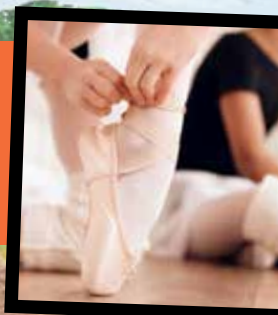


Real Kids



Real Stories



Real Challenges



Overcoming Adversity Around the World

Garth Sundem

free spirit
PUBLISHING®

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Note: Several stories in this book address intense and serious situations, which some readers may find unsettling.

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Introduction

We all face challenges. The 30 young people in this book have faced very serious challenges. Some have had to deal with discrimination. Others have faced poverty, a tough family life, physical challenges, or a combination of these difficulties. Some were able to overcome these challenges to do great things. For others, simply surviving is a triumph.

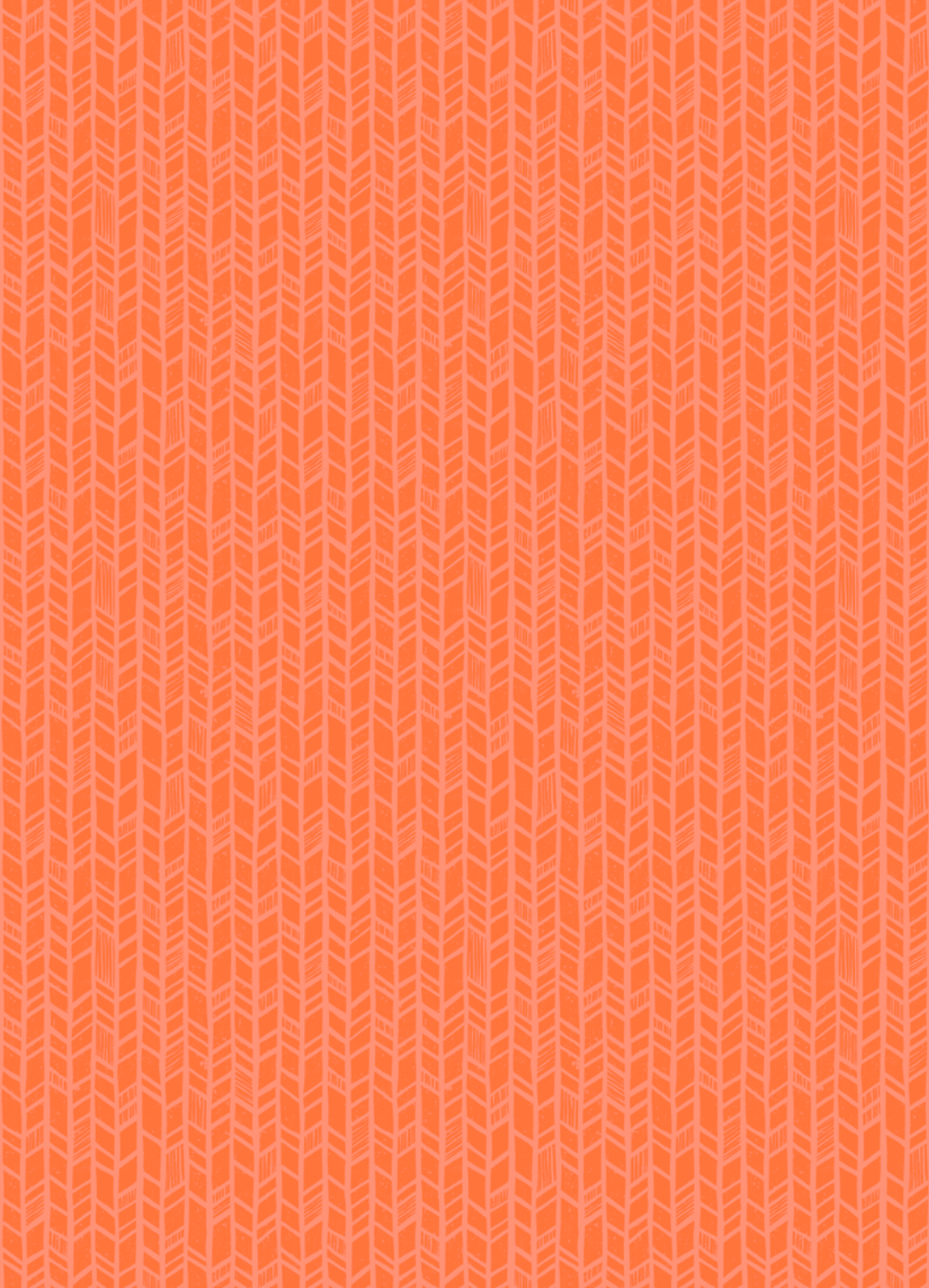
The thing is, the size of their success isn't what's important. What really matters is the *decision* to overcome. The young people in this book made the important choice to continue *despite* their challenges. For some, that meant changing how people think about them. For others, it was persevering despite great odds. And for still others, it was the decision to survive and, when they could, fight for a better life.

