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Interview with:
Eileen T.O’Grady RN, NP, PhD
Certified Nurse Practitioner and Wellness Coach
And
Sheri Denkensohn-Trott
Co-Founder, Happy on Wheels

[O’Grady]: Hey everybody! Dr. Eileen O’Grady here— thanks for joining us. Welcome to the podcast “On Wellness.” This series I developed explores the different ways people live well and practice extreme self-care in their own lives. For more information you can visit my website at www.eileenogrady.net or like my page on Facebook. Once again thanks for tuning in and now we can get into the interview.

In May of 2017, I met with Sheri Denkensohn-Trott in her apartment in Arlington, Virginia. I met her through her sister Debra, who is a fellow yoga student with me. Sheri has been a quadriplegic for 33 years since she sustained a spinal cord injury after a diving accident when she was sixteen. Prior to that she was extremely athletic, and a lifeguard, and a swimmer. After her injury she went through two years of rehabilitation far away from her family in rural upstate New York. She returned to that hometown and graduated high school in the top of her class, went to college, and then law school. She practiced as an attorney for twenty-five years and lives in a beautiful light-filled apartment, with a huge balcony, with her husband of 11 years—who is also in a wheelchair. She is a breast cancer survivor, she has had health issues, and surgeries with complications that were so serious she nearly died 8 years ago. She left the hospital with a trach, never thought she would work again and did for seven more years. She and her husband founded Happy On Wheels, an organization to help others who use wheelchairs overcome challenges and develop mindsets to be “*happy on wheels.*” Sheri has a lot of wisdom, especially on resilience and mindset. She is smart and passionate. Please enjoy my interview with Sheri Denkensohn-Trott.

[O’Grady]: I am excited to talk to you today Sheri.

[Denkensohn-Trott]: Great!

[O’Grady]: I am wondering if we can start with my first question, which is how was health expressed in your family? Who were your role models? How did all of that work when you were a child?

[Denkensohn-Trott]: Well it is interesting, I grew up in a very rural area of upstate New York and my mom had me when she was 43 years old which at the time is pretty rare. But she was very much health food orientated. Which I guess, health food today is different than it was then. Where we lived there was a lot of farms so you could buy fresh fruits and vegetables. My mother went to a food co-op before they were even popular. She was very into vitamins and she was really my model for eating healthy. She made very healthy meals, and mostly made them in the house. We didn’t eat out a lot. So I sort

of grew up with a healthy mindset. Not a lot of sugary things. She baked her own bread; she baked her own baked goods, and really cooked from scratch. So that's sort of my entrée to health. My parents didn't exercise on a regular basis. But they were very physically active. So that is where I got my entrée to healthy food.

[O'Grady]: Right, so it sounds really wholesome, it was just around you all the time. It wasn't like you had to make any choice. It was just there.

[Denkensohn-Trott]: Right, and literally you could go to the next-door corn field and pick your piece of corn that you wanted to have for dinner in the summer. So the fact of having—its interesting now, living in the city and going to a farmers market, to me you'd go down the street where I lived and there was someone who had a farm who had a stand and they were selling fresh stuff. So it was available everywhere.

[O'Grady]: And easy, yes. I am interested in your mindset Sheri, and can you tell us about what happened and how you got to this point. Because I am interested in this notion of, when you have this accident and when you woke up, I've heard in other interviews that you didn't even know what quadriplegia was. What was your process, your self-talk, through that?

[Denkensohn-Trott]: So it is true, I woke up. I had never met anyone in a wheelchair. I didn't know what quadriplegia was. I woke up in a hospital. Everything was very foreign. Quite frankly when they told me I was going to a rehab center, I'm not sure if it's the mind that does this deliberately to protect you or whether it was my mindset because I was an athlete. I thought I was going to health spa. It didn't really hit me that this could be permanent. I did go to a rehabilitation center. It was 2 ½ hours away from my house in Westchester. It was very hard for family to visit me. I was around people I didn't know and an environment I didn't know. And that was a very, very difficult time while I was there. I attribute the initial pushing of my mindset to become positive there. For a long time it was not positive. And there were outbursts of not wanting to continue my life, what was I going to do. In a way, I had to make friends with the people that were there, which were mostly men because that's what happens with spinal cord injuries. After that I came home. It was very strange to be back your old environment that's the same and you're different. And I knew I needed to go away from where I lived because it was so rural and I had to be so dependent to be dependent. And I think that is where my mindset started to change where I realized that I needed to push my self forward to achieve a goal. Many people said, "Oh getting injured at sixteen what a tragedy." Ironically I hadn't formed a career yet. So I didn't have some of the obstacles that many people who were injured who couldn't go back to the career they had—that's a whole different story—but I knew I wanted to go away and I knew I wanted to go to college. And as that progressed I realized quite frankly that it took way too much energy to be negative than it took to be positive. Now don't let me lie and say that I woke up every day and was Ms. Super Happy Person. But, each day became a day of wanting to just move forward. And I think that it's unconsciously or consciously I just was not of the mindset that I was going to be negative every day. I do believe that your underlying personality is the same. But when something, whether that it is the injury hat I had or something tragic happens to you or in

your life, that many times your underlying personality becomes emphasized. That's what I've witnessed. So if you're a negative person to begin with, you become even more negative. And if you're a generally positive person to begin with you really draw on that and try to be positive. And I've found that it brings positive people into your life. You feel better when you're positive. Negativity just drags you down.