

QUIT BEING SO GOOD.

STORIES OF

A SMART, NICE GIRL

AN UNAPOLOGETIC WOMAN

KRISTI HEMMER, M.ED.

PRAISE FOR *QUIT BEING SO GOOD*

“If it’s moxie you’re looking for, Kristi Hemmer’s new book has plenty of it! With humor, candor, and a distinctive approach, Hemmer provides suggestions for how you can get your needs met directly and unapologetically. Not for the faint of heart, but rather for women ready to break out of their self-imposed constraints with abandon and gusto.”

—**Lois P. Frankel**, PhD, author of
Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office

“In *Quit Being So Good*, Kristi Hemmer mixes stories from her childhood, and from her grown-up travels and work all over the world to show girls and women they can find the deepest fulfillment from growing to become more of themselves, not shrinking to be less of who they are. She illustrates that thriving in life is a goal that can take as many forms for women and girls as it can for men and boys, even when it means that girls and women defy expectations of how they ‘should’ act or exist in this world. This book is like a series of long talks with your best girlfriend, aunt, or mentor. It leaves you inspired, resolved, and ready to use your power for good in your own life and in the lives of others.”

—**Emily Yellin**, journalist and author of *Our Mothers’ War*

“Hemmer’s personal anecdotes and expansive life view provide a courageous and unapologetic roadmap for women and girls everywhere.”

—**Romy Newman**, president and cofounder of Fairygodboss

“In *Quit Being So Good*, Kristi reminds readers that much of what holds women back is in our heads. Combining her own experiences with a three-step process, she encourages readers to dig deep, question everything, and use our power to topple structural inequities in our professional and personal lives.”

—**Renee M. Powers**, founder and CEO of Feminist Book Club

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To all those who have been told *Quit Being So Good*, this book is for you. Keep it up; other women and girls are watching.

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Prologue



The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.

—GLORIA STEINEM

DUBUQUE, IOWA, JANUARY 1983.

When I was in eighth grade, my Future Problem Solvers of America team was the only one from my junior high to advance to state. It was a big deal. My mom took me to JCPenney, where I picked out a brand-new maroon corduroy blazer with puffy sleeves and new navy pants with an elastic waist to fit the belly that was getting ready for my first period. I would be the most fashionable Problem Solver out there.

Growing up, I was labeled the “smart, nice girl.” I was told I was smart by teachers, my family, and my friends. As a Future Problem Solver champion, I was labeled as smart. With my Coke-bottle glasses, I looked smart.

But on this Future Problem Solver team, I was the dumbest of the smart. Everybody knew Kathy was the smartest—then Lavonne, Colleen, Lisa, and me. On competition day, we were told that only four of us could compete on the team. One of us would need to step down. I volunteered right away; I felt it was the smart and nice thing to do.

Curious, I recently looked on the Future Problem Solving Program's website from the year I competed and noted the problems that needed to be solved in 1983 were Electronic Games, Prisons, Lasers, Nuclear Waste, and Genetic Engineering.

Thinking of my “smart, nice” label, I wondered, “But what about the topic of Identity?” As an educator I saw girls shrink in eighth grade and the boys take up even more space. And when I was an eighth grader, I started to shrink and drop out of things I liked and was good at—like the Future Problem Solver Team.

As an educator and counselor, I knew from Joan and Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development that “Identity v. Confusion” is the stage adolescents must resolve to develop a sense of self. At thirteen—when developmentally I was asking myself, “Who am I?” and “What can I be?”—the world told the rose-tinted-glasses girl to accept being “Smart, Nice Kristi.” This is a problem.

Today, when I work with high-potential women and ask them what they want to be known for, the two words that are most common are “nice” and “hardworking.” Of course, you need to get along with others and work hard to do well, but these labels are not differentiators. They do not show your potential, your possible, or what you want. Just like being labeled “Smart, Nice Kristi” did not serve me, because I was so much more than that.

I liked to be on stage. I liked to dance. I liked winning. I liked competition. I liked writing. I liked leading. And I really liked learning.

I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up—and that's what I did. I became a teacher who was intentional about not letting society's labels define potential. A principal at an all-girls school

who coached not only her girls to be self-assured—but also her all-female faculty. A counselor who “recognized the equality and full humanity” of girls and boys. What Gloria Steinem would call a feminist.

JAPAN, AUGUST 2007.

