

Jennifer Gilbert

LEFT FOR DEAD AFTER A BRUTAL ATTACK, EVENT PLANNER EXTRAORDINAIRE, "REAL HOUSEWIVES OF NEW YORK" ALUMNA AND MOTHER OF THREE, JENNIFER GILBERT IS NOT ONLY A SURVIVOR, SHE'S A THRIVER

By Susannah Pask



On May 30th 1991, something happened to the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Jennifer Gilbert in New York while visiting a friend, that would change her life forever. She thought she had the world by the tail and would take New York by storm. Fresh out of college and planning a career in the Big Apple, she mistakenly got off at the wrong stop on the New York subway and had to walk the rest of the way. Unbeknownst to her, a stranger had followed her five blocks to her friend's apartment building and down the hall.

He attacked her, stabbed her over 37 times with a screwdriver and left her for dead.

Ever resilient, Jennifer fought back. She punched, kicked, and blocked; she screamed and somehow survived. The police later told her that only 5% of women who are attacked fight back – and that she probably saved her own life.

"It's the day that cemented everything as a 'before' or 'after'. I saw my existence as before my attack or after it. I grew up very fast that day, the day I lost my joy, and realized that life wasn't always fair or happy and 'why me?' is a futile question to ask" says Jennifer of her ordeal. "Even after the physical attack was over, I still needed all my mental strength for the months and years to come. I had to do police lineups and answer the District Attorney's question. My story was plastered across the papers and on the television news stations showing the composite picture I had helped to create. There was a grand jury hearing, and years later I sat face to face with my attacker at the trial where my testimony put him away for attempted murder."



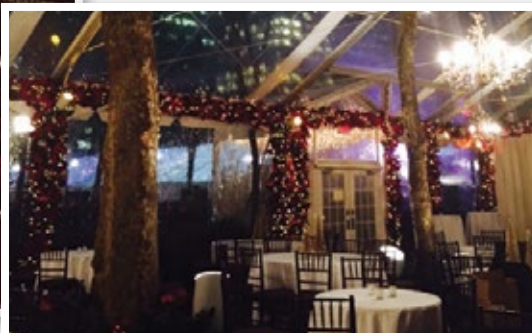
"I had learned the very valuable lesson in my young twenties that we are all mortal, and all we really ever have is today, and this one life, so make it count. I knew I had to spend the rest of my life in pursuit of happy moments and people celebrating, even if I wasn't sure if I'd ever have my own again. So, I became a party planner."

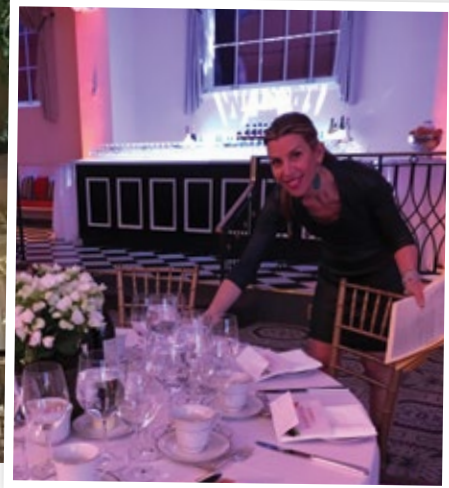
She managed to get through her own sadness and depression by making other people happy. Event planning helped her get her own life back together again; by planning happy parties for others, she managed to get through years of self-healing.

"People always ask me if I think I would have turned out this way if this had never happened to me. It's an impossible question to answer, as it's part of the fiber of my life, as inseparable to me as my own skin, now, these 25 years later. Would I have become a party planner if not for my attack? I'm sure not, but 'after', I was

on a mission, and would have probably mastered any career choice. I was going to prove I deserved my survival, at least publicly. At the ripe age of 25 I started my own event planning company, Save The Date®, completely sure I was going to succeed. I took on my new business with the same force and strong will as I did my own survival, never looking back. After the unimaginable happens to you, you sort of have a tricky relationship with fear, either it owns you, or you just don't believe in its power any longer. Privately though, I suffered. I had years of denial, posttraumatic stress, eating issues, exercise issues, control issues, and lived this totally dichotomous life."

"The first ten years or so afterwards, I measured my life by work accomplishments. I won awards, grew my sales by millions of dollars each year, rolled out my company to different cities, spoke to groups of future entrepreneurs talking about passion and perseverance and went to M.I.T for an





entrepreneurial MBA. At first glance, I even seemed to have a balanced personal life.... I appeared to be normal. I buried that attack so deep down that I nearly forgot it happened, unless I got a glimpse of the scars... and even those faded within 10 years. Years passed and I never told anyone what happened to me on that day in May. It was my secret and I never wanted to be defined by 'victim', even though I perpetually felt shame about the attack, like there was an invisible V on my forehead. Every day in the mirror I saw my own personal bumper sticker — I Am Here God Damn It — And it wasn't enough to just survive, I was going to thrive! So, I fought for my worthiness, every single day..."

Her event-planning company, *Save The Date*© has been extraordinarily successful; she's organized parties and corporate events for the likes of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Barbara Walters, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Goldman Sachs and many other prestigious corporations. She also appeared on *Real Housewives of New York* in 2010 when she was hired to put together a skating party for former housewife, Jill Zarin during Season 3. "She was amazing and everything I heard about her was true," Jill blogged on Bravotv.com at the time, singing the successful businesswoman's praises.

But Jennifer, a mom of three who's also the co-owner of baby-carrier company Portamee, found she ultimately wasn't a good match for the drama that season, which saw Jill and Bethenny Frankel—who's returning to *RHONY* in an epic feud that forced all the *Housewives* to choose sides. After telling *Entertainment Weekly* that she was "really normal," Jennifer admitted to the *Huffington Post* as her season wound down that "I'm probably not the right fit."

In 2012, HarperCollins published her book *I Never Promised You a Goodie Bag*. In it, she revealed the shocking secret of her attack, detailing how she'd managed to rebuild her life and career despite all she'd been through.

"I now take my own advice about happiness, it is up to me to own my life and move forward. I re-prioritized my work life and put my kids above it all. I am happy. I live way more simply now and enjoy being alone in ways I couldn't understand before. I have true friends and relationships and never get involved in things not meant for me. I love the motto "less stuff, more happiness." I have forgiven myself for the mistakes I have made. I have finally forgiven myself...." ■

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