Accumulating wisdom: from teen Olympian to gay pioneer to new discoveries at 67

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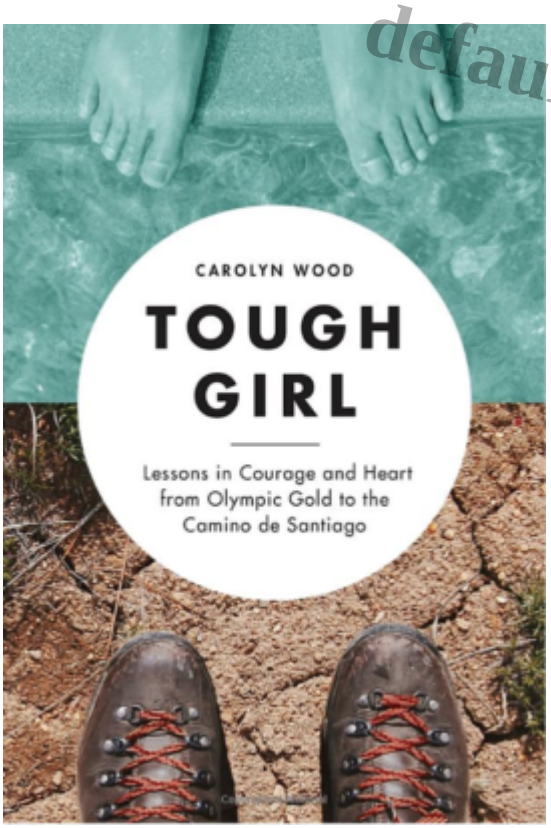

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From reaching for gold at the Olympics at age 14, and coming out as gay in Portland, Ore., from letting go of a 30-year marriage to walking 500 miles along Spainâ??s Camino de Santiago, Carolyn Wood has accumulated some wisdom.

Carolyn Wood (Photo by Robert Graves)

That was in evidence Tuesday, Aug. 28, at the Institute on Aging, when Wood read to an audience of about 45 from her newly published book, â??Tough Girl: Lessons in Courage and Heart from Olympic Gold to the Camino de Santiago.

Wood, 72, recalled her first trepid steps at swimming to turning herself into a 14-year-old Olympic gold winner. â??I was struggling until my mom went into the hospital for major surgery, â??said Wood. â??She told me that she might not always be there to help me, and I needed to learn to swim to be safe.â?•

Realizing the need to â??grow up,â?• Wood persevered with her swimming and found out something amazing in the process: â??Once I learned to swim, I realized I was a speedster,â?• she said. â??I had great coaches, involved parents and a supportive community at the Multomah Athletic Club where I trained. All that added up to help make me successful.â?•

The culmination of her success was supposed to be a gold medal in the butterfly competition at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. â??There were a lot of expectations on me,â?• Wood said. â??When I choked as the result of a wave, I did what I was taught to do: swim to the end of the pool.â?•

Swim to the end of the pool became one of Woodâ??s mantras in courage. â??What this meant to me was always try your hardest, complete your goals, while maintaining your dignity.â?•

A lesson in defeat

Wood had to recover quickly from the butterfly loss since she needed to swim the freestyle relay with three of her teammates. They won gold, and Wood found a new way to look at her earlier loss. â??I

focused on the positive benefits of working together, thinking â??all life is a relay and weâ??re all on the same team.â??â?•

Carolyn Wood in the 1960 Olympics.

Not wanting to train for another Olympics, Wood set her mind on college with literature as her major. â??Throughout school, literature was as important as swimming,â?• Wood said. She loved reading great literature more than once because she relished how story meanings changed depending on her lifeâ??s circumstances. â??I enjoyed teaching high school English because I loved to watch the students grow and develop over the course of the year.â?•

In her mid-30s, Wood met a woman who was to become her partner for the next 30 years. â??I got married to a man in my 20s because I wanted to be â??normalâ?? and have a child. As compatible as we were, it wasnâ??t right of me to be in this relationship because I knew I was gay,â?• Wood said. â??After our divorce, because gay women at that time were not considered to be good mothers, I lost custody of my son. I was devastated.â?•

After adjusting to having a certain amount of visitation with her son, Wood focused on embracing her gay life. â??For the first time, I felt whole. I had a place, a community,â?• Wood said.

Writing to reclaim a life

When Wood found Rose, she thought she had a partner for life, but in 2010, after 36 years, Rose wanted more space to pursue life as a full-time artist. â??This is when I felt I needed to write to reclaim something of myself, to feel strong, to put my life in perspective,â?• she said.

The book was a process that evolved over a period of four years. She self-published the first edition in 2016. Sasquatch Books bought it and the expanded second edition with more material and photos was published in 2018.

Wood got more out of writing the book than she initially thought.

â??I made incredible connections with my students (in their 30s to 60s), my teammates and my classmates. Most of all, I felt an integration of what my life meant,â?• Wood said. One of the best things seniors can do for themselves is tell their stories and see the overall value in their lives, she added.

Woodâ??s ability to tell her story came largely from her introspective walk in 2012 on the Camino de Santiago at age 67 â?? after her breakup with Rose. She walked 500 miles in total, 15 miles a day. Wood found courage on her solo journey â?? no camera, no music, just a journal. â??Go out of your comfort zone, stretch yourself â?? this will help you when youâ??re really stressed,â?• she said.

Examples of courage and heart fill the book: the exciting build-up to the Olympics, the trials and joys of the Camino walk, and her relationship with her family, coaches and peers.

â??I am very blessed to have a son and daughter-in-law Iâ??m close with, and a beautiful three-year old granddaughter,â?• Wood said. â??I try to live by my creed of trying to remain optimistic, remembering my comebacks if I dip, and supporting others.â?•

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