



FOREWORD

THIS BOOK IS THE ENGAGING STORY OF THREE BROTHERS—TWO Olympic gold medalists and a war hero—who have individually and collectively accomplished remarkable things. But it is more than that. It is also a book about deep and profound bonds that held three brothers together against implacable odds. It is a book about faith—faith in oneself, faith in one another, and faith in a higher power—that allowed each to achieve the unthinkable. And it is a “how to” guide for those who are seeking balance in creating a life rich with success, contribution, and service to others, along with deep and lasting relationships with family, with friends, and with God.

My connection to the Banach brothers began thirty years ago, in the fall of 1983, when Lou Banach walked into the West Point wrestling room as an Olympic hopeful and new assistant coach. I was a sophomore and the starting 167-pounder for the United States Army wrestling team. For reasons that remain inexplicable to me, Lou took a particular interest in my development and, while he often led practices for the entire team, I regularly got the added (and sometimes painful) benefit of one-on-one workout time with Lou. We became friends, and I have been his deep admirer ever since.

It was quickly apparent that, in addition to being an exceptional athlete, he was and is an exceptional man. Throughout my own career in the Army, in business, and in government, I am hard pressed to think of a single person I have known who has greater humility and yet greater personal and professional success than Lou Banach. His quiet confidence is matched with a fierce independence that is demonstrated by his own path of unorthodox and unexpected choices in wrestling and in life. From my earliest conversations with Lou, I recall a young man clear in his own mind about what was most important in life—his beautiful girlfriend (and now wife) Kim, continuing his education, building a family, and developing and maintaining friendships. From the moment I first met Lou, I recognized that he was not just a role model on the wrestling mat, but also a role model for life.

Though I don't know Ed or Steve Banach like I know Lou, they are equally remarkable figures in their own right, and it is no exaggeration to say that the careers and lives of each of these three brothers is worthy of its own book. Ed Banach is indisputably one of the most successful wrestlers of all time, and his relentless, fearless style on the mat, combined with his unique physical talents, make him an iconic figure in the history of collegiate and Olympic wrestling. Likewise, Steve Banach's Army career would have been extraordinary during any period. The unique leadership he provided—as a senior officer in the U.S. Army Rangers during the War on Terror, leading a combat parachute assault in Afghanistan on October 19, 2001, and a second combat jump into Iraq in 2003—is the stuff of legends and make him a true American hero.

And yet, based on what I already know about the Banach brothers, I'm confident these few brief paragraphs above would make all three of them blush and quickly want to turn the page. They are the best kind of success stories—grounded, unselfish, grateful to others, and committed more to the journey ahead than the milestones already behind them. Yet the journey that brought them to where they are today is a one-of-a-kind American story, and one that must be told.

The timing of this book could not be better. One simply needs to peruse the newspaper or the evening news to see one deflating story after another about cynicism, corruption, greed, selfishness—or said differently, the absence of leadership—in today's business environment, in college and professional sports, and in political life. Against this background, the lessons we discover in *Uncommon Bonds: A Journey in Optimism* are the antidote for much of what ails America. In the pages that follow is a tale of triumph over adversity, a story of optimism when there was little cause for hope, and a case study on resoluteness against the odds.

The Banach brothers are first and foremost hard-working, loyal, decent men and great husbands, fathers, and sons. They are the kind of people you would want to invite to your home on the weekend for a family barbecue. Yet they are exceptional. By believing in themselves and each other, they made the seemingly impossible a reality. They are role models for us all.

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INTRODUCTION

JOSEPH CAMPBELL, THE GREAT CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGIST, wrote of the power and necessity of mythology in the development of our young people into adults. He had studied most of the world's major religions—and many of the esoteric ones—in addition to philosophy and science, and conducted an in-depth study of the teachings of various views on psychology. In particular, he had a very deep understanding of Carl Jung and the collective subconscious.

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell explored just how significant all of these religious and mythic figures are in the development of each individual's ethos in society. In reading *Uncommon Bonds: A Journey in Optimism*, you will see the perfect example of what Campbell describes as “the hero journey.” The lives of these brothers is a mission of survival and great adventure in the pursuit of remarkable dreams. Along this path, and while achieving all they had hoped for and more, the real treasure they found was the strong bonds of interdependent relationships and that of becoming servant-leaders. And that is what they are, in every facet of their existence.

I, along with a number of other people, had to insist that Steve, Ed, and Lou share this amazing account. True believers in the gifts of each and every individual, these three brothers practice lives of astonishing humility, and they adhere to a code of honor that defies any label. In my conversations with them, they refuse to accept any sort of accolade for their own roles in this fateful unfolding. From their perspective, there is nothing special about them as individuals. They remain ever firm in their assertion that anyone could have achieved similar things given the same circumstances. And they are right about that. But they are the examples that it can be done and how it can be done.

