Women Who Say Yes to the Spark
A Story Series by Angie Thompson
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Marching to Her Own Beat: The Unshakable Journey of LaJuana Duncan

If her story were a film, it would open on the Ka'iwi Channel—one of the roughest stretches of ocean in the world—deep, restless blue between Molokai and Oahu where twelve-foot swells rise without warning and paddlers earn their courage the hard way. It took her nearly eight hours to cross that channel—eight hours of grit and rhythm with a six-woman crew moving as one.

A woman waits in open ocean, arm lifted for balance as she holds position for the next crew change. No shoreline. No applause. Only breath and instinct.

The Molokai Channel didn't create her courage.

It revealed what had always been there.

Roots in Red Dirt and Quiet Strength

LaJuana's story begins in the red dirt of Atwood, Oklahoma, and the warm, dusty air of Parker, Arizona. Her family's Atwood farm is a fourth-generation cattle operation—the kind of place where work isn't taught so much as absorbed.

School years unfolded on the Colorado River Indian Tribes reservation, where her father taught and her mother served as the high school secretary. School wasn't just a building—it was a smell. She still remembers the scent of fresh paper from her father's textbooks, something that pulls her instantly back to those early years.

Her parents led by showing up, pitching in, and caring for people—quiet, steady lessons that shaped her view of leadership.

She married young—her first marriage to the son of the CRIT chairman—and that chapter brought two children and her earliest lessons in resilience. By her early twenties, she was raising them on her own, both

LaJuana Duncan

under the age of five, working constantly and realizing she could survive far more than she once imagined.

As her life expanded, her work did too. She rose from the basement copy room of a telephone company to assisting its executives. She became the only woman selling Chevrolets on the lot. She traveled the country to watch mall magazines

come off the press—learning to notice details most people never see. And in a small funeral home in Coy, Arkansas, she witnessed racial inequities she would never forget.

Those years toughened her—teaching her to adapt, listen, and keep moving.

Finding Strength on the Water

Hawaii opened a chapter she never expected.

"Growing up, I wasn't athletic," she laughs. "Nobody wanted me on their sports teams." But the Hawaiian Canoe Club didn't care. It taught her endurance, balance, humility, and trust. She felt something click the first time she paddled into open water.

She spent ten years with the Kīhei Canoe Club on Maui—serving a year as club president and later becoming a lifetime member—and ten more years with the Keaukaha Canoe Club on Hawai'i Island. During that time, she trained, raced, and competed in long-distance events, including the 32-mile NaPali Challenge off the coast of the Island of Kauai, one of the island's notable endurance races.

"The Molokai Channel didn't make me brave; it just showed me how far that courage could go."

She also crossed the Molokai Channel three times in the prestigious forty-two-mile Nā Wāhine O Ke Kai, the *Women of the Sea* race.

"Paddling proved what I already knew about myself," she says. "The Molokai Channel didn't make me brave; it showed me how far that courage could go."

Her defining moment came during a race off Kauai, when she noticed two women in their seventies paddling with absolute authority—strong, grounded, unshaken by the ocean beneath them.

"That's who I want to be," she thought.

Still moving.
Still learning.
Still willing to try.
It became a quiet blueprint for her life.

Building Something From Nothing

That same endurance carried her into entrepreneurship.

She founded *Hawaii Blooms* with $100 and a handwritten price list—washing flowers in a bathtub on the lawn, hauling boxes to inspectors, and growing it into a 20-employee operation with a nationwide customer base.

Her home became her headquarters—kitchen for employees, dining room for bookkeeping, living room for sales, twelve phone lines buzzing with orders.

Through it all, her husband Dave was her steady anchor.

"He always says, 'As long as you can pay for it, you can do it,'" she laughs.

"It wasn't permission," she says. "It was partnership."

One order even shipped to the White House—a milestone that confirmed she could build something meaningful from the ground up.

Real estate sharpened her instincts. She sold homes across Hawaii, building confidence and intuition, and still keeps her broker's license active—"just in case."

Then came the call from Oklahoma Farm Bureau Insurance. They offered her an office in Holdenville, the town where she was born. Three years later she moved

to Okemah, where her team reached #1 in the state for new membership.

When she later transferred to Bartlesville, she doubled her book of business in ten years.

"My word is strong," she says. "People know they can trust me."

She joined the Chamber, completed Leadership Bartlesville Class 31, earned the *Jake Bartles Award*, and was later nominated for *Businesswoman of the Year*. Her daughter and brother followed her into the field, extending her legacy of resilience and leadership.

Stepping Into What's Next

Retirement made her pause—What now?—but not for long.

She kayaks Oklahoma lakes.

She runs 5Ks "because I like the shiny medal."

She keeps moving, keeps choosing, keeps learning.

Her advice to younger women?

- Don't be afraid.
- Put in the effort.
- Stay willing to learn.
- Follow your gut.
- And remember: You always have the right to choose.

"I've always marched to my own beat," she says. "That's the name of my song."

Where to Find Her Now

If you're looking for LaJuana today, look toward the water.

She'll be the woman paddling across an Oklahoma lake—steady, focused, unhurried—the same woman who once crossed the Ka'iwi Channel with a six-woman crew, trusting her strength one stroke at a time.

Still moving toward whatever comes next.

Still choosing her direction.

Still marching to her own beat.

LaJuana & Dave Duncan

About LaJuana Duncan

LaJuana Duncan is an entrepreneur and insurance professional known for her resilience and steady leadership. A former Hawaii paddler with three Molokai Channel crossings, she built successful businesses and top-ranked insurance offices before retiring on December 31, 2025. She continues to mentor others and keep moving toward what comes next.

About the Writer and Permissions

I'm Angie Thompson—a fundraising strategist, storyteller, and consultant who believes words and images can spark transformation. 've partnered with nonprofits, small businesses, and purpose-driven individuals to help them move beyond generic messaging into clear, compelling communication that inspires action. My work as a writer, composer, and brand consultant has earned awards in film, television, and philanthropy, and continues to fuel my passion for stories that build connection and change lives.

Disclaimer

The narrative presented in this story is based on personal interviews and reflections of LaJuana Duncan. The views and memories shared are her own and are included with permission. This feature is part of the *Women with a Spark* series and is intended to celebrate the subject's influence and leadership.