This book is about heroes. And the reason these young people are heroes is because they made the heroic choice to struggle against the easy path that many people take in the face of these challenges. It's easier to give up—to say, “I can't” or “What difference will it make?”—than it is to try and try again in the face of difficulties. And it's much easier to act in the stereotypical ways that people expect than it is to prove people wrong.

You may or may not face the same challenges or the same degree of challenge as the young people in this book have. But you have the opportunity to make the same heroic choices. We *all* have challenges. For you, maybe it's a math test, a tryout for a sports team, a difficult situation at home or with your friends, or something much more challenging for you.

You have the choice to continue toward your goals despite these challenges. It's not easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is! But the heroic struggle to overcome your challenges, big or small, is the only way to make change—for yourself, the people you love, and the world.

Garth Sundem



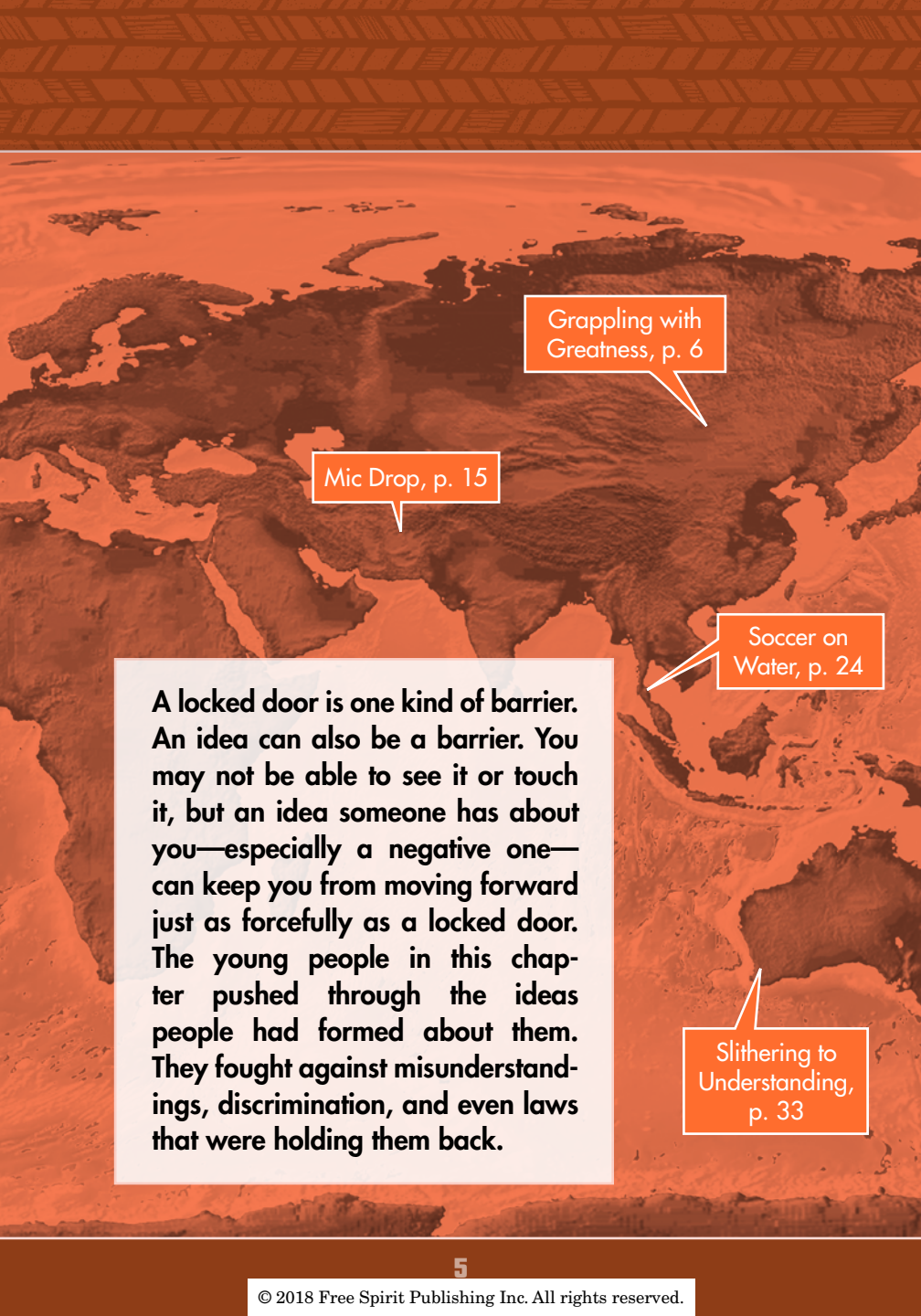
Chapter 1

Breaking Barriers

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His Board, p. 11



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Greatness, p. 6

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Water, p. 24

A locked door is one kind of barrier. An idea can also be a barrier. You may not be able to see it or touch it, but an idea someone has about you—especially a negative one—can keep you from moving forward just as forcefully as a locked door. The young people in this chapter pushed through the ideas people had formed about them. They fought against misunderstandings, discrimination, and even laws that were holding them back.

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Grappling with Greatness

Sükheegiin Tserenchimed

Wrestling is an important part of Mongolia's history. Cave paintings more than 8,000 years old in Mongolia show drawings of wrestlers. Genghis Khan, the great Mongolian warrior of the 13th century, chose his generals in part by how well they wrestled. And one modern-day wrestler went on to become a presidential candidate. When a child is born in Mongolia, often the family prays that the child will grow up to be a wrestler.