Faith, resilience, optimism, mentors, servant-leadership, and innovation: that is this book in a nutshell. The manner of the telling focuses on the journey, the people, and the lessons through incredible milestones in each

brother's life. It is a story that begins and ends with two sets of parents, spanning World War II and 9/11, who do their best to produce family stability. In between, there are many cases where past and future events intertwine. And so this is the way the story is written.

What makes this story so compelling is that it is not just about one person, but about three brothers, two of them twins. All three, through mutual support and the support of four parents and countless coaches and mentors, overcame early tragedy and extremely difficult odds. All three achieved greatness on the world stage, although they would never agree to that wording. They are husbands, fathers, friends, and members of our communities. They are the sort of role models that every young person, especially those who might be struggling, need to read about. Theirs is the story that should be told around every table, from manager to senior executive, athlete to coach, and parent to child.

As a general note, this text is about three brothers telling one story. The first half of the book is written in the third person based on the collective memories of the three brothers, family, and friends. The majority of the second half of the book uses two brothers as biographer for the third, or it offers a first-person account of events. The view of one brother is through the eyes of the other two when possible. This is a simple story, but its telling can be complex. The bonds of brotherhood that the three brothers would need to sustain one another—through incredible challenges—is what is unique about this book.

The primary intention of this book is to capture the story of courage and optimism exhibited by the boys' biological parents, foster parents, and the three brothers themselves as they lived the journey that began in World War II—torn Europe and on the broader world stage over these many years. Steve, Ed, and Lou's parents were immigrants from Germany and Poland who wanted to become American citizens, and they wanted their children to be citizens as well. The Banach brothers are proud of that fact that they live in the best country in the world!

This book also serves as a written legacy of the Banach family's journey for the generations that follow. It chronicles an uncommon beginning, with a quest for life's meaning during and after family betrayal in Germany, leading to internment in prisoner-of-war and work camps for the biological parents. In addition, this is the tale of the boys' foster parents, the Tooleys, who would

carry the baton of parenthood when the biological parents were forced to relinquish it. The book highlights the necessity of, faith, resilience, optimism, servant-leadership, innovation and sponsorship from coaches and teachers, who together strengthened the core values of the Banach brothers, as they grew up.

From the start, this manuscript was simply meant to be a diary, a personal tribute to the boys' adoptive and last surviving parent, Alan Tooley. In fact, the boys mailed their short story, covering thirty-two pages, to Alan for Father's Day in 2011. They also shared their short story, upon request, with close friends and family, all of whom encouraged them to expand the number of stories and asked that the manuscript be shared with a broader audience.

The development of this book is strengthened by firsthand knowledge and experiences from older siblings. The Banach brothers' search for understanding and meaning of the events that their family faced started when they were very young children. Through the passage of some fifty years, they now understand more fully and can share these emotional and painful stories that have profound meaning and indispensable life lessons.

The brothers wrote this story for both sets of their parents, as a way to express their thanks to them for making a difference in the face of incredible sacrifice and loss. Standing firmly on the foundation built by four loving parents from worlds apart, the three brothers are in awe of what their parents accomplished on their behalf.

While life was difficult growing up in poverty, it shaped the brothers and helped them develop an appreciation and permanent understanding of the importance of mentors who benefited the brothers at a personal level.

This is a story that will uplift, rejuvenate, and make better anyone who reads it. It is a saga that seems almost too fantastic to be true. Yet the events are well documented—it has just never been told in its entirety like this. When told as a complete story, it becomes abundantly clear just how extraordinary these three brothers, their families, and their mentors were in preparation for their Journey in Optimism.

The Banach brothers will share that they have indeed lived the American Dream in which their parents believed. That dream is still there to be realized today for anyone who has the courage to pursue it. I sincerely hope you enjoy this remarkable journey!

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ASHES TO ODYSSEY

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

“FIRE!” screamed Nada. The overwhelming and out-of-place scent of old burning wood and the appearance of smoke gave the warning; the sight of flames was the damning evidence that there was a fire. This was not just any fire; and it was not just any house. “OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE!” As a mother to fourteen children and wife to a poor Polish dairy farmer, she had many things to worry about. But what was happening now was going to be tragic no matter her panic. Life during—and since—World War II had not been easy or fair to her and her husband. Indeed, the word *fair* had long since been stricken from the dictionary for them both. Their seventeen years together had been full of trials and transitions. Now life for Nada and her Polish-born husband, Izek, would take yet another cruel twist this frigid December evening in 1963. Their first fateful event occurred about two decades earlier.