When I started teaching in 1992, I said I would never teach above second grade; my first job was teaching third grade in inner-city Houston. My principal saw my ability to bring out the best in each student, influence social consciousness, and stretch all of them into their best possible selves, and he said I was needed in middle school. I trusted his judgment and indeed fell in love with teaching and counseling middle schoolers. To me, it was the best of both worlds: the lower-school pedagogy with the upper-school ability to solve big social problems.

I taught and was a school counselor for sixth grade for eight years at three different schools when, one fateful day in August 2007, I stepped into my international, eighth-grade Language Arts classroom. I was struck by the suffocating testosterone wafting through the room; I opened the windows. These almost-men who were taller and bigger than me took up plenty of space. The girls were tentative and quiet, took seats at the back of the room, and tried their hardest to take up no space.

This wasn’t like my sixth-grade classes of the past eight years, where the girls came in talking loudly and took seats in the front and the back of the room while the boys filled in the spots.

After a quick review of the syllabus, I opened my eighth-grade class with a question. I asked, “If this class was really helpful to you now and in the future, what would you learn?”

The boys raised their hands. “How to create a video that will go viral.” “How to write a song that will go viral.” “How to use commas correctly.” “What is the meaning of life?”

The girls sat on their hands. Boy after boy shared.

This wasn’t like my sixth-grade classes, where the girls’ hands

flew up in the air and waved all over the place trying to get my attention while the boys waited to be called on.

Straight away, I noticed the gap between the girls and the boys. However, it was my first time teaching eighth grade, so I gave more wait time, hoping that was what was needed.

Nothing from the girls. Nothing. They had given up.

“Let’s hear from the girls,” I said.

Nothing.

I waited. Still nothing.

Aaron, the most popular boy in class, sighed and said, “Girls, just answer. Ms. Hemmer’s not going to move on until you do.”

Finally, a girl raised her hand timidly; her voice was so soft we all had to lean in to hear her. She said, “I’m not sure if this is right. But I think I’d maybe want to know how to write a college essay—if that’s OK.”

It was so painful. And I thought, *Why do girls shrink? With their minimizing word choices, their inaudible voices, their self-doubting thoughts, and their invisible bodies?*

And then I thought back to the years when my name was “Smart, Nice Kristi.”

It was then that I painfully understood that this universal shrinking of girls’ voices, ideas, and existence at a time when their identities were forming was not only a problem but a crisis.



When I was eight (one year before confidence peaks for girls in America), I was the Connect Four champ; nobody wanted to play with me. The message I heard was one I’d come to hear again and again as a girl and then as a woman: *Quit Being So Good.*

As part of the Future Problem Solvers of America team mentioned above, I was told, “Don’t be too smart, boys won’t like you.” *Quit Being So Good.*

My best guy friend in high school said, “You’re too smart to be a teacher, Hemmer.” *Quit Being So Good.*

My college advisor said, “Don’t show your GPA because it looks like you haven’t experienced failure.” *Quit Being So Good.*

When I was thirty-three and the principal of an all-girls school, a city council member told me I was too young. *Quit Being So Good.*

I didn’t know it then, but my first day of teaching eighth grade was when I decided to quit being part of the problem. Three years later, I quit my job, traveled the world for four years learning from changemakers while living on twenty dollars a day, and was inspired by the young women I met around the globe to start my own social business, Academy for Women’s Empowerment. Because the schools I worked in for over twenty years were more concerned that you knew how to conform than they were about equality. There was no room in the curriculum for equality.

I was pissed off.



Now I realize the question that I have been pushing up against since I was eight is: “Why do women and girls shrink in a classroom, boardroom, and conversation?”

As a good Future Problem Solver, I still love solving problems.

This book explores, plays with, and challenges every change-maker to imagine a future world where it’s safe for a woman and girl to show up not as “Smart and Nice” but as “Unapologetic.” Even if it hurts somebody’s feelings.

If you identify as female, the book will give you tools to be unapologetic, stories to let you know *you’re not alone*, and the MOXIE to do something about it.

If you identify as male, it’s like reading your sister’s diary. The book is a safe space to listen and learn, so you can be a more empathetic brother, partner, father, leader, boss, colleague, and

direct report. And it will (hopefully) inspire you to help create a safer and more equitable world for women and girls.

This book is NOT about changing you. It's about showing up as MORE of who you are—even at the risk of hurting somebody's feelings. It's about reclaiming the little girl inside you who climbed to the very top of the jungle gym, who tried her best to win every time, and who was proud of being a Future Problem Solver.

