Could You Be a Hero?

By Elizabeth Svoboda

Meet three teens who discovered their superpowers in life-or-death situations. Then learn how to find your own inner strength.

It seemed like an ordinary bus ride home from school for Graceanne Rumer, then 17. Feeling the strain of a heavy workload, she was struggling to keep her eyes open. “It was a few days before midterms, and I was really worn out,” Graceanne recalls. “I got on the bus and told one of my friends, ‘I’m so tired, I just want to go to sleep.’”

Within a few minutes, though, Graceanne was jolted awake. The bus driver had passed out, slumped over the wheel, and the school bus was veering out of control—straight into the oncoming lane of traffic. One younger girl on the bus said to her, “You have your license—drive the bus!” Even though she was gripped by panic, Graceanne managed to take action. She rushed to the front of the bus, grabbed the wheel to steer the bus away from oncoming cars, then pulled safely to the side of the road. It was as if she went on superhero autopilot. “I didn’t think,” she says. “I just kind of did it.” After that, the young bus riders got out and reunited with their grateful families.“ All the parents were hugging me. I’m definitely glad that I was able to do it.”

You might think you don’t have the special blend of bravery and selflessness it takes to step up like Graceanne did, but it turns out heroes aren’t just born—they’re made. “Some people think that to be a hero, you have to have some special skill that goes above and beyond what ordinary people have,” says Zeno Franco, a psychologist who studies heroic action at the Medical College of Wisconsin. “We’ve moved from that position. What we’re saying now is that anyone can become a hero.”

## The Hero Spectrum

To understand how ordinary people become heroes, it helps to think of heroism as a range of helpful acts. On one end of the spectrum you have feats of “everyday heroism,” like helping someone cross the street. These good deeds are relatively low-risk. And on the other end, you have high-stakes heroism, like rescuing someone from a burning building. Both are important. In surveys, a pioneer in hero research, Phil Zimbardo, has found that people who help others on a regular basis (those who volunteer an average of 60 hours a year) are also more likely to behave heroically, like Graceanne did. That may be because by flexing that generosity muscle so often, they’re strengthening it, making them more likely to take a grand heroic action, even when it means facing personal risk.

That means you can give yourself “hero-in-training” assignments: Smile at the homeless man you pass on your way to school, tell a great teacher how much she means to you, or stick up for a kid in your class who’s getting bullied.

And while scientists are still studying the connections between everyday generosity and high-stakes heroism, real-life examples do point to a link. After the Boston Marathon bombings, for example, many doctors and nurses rushed into the fray to aid victims. Since they devote themselves to others day-in and day-out, helping was second nature to them. They didn’t have to pause and figure out what to do—their daily lives have been perfect preparation.

## Getting Schooled

It might seem unlikely that you could learn to be a hero the same way you learn Spanish or math, but Zimbardo and others believe you can. Zimbardo founded the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP), a San Francisco-based organization dedicated to helping ordinary people become everyday heroes.

Zimbardo and his HIP colleagues have devised a “heroic education” curriculum for high school students. Future Avengers learn about mental obstacles that may hold them back from behaving selflessly. Studies show that people are less likely to help when many others are in the vicinity—a phenomenon known as the “bystander effect.” Peer pressure—worrying that people will give you a hard time if you lend someone else a hand—can also come into play. But once students become skilled at recognizing such thoughts, they can consciously put them aside to help someone in need.

Participants in the HIP programs felt it upped their potential by teaching them to push past their own resistance and step forward to help. One young hero-in-training even stepped in when he saw a bus rider having an asthma attack. Even though nobody else tried to help, the student remembered what he’d learned at the HIP and realized he didn’t want to fall prey to the bystander effect. So he told the driver to stop and led the wheezing rider off the bus to get assistance.

## Can You Help?

Could you put yourself on the line for someone else, just as Marcos did? It’s hard to know for sure until you’re tested in the real world. But as you seek out ways to help others, keep in mind that seizing big-time heroic opportunities requires good judgment. Zimbardo cautions that you shouldn’t jump into the action without thinking. If you try to tackle a bank robber who’s wielding a gun, you could easily get hurt or killed. Sometimes it’s better to alert the authorities than to put yourself in danger.

Your quest to be a hero will likely have more staying power if you start small, with generous acts you feel confident you can carry out. Although mowing your elderly neighbor’s lawn or mentoring an elementary-school kid won’t get you on the cover of People magazine, you’ll still make a very real difference in people’s lives—and feel great about yourself for doing it.

And ultimately, by being kind and connecting to others on a daily basis, you might be ready to step up in the same outsized, seemingly effortless way that a superhero does. Only you will know how you had been purposely working toward that moment all along.