A ROUGH START:

LOVE, TOUGH CHOICE, REUNION, AND AMERICA

For centuries Nada’s clan had lived in southern Germany, working their farms, raising livestock, hunting, and in general making a living off the land. Her parents had seven children who were born between the Great War and World War II. As a teenager, Nada would experience the fullest meaning of nationalism and fear that embodied Germany at the time.

She would also see her paternalistic father make a merciless choice that would have not been uncommon in that era, whereby one is surrendered to protect the remaining family members. One can only imagine the torment and remorse—and the ensuing phantoms of his decision—he experienced as the paternal guardian of his family.

SCANDAL

Approaching her nineteenth birthday, Nada was now a productive member of the family farm, and she was expected to provide full allegiance to Nazi Germany throughout World War II. She did not work the farm fields; that was work performed by the prisoners of war (POWs) of Germany's blitzkrieg expansion. Rather, her responsibilities centered exclusively on helping prepare meals and general chores around the farm, including baking, canning, and feeding the POWs.

While serving meals to the POWs, Nada encountered the Polish soldier who would become her future husband. At first she was suspicious of the man, but it wasn't long before Nada was smitten by the young Polish Army soldier's looks, personality, and big dreams. In befriending this captured enemy soldier, she was committing a crime against her country, her family, and the warped sense of humanity that existed in Nazi Germany at the time.

Their love—young and forbidden—drove Nada and Izek to disregard national boundaries and political differences. Spring drifted into summer, and their relationship matured with the passing season. Nada shared many things about her home with Izek as she frequented the fields. Izek found the simple and stable life on the farm alluring, which further strengthened his love for the young woman who represented this to him.

While Nada had heard of Poland, she had not traveled far from her farming village, and her worldview at that point could be described as provincial. It is important to note that her relative isolation protected her from a more deeply rooted prejudice that might have caused her to ignore Izek completely. However, protecting her from her own rebellious and anti-authority disposition became impossible for her family.

She admired Izek for his courage in defending his homeland as a soldier. "My home city," he explained, "is a coal-mining city just southwest of Warsaw." The influence of the American Industrial Revolution of the early 1900s had by proxy reached Poland, which was then—and continues to be—one of the world's top coal-producing countries.

With the passing of the seasons, the farm became a very busy place. As summer progressed toward autumn, the harvest (grains and hay for food and to feed the livestock), the slaughter (preserving of livestock), and canning (vegetables and fruits) become the highest priority in preparing for a long and often bitterly cold winter. Finally, the planting of winter wheat would be

the last task as the cooling north wind replaced the few scattered warm days. This wheat would mature under the winter snow, just right for germination and early-stage green growth.

The family's patriarch, Nada's father, was a respected village leader who witnessed with growing concern her affection for this Polish POW. While harsh and direct in his assertion that if their relationship did not end, he would turn both over to his brother, the mayor, for final punishment, he also recognized that in order to protect his remaining family members, he must surrender to the unthinkable. Whether our maternal grandfather's motivations were based in a dogmatic nationalism or a desire to protect the rest of his family, it is difficult to say. However, the harsh and bitter reality is that he did exactly what he said he would.

TOUGHEST CHOICES

When his warnings went unheeded by Nada, her father became more troubled and heartbroken. A slave to his convictions and relentless love for his family, Nada's father restrained both his daughter and Izek and delivered them to the local German political authorities. As he recoiled and gathered himself following his decision, faded words trickled off his tongue: "If only she had listened, this one."

And with this action done, Nada and Izek were quickly processed and shipped to separate Nazi work and prisoner-of-war camps. It was against great odds that they survived these German internment camps, which would take immeasurable physical and psychological tolls on both of them in the immediate years ahead. Even more miraculous was that they were later able to find each other in the postwar chaos that was Western Europe.

Both Nada and Izek believed that they had nothing to return to in either Germany or Poland. So they celebrated their lives and freedom by marrying and moving to an emigration camp near Nada's hometown, where they waited until 1952 to be sponsored by an American family. By this time, their family had grown to a total of eight, so passage to America was no small expense or feat. But it would provide the fresh start they longed for, an ocean to separate them from their past. Nada and Izek remained registered aliens until their deaths.

DREAMS TURNED TO ASHES

Family, firefighters, and police worked as one to ensure everyone was pulled safely from the relentless flames that ravenously destroyed the Banachs' New Jersey farm home. Fire is an emotionless predator that burns wood and flesh with equal indifference. The fear is that even if it seems that everyone has escaped a fire, that it will somehow reach out and claim a victim in the future.

