjoys few things more than being on camera or on stage? Someone who lives for the pleasure of sharing things that I hope are useful to others? Here's what happened. I didn't want to have a phobia of speaking, and when one day a woman from the Business and Professional Women's Clubs called (it was a cold call), asking if I'd like to take their public speaking and self-confidence course, I signed up. That was the beginning of probably a dozen public speaking courses and reading many dozens of books on public speaking. These paid off: I ended up with a syndicated TV show and a radio show. It wasn't that I had all that much talent, but I did have a grounding in the basics – and most of all, I was ready to

put myself out there in auditions. Further, the speaking courses gave me the self-confidence to get past my shyness. Getting turned down still has a sting, but honestly, my attitude isn't too far from Babe Ruth's when he said, "Every strike brings me closer to the next home run."

My career up until my early 80s has been in communications. Now I'm taking a different tack, and for me, it makes life even more fulfilling. As a war correspondent in Ukraine, I became increasingly aware of the mental toll the war is taking on Ukrainians. By some calculations, more than 90 percent of Ukrainians have conditions that would benefit from mental health support, including anxiety, depression, insomnia, or panic attacks. Unfortunately, there's a staggering gap between the need for mental health professionals and the actual number of them. I wondered if a ChatGPT-type app, specifically tuned to Ukrainian mental health practices and trained by Ukrainian mental health professionals, could help bridge this gap. I mentioned the idea to General David Petraeus and he encouraged me on the idea. Today, the nonprofit, Mental Help Global (MHG), is the result. We're still piloting it in Ukraine, but individuals who want counseling will be able to access it on their smart phones, free and 24/7. We're working closely with the Ukrainian government and half a dozen

universities are advising us or partnering with us, including Harvard's Program in Refugee Trauma. We haven't publicized it yet, but through word of mouth, there's now a waiting list of 37,000. I've observed some of the interactions and my personal impression is that while the app doesn't cure anyone, it makes their burdens significantly easier to bear. I've seen Mental Help Global change people's lives.

The other thing that occupies my time at this age is that my family has entrusted me with selling the family home, Knollwood. It's a once-in-a-generation estate, 19,000 square feet, 13 bedrooms, and a ballroom that seats 120. In the early 1900s, it served as the Summer White House of President Taft, and Mark Twain used to give readings there. I mentioned earlier that I'd have more to say about why I wouldn't change being 84 for any age I've been before. The reason is, I feel that with age, I have more knowledge, skills, contacts, and patience, and I'm better able to bring these to bear on carrying out my life purpose: to increase happiness and decrease misery.

I can't know that Mental Help Global will live up to its promise, and in fact it feels incredibly presumptuous to try, but since I'm the one who preaches, "Redefine failure: real failure is not trying," I'm all in. I'm loving working on it and loving life. ●