Go back to when you were a little girl. Before your confidence peaked (age nine) and before you started “dropping out” of sports, your passions, and your life (age fourteen). What is something you liked to do as a little girl that you “dropped out” of? This book will help you to reclaim it.

And now, what would be different if you were creating a future where girls and women were equal and safe all over the world? If you were a Future Problem Solver.

HOW TO BE A FUTURE PROBLEM SOLVER.

1. Take up space. Unapologetically. What are you known for?

_____ Now, what do you WANT to be known for?

_____ I was known as “Smart, Nice Kristi.” Today, I want to be known for inspiring changemakers to be unapologetic so that they can disrupt the systems of power to create a more equitable and safer world for women and girls. Go ahead, fill in the blanks. How will you take up space, unapologetically?

2. Be first. There is power in going first. As girls and women, we are taught to follow. In Scooby-Doo, Daphne and Velma follow Fred into the scary swamp. Even though it's Velma who solves the problem, Scooby and Shaggy get the credit. Be the first to speak up at the meeting, to start your own business, to choose not to get married, to live overseas, to climb Kilimanjaro, to buy a house. And then show those who are watching (and believe me, people are watching) that they can be first too.

Where do you want to “go first” in your life? What will it give you?

3. Look for the helpers. Mr. Rogers said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’” Mr. Rogers’s quote is powerful, especially for women because women are often the helpers and struggle with asking for help. I purposely did not say, “Be a helper,” because you already know how to do that. Now is the time to learn to look for the helpers.

Helpers look like many things. They can be allies. They can be sponsors. They can be men. And they can be women. Helpers can live on a dollar a day or have the glass office on the top floor in a big international city. When you’re out there being more of you, you are not alone. There are helpers. Surround yourself with them. What is something scary for you right now? Who are your helpers? Now, go ask for help.

**GO FORTH, FUTURE PROBLEM SOLVER.
TAKE UP SPACE, UNAPOLOGETICALLY.
AND MOXIEON.**

P.S. MOXIE. It means guts, pluck, sass, courage, and energy. I use it as an adjective, noun, and verb. When I say “MOXIEon,” I mean “Be your most powerful self and change the world.”



3

WONDER WOMAN IS NOT REAL.

A pedestal is as much a prison as any small, confined space.

—GLORIA STEINEM

“**What would Wonder Woman do?**” is scrawled across my writing notebook in gold. I wonder, *What would Wonder Woman do right now?* Would she fight for a nonviolent world like Eve Ensler? Would she fight for respect like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez? Would she fight for disability rights like Haben Girma?

When I hot-roller my hair and stand on stage, I am told I look like Wonder Woman.

When I started Academy for Women’s Empowerment to create a more equitable and safer world for women, I was told I am noble like Wonder Woman.

I know from my boyfriend’s obsession with vintage comic books that she was created by a feminist. A man. William Moulton Marston believed that women were mentally stronger than men and that the United States would one day be ruled by a matriarchy. He shared this idea with the Harvard Club in 1937.¹ In 1942, a press release about Marston read, “‘Wonder Woman’ was conceived by Dr. Marston to set up a standard among children

¹ Klein, Christopher. “Wonder Woman’s Surprising Origins.” <https://www.history.com/news/wonder-woman-origins>

and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and achievement in athletics, occupations and professions monopolized by men.”

Fascinated and curious, I looked up the definition of Wonder Woman online.

Wonder Woman: 1. A woman who can be a successful wife and have a professional career at the same time. 2. A woman of extraordinary powers.

Hmm . . . I’m not married and don’t plan on that ever changing. Where does this leave unmarried, childless women like me?

“A woman of extraordinary powers.” Power—I find women struggle with this word. When I encourage them to “Own Their Power” in coaching or a conversation, I usually get one or more of the following responses: (1) Confusion; she doesn’t have any idea how to own her power. (2) Fear; she is afraid of her power. (3) Disgust; she thinks power is a dirty word.

To clarify, the power I’m referring to is Personal Power. The power to . . . work and raise a family. The power to . . . choose if you want children or not. The power to . . . save money to buy a house or send your children to college.

Not Societal Power, which is the power over . . . the wife. The power over . . . the young woman. The power over . . . the system.