Anyone who has experienced a house fire knows it will revisit you often in dreams for years to come. It was with this subconscious awareness that Nada frenetically scurried between first-aid locations, instinctually and tirelessly accounting for all of her children. The older children helped to assuage their mother's fears by accounting for all of the other siblings.

"Have the younger twins been found?" Nada begged again, seeking further reassurance. "Yes, Mother, all of our family members are safe, including the younger twins," affirmed the calming voice of an older sibling.

At last she was confident that her family was safe from harm, and this relief was more strongly felt than any care for her own survival. At the back of her mind was the foreboding awareness of the impact this fire would have on her family. But for now there was only this moment, and embracing her children sustained her.

NATURE ISN'T CRUEL; IT JUST IS

Their rented farmhouse was not just the Banachs' home; it was also the last hope for the family to stay together. Theirs was a life on the edge of poverty, in which each day is a new opportunity for tragedy to strike in the form of illness, financial distress, or fierce hunger. This was especially true for non-bilingual immigrants who were barely scraping by as far as having shelter and keeping their family together, healthy, and fed. As is so often the case, a fire in a rented home becomes the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back for a very large family living so close to the financial edge.

The local church provided temporary shelter after the fire. This sufficed until the State of New Jersey—the final backstop to ensure that the individuals survive, even if it means the family must be broken apart—stepped in and did the inevitable. Despite best efforts, civilized life is sometimes not that far removed from its uncivilized sister, Mother Nature. Nature itself is not mean or cruel or kind or joyful; it just is. And as the Banachs were living now, life just was. It was unbearable and at the breaking point.

IN THE ABSENCE OF CERTAINTY, CHAOS REIGNS SUPREME

Uncertainty is an evil thing, especially for the young. When you have very little besides family, the reality of separation from them is the most devastating thing that can occur. Uncertainty is corrosive like acid: the longer it is in contact with the mind, the more the mind becomes irreparably scarred. And as we shall see, it is the survivor's choice whether scars become permanent, or instead give way to new and stronger mental processes that produce resilience.

The State of New Jersey was there to help, yet it caused incredible pain. The only option available was a foster care plan for the children. As fate often proves to have a sense of irony in its cruelty, for the second time in her life, Nada would know the deep suffering of loss that goes with a forced separation from her family.

“Our plan is to keep the younger children together, especially the twins,” explained the social worker to the emotionally fragile parents. Although doubting that the biological parents comprehended the full gravity of the situation, the social worker explained that these placements would be temporary until a permanent solution could be worked out.

A WINDOW TO THE FUTURE

While this was a very harsh reality, it would be this event that would channel three of the younger siblings, Steve and younger twins Ed and Lou onto a historic path. The three of them would pass through incredible struggles together, sharing the American dream as the result of mutual support, and then diverging to each do amazing things. All three brothers would be solid wrestlers. The twin brothers would earn Olympic gold medals. And many years later, Steve, the brother who didn't get to the Olympic mats, would make history in a brave act of American resolve after the horrible events of 9/11. Army Rangers, under his command, would lead our nation's first response against terrorism. But it was this devastation to their family structure that would contain some of the very important life lessons that Steve, Ed and, Lou would need to stay the course on the odyssey they had before them.

FAITH NOT OPTIONAL

Very bad things happen to very good and well-intentioned people. When people lose everything and their lives are torn apart, they have no control, and faith is not optional. Small children have a totally natural propensity to believe in something much bigger than themselves—everything is larger than they are. In order to take the next steps, the Banachs had to hold on to hope.

Hope is another word for faith, which some people find a difficult concept. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, even when it seems that all things familiar are suddenly removed. If anyone ever had a claim to totally giving up on life, the Banach brothers certainly had a large inventory of reasons. After all, how much can one family take?

Giving up was never an option. Faith is not optional, regardless of how some might try to deny it. Even if a person's future is not what she or he had imagined, new dreams must be born from the ashes. *The three Banach brothers are living proof that this is indeed possible!* This is the human condition and the mind's capacity: to shed, to forget the worst and fashion a positive future that is critical if one is to be successful in this life.

For the Banach brothers, faith was freely accepted, as they knew they needed all the help that was available if they were to discover their true potential. Not even aware of their special talents, they just never gave up, just like their biological parents. They always took the next step forward and walked through each door that was opened.

Of course, it always helped that their support system, whether team or family, encouraged them to maximize their potential. And this encouragement would be delivered by and through the new parents and family that would materialize in the days and years ahead.