The Guide Dog



Best-selling author Julie Barton, M.S. '04, looks back on the beloved dog who brought her back from the brink.

By Natalie Missakian



BEFORE SHE ADOPTED HER GOLDEN RETRIEVER PUPPY, BUNKER, IN JUNE 1996, JULIE BARTON, M.S. '04, WAS CONVINCED NOTHING COULD LIFT HER CRUSHING DEPRESSION.

"I had gone into a therapist's office, literally sat down and said, 'Good luck,'" she recalls. "Because nobody had helped me yet."

Two months earlier, Barton, then 22 years old, had collapsed on the kitchen floor of her New York City apartment, where she would remain for 24 hours in a haze of tears and inertia — her first depressive episode, a therapist would later tell her.

That same day, more than 500 miles away, Bunker was born on a family farm in Central Ohio. It was as though the universe willed them to be together, says Barton, who believes her seemingly cosmic connection with the dog she found through a newspaper ad saved her life.

"We absolutely understood each other. It was amazing," says Barton, who chronicles her journey out of depression's grip, with Bunker's help, in her New York Times bestselling memoir, "Dog Medicine: How My Dog Saved Me From Myself," published by Penguin Books.

After her breakdown, Barton moved back home to Ohio, where, with her parents' support, she began seeing a therapist and taking antidepressants. But she still struggled with rogue thoughts telling her she was "dumb," "ugly," and "weak." In her darkest moments in New York, the thoughts had become sinister: "Just kill yourself. Just tie a rope around something, cinch it around your neck and jump," she writes in the book.

As a kid, she would retreat to her room with the family dog whenever she felt scared or stressed. So she asked her mother if she could adopt a puppy, thinking it might help her recover. It did.

"I had this love in front of me that was so palpable, the thoughts starting going away. They didn't get as much oxygen as they used to," she recalls. "I was less up in my head and more back down on Earth."





Julie Barton, M.S. '04, read from her best-selling memoir at an on-campus event. [right] She reconnected with several of her former professors, Tim Parrish, professor of English, and Rosalyn Amenta, adjunct professor of women's studies.

Barton eventually became well enough to start over in Seattle, where she met her husband, Greg. In the following years, she earned two master's degrees — one in women's studies at Southern and an MFA from Vermont College — and became both a mother and successful author.

The latter was a longheld dream, but Barton had strayed from it after earning her undergraduate degree. Instead, she took jobs in marketing and business — including one at a startup kiosk company in Branford, Conn. — while her husband did postdoctoral work at Yale. She credits Southern with helping to "right the ship."

Unhappy at work, she decided to

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enroll in an MFA program for creative writing, but in 2002, none existed in Connecticut. (Southern launched a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing program in 2008.) So Barton pursued a master's in women's studies at Southern, with writing as her focus.

"My thesis was a feminist novel that is still sitting in a drawer. It was a good practice book," she says, laughing.

She credits Tim Parrish and Vivian Shipley, both professors of English, and Rosalyn Amenta, adjunct professor of women's studies, with shaping her as a writer — especially Parrish, a "great friend" and "tough critic" who taught her the art of brevity.

"They were amazing," she says. "It was a formative time for me. I wouldn't be where I am without it, that's for sure."

While she did not set out to write a memoir, that changed when Bunker died of cancer in 2007. The next day, she learned she was a finalist in a prestigious fiction contest, and for Barton, it was yet another sign.

"I swear I heard some voice — or him — saying, 'Tell our story,'" she says.

She started jotting down memories that became the basis of the book, which took roughly five years to finish. It was difficult, but healing, as she untangled family dynamics she believes fueled her depression, including abuse at the hands of her older brother growing up. (They have since mended their relationship, and he's given the memoir his blessing.)

"Dog Medicine" has received critical acclaim as well. "It's a harrowing story told with gentleness and wit," writes New York Times critic Judith Newman. O, The Oprah Magazine cites the work as one of the 10 best memoirs of 2016. A review by Jenni Berrett on Ravishly.com notes, "Julie Hill Barton's 'Dog Medicine' is probably one of the toughest reads I've encountered, and I mean that in the very best way possible."