Girls and women around the world are raised to give our power away. We are raised with an external locus of control. I learned about the locus of control reading Mary Pipher’s book *Reviving Ophelia*. Locus of control is a psychological concept, developed by Julian B. Rotter, that refers to the degree to which individuals believe they control situations, experiences, and outcomes in their lives. That what they do matters.

For example, I was talking on the phone with Lila, who was considering hiring me to work with her women-in-tech group. As I was getting to know her, she told me a story about how when she was in college, she started a company in her dorm

room and sold it for over a million dollars before graduation. She sighed. “I am lucky.”

“You’re a serial entrepreneur and have managed more money than most women will have access to in their lifetimes. And you’re not even thirty. That doesn’t sound like luck to me,” I pointed out.

“You’re right. When my friends were out partying all night, I was pulling all-nighters creating presentations for men who would ignore me or hit on me. When my friends were going on spring break, I stayed on campus to finish one more proposal. When my friends were napping during their lunch breaks, I was running a business. It’s grit, not luck.”

Initially, Lila was externalizing her power: luck. Then when she reflected, she internalized her power: she worked hard, sacrificed, navigated politics, and earned over a million dollars with her extraordinary powers.

Then she asked, “So how do you help women?”

I paused. “Just like I did with you. I help them see how their limiting beliefs get in the way of owning their power and taking up space. Once they own their power, they can make more space for other women.”

“Let’s find a date for you to come and work with us,” Lila said.



EXTRAORDINARY POWERS.

When I think of “extraordinary powers,” I think of my dear friend Gina, who is a “Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! And able to leap tall building in a single bound” person. She threw a going-away party for me when I moved overseas, drove on icy roads to be with me when my dad was in the hospital, and brought me SnackWell’s cookies in graduate school (so I wouldn’t eat all of hers). Gina can do anything and everything at the same time. From the outside it looked like

Gina had Extraordinary Powers because she was “doing it all,” a real-life Wonder Woman. There was a meme going around on Facebook about checking in on your strong friends. I checked on Gina. Her brother was supposed to visit her mom before she died. I texted her, “Did your brother make it?”

“He just landed. Jeffrey [her husband] had to pick my brother up because I’m in the ER.”

She sent me a photo of some growth on her leg. *Did she catch what her mom had? Is she going to lose her leg?*

“Wthuh?” I texted back.

“Bad accident in the kitchen with boiling water. I’d rather have a baby; it hurts really bad. Like I needed more adventure in my life,” she replied.

I was about to text back but called instead, like the olden days before texting; I didn’t want her to hide behind texts. We talked and laughed as the morphine settled in. We hugged each other over the phone line and then hung up.

My boyfriend asked, “How can you laugh when she has second-degree burns?”

That’s what Wonder Woman does. But Wonder Woman isn’t real.

What if he was right? How could we laugh? If we weren’t laughing, we would have been crying. And we’d both been taught that crying is not OK.



DEPRESSION IS REAL.

It was August 2018. My boyfriend showed me a photo from our recent Fourth of July cabin trip with his family. I saw me. But it was not me. My eyes were empty. I was disheveled. I teared up. “Why didn’t you say something?”

He was quiet. “I didn’t know what to say.”

This was not supposed to happen to me. I was Wonder

Woman. Business was growing. My tennis serve was improving. I was in a golf league. The POWERcamp had turned into the Academy for Girls' Empowerment and was now a national initiative in El Salvador. Women who graduated from my programs had changed policies, fought for equal pay, started employee resource groups, and challenged the status quo and were now the managers sponsoring the next round of women leaders. Thousands of lives have been changed because of my hard work and MOXIE.

And yet I was depressed. That holiday weekend, I stayed in my room and read two books. Nobody came for me. Nobody checked in on me.

I felt so alone. Alone in my failures: a big corporate deal had fallen through after it was signed, leaving me without income for three months. One of my favorite family members was struggling again with addiction. I'd gained seven pounds. I not only *felt* alone, I *was* alone. I felt nobody could handle what I was feeling. I was depressed, and nobody knew.

I'd been depressed one other time in my life. It was 1996. I knew I was depressed because I'd given my Alanis Morissette ticket away. It was a time where I was disconnected from the family system I grew up in. Giving my Alanis ticket away sounded an alarm to my friends; they knew I was not well. They stopped by my apartment randomly to check on me. Even friends of friends stopped by. They were on Kristi Watch. Back then, I created a safe space to heal and learned to lean on friends.

