

Leon Kelly



\$5,000 WINNER

**Distribution Center #6061
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My brother, Ricky, died of AIDS on January 11th, 2021. We were only a year apart, we were very close and the loss still seems fresh. I'm 54 and I've been writing a novel since 2013, but I didn't have the energy to finish it. When I sat down at the computer I'd get distracted. Ricky was always so happy to hear about my story. He'd say: "You're going to be famous!" He was my inspiration and I have his picture right beside my printer. But last year I was too lethargic to focus. I wasn't working out, I was eating fast food and drinking my favorite wine a little bit too much. I knew I needed to get up and move, and get back to my novel. But it never happened.

I used to be a teacher and writing has helped me get through the challenges in my life.

I was a lonely kid with very few friends. I felt like an outsider, that I just didn't belong. I'm one of six and my brother Cedric was shot in the chest and killed when he was 21. There's been a lot of loss. Now, I'm happy with my partner, Cesar — we've been together for 14 years — but I wanted to accomplish the things I set out to accomplish.

One night last September I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned.

I got up and I went into the living room. Cesar woke up and said: "What's wrong?" and I said: "I have to do something different." He sat and listened. The next day I started the Thrive Challenge.

Each morning, I open the Bible app on my phone and read a scripture.

I do a little yoga, make my coffee, and dance. I'm a '70s music person; I'll listen to Blondie's "Heart Of Glass" or Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon." I call my mother, and my aunt who's battled cancer. We're close and we encourage each other. Cesar and I are cooking lots of greens. I make a great kale salad and we both make good turkey burgers. We go for walks and I have more energy for my writing.



On all my days off, I committed to writing a chapter of my book.

Cesar would text me from work saying: "You can do it." And I'd give myself pep talks, saying: "Leon, I'm so proud of you." I'd write all day, getting up after an hour or so to stretch or do push-ups, and then go back to my writing. Soon I felt much more positive.

I've finished the first draft of my book.

The title is *Kennedi Fitzgerald's Journey to Beautiful*. It's about a young beauty queen, Kennedi, who finds out she was adopted and feels betrayed. Her life is derailed and she has to discover the deeper meaning of inner and outer beauty. And that's what I've had to do for myself — learning to accept myself, knowing that I am good enough just the way I am.

Finishing my novel felt amazing; I was in tears.

It was the same feeling I had when I finished the New York City marathon in 2013. It was a big accomplishment. The first thing I thought about was Ricky, and how happy he would have been. My novel is edited and now I'm planning to self-publish it this summer. I'm so excited. It's my way of putting something positive out in the universe that I think will inspire people, and it's been healing for me. I've also written a screenplay based on my book and I hope one day it will become a movie. My goal: financial independence that will take me into retirement.



THRIVE