For her part, Barton finds the book's impact on readers far more gratifying than her commercial success. More than 600 emails from readers around the globe are saved in her inbox — many detailing similar struggles with depression.

"The messages are really long and heartfelt, and it means a lot to me, so I write back," says Barton, who lives in Piedmont, Calif., with her husband, two daughters, 10 and 13, and two rescue dogs, a Chihuahua and a terrier mix.

"[Depression] is hideous. It's brutal. It's impossible to get out of without help. But you can get out of it," says Barton, who is working on a second memoir. "That's hopefully one of the messages of this book." ■

Big (4) Dreams

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— a program he says develops a comprehensive understanding of the business world. He also volunteered with the campus VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program, which helps those with low-incomes, disabilities, and limited English. "My career is not in taxation, but the knowledge and experience I gained translate to any business environment," he says of the program overseen by Frank Bevvino, associate professor of accounting.

Today, things are looking up. His father has recovered, and Chowdhury's transition to Deloitte has been remarkably smooth. "After working for Deloitte for six months, I can absolutely say that this was the right decision for me. It's been priceless in terms of the experience and many benefits," he says.

Lubna Sparks, '17, also transferred to Southern — and says her interest in Deloitte peaked after the organization made a presentation to the SCSU Accounting Society. After interning at the company last year, she's been offered a full-time position. But she asked to remain an intern while preparing for her examinations to become a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) — a request Deloitte honored.

A fellow graduate of the Class of 2017, Louis Signor is preparing for his CPA examinations as well. It's a welcome development for the talented alumnus who had worked at Home Depot for about six years when, in 2016, his position as an asset manager was eliminated.

"I'm not a typical student," says Signor, who graduated from Southern at the age of 29. He'd attended Utica College right after high school, but didn't return after his first year. Instead, responding to his father's request to "get a job," Signor applied at Home Depot — and steadily moved up the corporate ladder. Armed only with a high school degree, he ultimately found himself overseeing asset protection for all stores in the Norwalk, Conn., and New York Metro area — a market grossing $105 million.

"At the age of 24, I had a really good job making much more money than I thought would be possible," says Signor. A watercooler conversation with coworkers changed his perspective. "The general consensus was that they felt stuck. They were paid well. It wasn't a bad situation, but they didn't have alternatives," he says. He began attending Southern part-time, using Home Depot's tuition reimbursement benefits. Then in August 2016, Home Depot underwent a corporate restructuring and his position was eliminated. Signor took the compensation package and, as a Southern senior, began attending the university full time for the first time ever.

In May 2017, Signor became the first in his family to earn a college degree, graduating magna cum laude. He interviewed with six employers and received five job offers — including one from Deloitte. He started in September. ■

The Interns

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intern with Deloitte again: Velez in summer 2018 and DePriest in the winter. "It's a very unique experience because it allows you to get a glimpse of both aspects of accounting to possibly steer your career decision-making before you graduate," says DePriest.

Southern senior Yenny Bayas, who interned with Deloitte in the winter of 2017, agrees, noting the experience confirmed her career aspirations. Although she's wanted to study business since high school, she was unsure what specialization to select. But she loved her accounting classes — and a trip to a major European accounting conference with Robert J. Kirsch, professor of accounting, and three other Southern students cemented the deal. Southern was the only college or university from the U.S. at the event. "That's where I really fell in love with accounting," says Bayas. "But my internship at Deloitte made that even clearer."

Like the others who won internships after completing several rounds of interviews, Bayas is a hard-working, high-achieving student. She — and classmate Velez — are School of Business ambassadors, two of only nine in the selective leadership program. At the age of 23, she also has been a licensed realtor for several years. In sum, Bayas — a native of Ecuador and a first-generation college student — is no stranger to a challenging workload. Still, she concedes that her Deloitte internship, conducted during the busy tax season, was very intense at times. "I loved the challenge," she says.

In terms of a future career, she says being an accountant who specializes in real estate would combine her passions. But she's also drawn to audit services. "I like that you are with a team and that you are investigating," says Bayas. "You see the financial statements, think about the facts and numbers, and combine them into the story to make sure it all makes sense. I discovered that I really enjoyed that at Deloitte — and that's one of the things I loved most about my internship." ■