That is, if the child is a boy.

Chimdee, whose full name is Sükheegiin Tserenchimed, is not a boy. To many people in Mongolia, that means she should not be a wrestler. But wrestling is in her blood.

Chimdee's father was a herdsman, tending camels, sheep, goats, cows, and horses. He was also a champion wrestler in the traditional Mongolian style, called

Bökh. Before a match, as Mongolian wrestlers had done for centuries, Chimdee's father would dance into the ring imitating a falcon, a phoenix, or a lion. He'd set himself in place and then deliver three huge slaps to his legs before attacking his opponent.

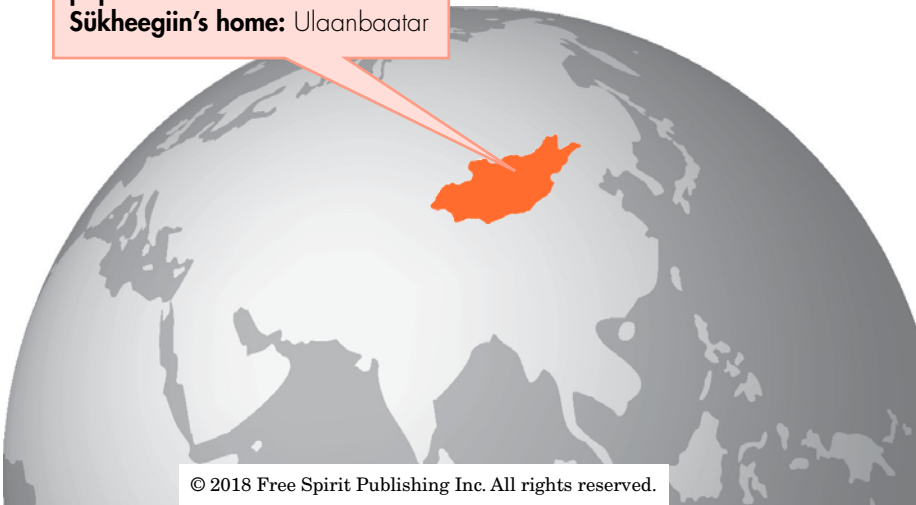
In Mongolia, wrestling is passed down from father to son, not to daughters. But even if Chimdee's father had been willing to teach Chimdee how to wrestle, he didn't get the chance. He died when Chimdee was just seven years old.

After her father's death, Chimdee moved with her mother to an apartment in Ulaanbaatar, the coldest capital city of any country in the world. On mornings when the temperature was far below zero, pollution from the simple wood-burning stoves that people used for cooking and heating mixed with pollution

MONGOLIA

population: 3 million

Sükheegiin's home: Ulaanbaatar



from the factories—wrapping the city in a choking fog. Maybe because of the pollution, Chimdee’s mother often was sick.

Sometimes, Chimdee’s mother was too sick to look after her. But letting Chimdee roam the city by

FAST FACTS

In traditional Mongolian culture, wrestling, horsemanship, and archery are considered the “Three Manly Skills.”

herself offered too many opportunities to get in trouble. Instead, Chimdee’s mother signed her up for classes at a nearby wrestling gym. It was one of the few gyms that accepted girls. Soon, the gym became like Chimdee’s second home.

She wanted to be like her father. She worked hard, adding strength to her natural sense of balance. And the harder she worked, the stronger her determination grew to become a wrestler.