But this time, there was nobody on Kristi Watch. Being an entrepreneur is lonely and hard. Like having a baby, except a business is not adorable. Nobody gets mad when you spend time and energy on a new baby, but they do when it's a business. My friends and family said, "Your niece misses you." "Of course you can't talk, because you're busy." "When are you going to settle down?" Nobody noticed. I was invisible, like Wonder Woman's jet.

A month later, I visited an old friend from my Leadership Academy days, and I told her about how awful my summer was. She looked at me and said, “But you’re Wonder Woman. We all look up to you. How can you not be strong? We need you.”

I wanted to scream, “*That’s not fair! Why do I have to be Wonder Woman?*” I would almost rather be damn Cinderella. Almost. “Wonder Woman isn’t real,” I replied.



How many of you know a “Wonder Woman”? How many of you have been told you are “Wonder Woman”?

Wonder Woman’s most noted superpower is her Lasso of Truth.

Let’s try it out. Right now. You must answer truthfully because, you know, the Lasso of Truth.

LET’S START WITH A DEEP BREATH.

Are you OK?

SCAN YOUR BODY. BREATHE.

Are you really OK?

PAUSE. BREATHE.

What do you need to be OK?

PAUSE. BREATHE.

Sometimes you’re not OK. And that’s OK. Because Wonder Woman is not real.

HOW TO NOT BE WONDER WOMAN.

1. Take up space. Own your emotional state and space. It’s OK to be mad. It’s OK to be sad. Hell, it’s even OK not to be OK. Say something. Let others in. And own your emotional intelligence. Don’t let society use words that minimize our ability to feel, to connect, and to empathize. We do not create drama; we feel. We are not gossips; we connect. We are not weak; we

empathize. Like superstar New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern says, “It takes strength to be an empathetic leader.” How is your emotional intelligence a strength? Where can you use it to do the most good?

2. Be first. Talk about how you’re really doing; find the friend who is able to listen and be comfortable with the uncomfortable. And don’t let others label you. “I’m not Wonder Woman. I’m Kristi, who right now is OK. But please do check back. Often.” How are you really doing? Who can you reach out to?

3. Look for the helpers. Sometimes helpers are paid for. I have a therapist who helps me not to be a caretaker and to understand what Little Kristi needs to heal. The work I do in the world is disruptive; I’m not always liked. I have a group of women around the world who remind me that 1.) I don’t have to be liked by everyone. 2.) They like me. What do you need to be OK?

**NOW, DO SOMETHING THAT MAKES YOU FEEL MORE
OK THAN YOU DID BEFORE READING THIS.**

Gratitudes

TO MY DREAM KEEPERS.

This is what fifty looks like.

—KRISTI HEMMER

Writing and publishing *Quit Being So Good* has been my dream since I was eight; thank you for being part of the dream. Gratu-
itudes to my Dream Keepers, who have protected my dream of
being a published author from, as Langston Hughes wrote, “the
too-rough fingers of the world” all along.

Linda Hemmer: for believing that I was always writing a book.

Dennis Hemmer: for teaching me not to give up.

Michael Bartus: for loving me as a single, childless woman.

Amy Quale: for believing the three steps could dismantle the patriarchy.

A-team: for encouraging me to write the book and believing that it was a Big Deal.

Team Kristi: for the feedback, the pushback, and the “I have your back.”

My students (young and old and the young who are now old): for making me a better human.

My teachers (like Mrs. Cain, Mrs. Boyes, and Mrs. Leifker): who inspired me to teach, to write, and to love unconditionally.

Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: for making me not feel so alone.

Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within*: for "getting" me.

Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia*: for inspiring me to own my power and make sure other girls and women do too.

The Wise Ink team: for your extra hours, love, and time for making my voice readable.

You, the Reader: for your trust and guts in reading until the MOXIE end.

IN LOVE AND MOXIE,

Kristi

About the Author



Kristi, age eight, when she first declared she was going to be an author.

Why do women and girls shrink in a classroom, boardroom, and conversation? This question made educator Kristi Hemmer so mad that she quit her six-figure job in Tokyo to answer the question and solve the problem. For four years, she traveled the world on twenty dollars a day learning about social entrepreneurship. In the process, she founded Academy for Women's Empowerment (AWE). AWE has inspired thousands of changemakers around the world to disrupt the systems of power and create a safer and more equitable world for women and girls. Kristi Hemmer has a master's degree in education. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and everywhere else in the world, for that matter. To learn more or invite Kristi to your organization, visit www.kristihemmer.com.