At age 19, Chimdee brought her skills and mindset to the 2014 World Freestyle Wrestling Championships in Uzbekistan. Her final match was against 2012 Olympic bronze medalist, Yuliya Ratkevich. Yuliya was from Azerbaijan—a country with a rich tradition of women’s wrestling.

Chimdee and Yuliya circled each other for only a few seconds before Yuliya grabbed Chimdee’s left knee and drove her out of the circles painted on the mat. Was everyone right about Mongolian female wrestlers? In Mongolia, was wrestling a sport better

left to men? The wrestlers started again. Instead of being intimidated by her opponent's skill, Chimdee attacked, shooting underneath Yuliya to grab her by the legs and take her down to the mat! But Yuliya scrambled away.

Now the wrestlers knew each other. They danced in a careful counterclockwise circle, both pawing at each other's heads, both faking toward their opponent's legs. Then, quick as a snake strike, Yuliya had Chimdee around the waist and took her down to the mat! Chimdee struggled to escape. Luckily the round ended before Yuliya could end the match with a pin.

During the break, the crowd cheered for Chimdee's opponent. Who did Chimdee think she was, this *girl* from a country where women didn't wrestle, daring to step into the ring with a trained athlete?

At the start of the second round, Chimdee was behind on points and looked hard for an opening. She was able to grab Yuliya's foot but couldn't get the takedown as her opponent scrambled out of bounds. That's how it went, back and forth, with Chimdee's balance and quickness versus Yuliya's training and the crowd's belief that Chimdee was bound to fail. The wrestlers crashed into each other again and again.

At the end of the match, the judge took both wrestlers by their hands . . . and then held up Chimdee's arm as the winner! At 19 years old, Chimdee became the youngest wrestler ever—male or female—to win a World Championship. With her mother's

encouragement and in her father's memory, Chimdee had showed her country that women could wrestle. And she had showed the world that great wrestlers still came from Mongolia.



Take Action

Help make it easier for girls to play sports.
Go to **ngwsd.org** to learn how.



Living Intensely on His Board

Italo Romano

When Italo Romano was 11 years old, he and his friends decided to take the train from their home city of Curitiba, Brazil, to the beach 60 miles away. They didn't have money for tickets, so they waited for a train to pull out of the station. They ran alongside the train, hoping to sneak a ride by swinging themselves onboard.

Italo was the fastest, so he went first. But when he tried to lift himself onto the moving train, he lost his grip and fell. He might have been okay—the drop wasn't far, and the train was only just starting to pick up speed—but his body turned toward the train as he fell, and he landed on the rails. The huge wheels of the train sliced through his legs.

"To open your eyes and realize you have no legs . . . then you think, you know, what am I going to do now?" he said.

Italo spent a month in the hospital recovering from his injuries and learning how to use a wheelchair. He

FAST FACTS

Most passenger train cars weigh more than 60 metric tons (132,277 pounds).

worried what life would be like after the hospital.

Before his accident, Italo had often watched skateboarders in the streets of Curitiba. Italo had tried skating a few times, but his family never had enough money to buy him a board of his own. A year after his accident, a family friend gave Italo a skateboard, thinking he could use it sometimes instead of a wheelchair. But Italo saw the board as much more than a way to get from point A to point B.

“I thought about how I could adapt myself to sit on a skateboard,” he said. He learned to paddle against the pavement with his hands to get up to speed. He steered by grabbing the sides of the deck and learned to jump by straightening his upper body and yanking the board off the ground. Eventually he started working on more complicated tricks like grinds, fakie flips, kickflips, and manuals.

The hardest part about learning these tricks was that, without legs, he couldn't bend his knees to cushion the shock of his wheels coming down hard on the pavement. Imagine it: What do you think it would feel like to jump off a flight of stairs and land flat on your butt? Ouch! That's what it was like for Italo. With every trick, he felt the impact through his whole body.

Still, as jarring as it was to land tricks without legs, skating also made Italo feel whole again.

“When I was given a skateboard, I left the wheelchair forever. It was a sensation of freedom for me,” Italo said.

By the time Italo was a teenager, people in the skateboarding world began to notice his skills. They invited Italo to start competing as a pro. In 2015, at the Tampa Pro competition in Florida, he made it to the semifinals competing against able-bodied pro skaters! Italo also started thinking about an even bigger goal: He wanted to skate a megaramp.

Megaramps are monstrous. They start with a steep “ski jump” and end with a quarter pipe that can shoot skaters 45 feet into the air. A few years earlier, a skater



BRAZIL

population: 208 million

Italo's home: Curitiba