

Walking Through Fire: My Personal Training Origin Story

By Lance Callahan

My earliest memory is just a flash—a glimpse into a world I had not yet begun to understand. It was 1980. I was three or four years old. I know this because the accident that changed everything happened sometime that year.

I must have been lying on the shoulder of a Los Angeles freeway, moments—perhaps only minutes—after being pulled from the back seat of a two-door car that was fully engulfed in flames. I remember the overpass not far from where I lay, cars and trucks gliding above, the world carrying on as mine came apart. I don't remember the fire itself, or the pain of being burned. Maybe the memory was too terrible, and my mind did what minds sometimes do—it sealed the door shut.

What I do know is that I survived. My life was saved by a stranger, a bystander who stopped his car when the crash brought traffic to a halt. My mother was driving that day. Whether fear froze her or cruelty ruled her, I don't know—she escaped, but I was left inside. Maybe she tried to help and couldn't. We never talked about it. Now we don't talk at all.

I lived, though the fire left its signature. Third-degree burns covered my hands and scalp and left small scars on my face. Doctors took skin from my hips and thighs to graft over the damaged areas. I've always assumed I must have raised my hands to shield my face—an instinct that spared it. Thank God for instinct.

Many burn victims live hidden lives, too wounded to face a world that often recoils from what it doesn't understand. I've been luckier than most. After months in the hospital, I learned to wear hats to conceal the bald, scarred patches on my scalp where hair no longer grew. By six I was wearing hairpieces, hoping, like Pinocchio, to become a real boy—a normal boy—a happy boy.

But I never felt normal. The scars weren't just on my skin; they lived in me. I wouldn't begin to heal, not really, until twelve years later, when I picked up my first weight and began to build something no fire could destroy.

Fast-forward to 1994. I was nearly eighteen and about to step into a gym for the first time. I was a freshman at the Boston Conservatory, studying musical theater, still marked by adolescent acne and a lifetime of shame. I had no idea that walking through the doors of Gold's Gym in Boston would change everything.

I was terrified. I half-expected to be laughed out of the room—for being too small, too unsure, too me. I didn't even know what a "man" was supposed to be. My father was mostly absent, my role models few: He-Man, the cartoon hero with muscles and moral clarity; Uncle Nando, my father's brother, a recreational bodybuilder; and David Green, the director of my high-school theater program—the rare adult who truly believed in me.

Still, I carried shame. Shame about my body, my scars, my voice, my very existence. My mother—herself bitter and broken—taught me that pride was dangerous. She belittled whatever gave me joy. The lesson stuck: hide what you love or it will be taken from you.

By ten I had become a phantom, hiding beneath hats and hairpieces, afraid to be seen. Yet somewhere inside, a gentler spirit survived. It surfaced when I saw a dog, or looked up at the sky. Those small, natural mercies kept me alive when nothing else did.

So when I entered that Boston gym, clutching my new membership card, I wanted more than muscles. I wanted belonging. I wanted transformation.

That first day, I only managed to sign up. I couldn't bring myself to touch a single weight. It took two weeks of silent courage before I returned. The room was vast, echoing with the clang of plates and the hiss of machines. I wandered aimlessly, pretending I belonged, until I found a machine labeled "Chest Pec Something." I sat on it—backward, I later learned—and fumbled with the handles, my heart racing with humiliation. After a few awkward moments, I fled. That was my first workout.

But I wasn't discouraged. Something had awakened.

A few months later I dropped out of the Conservatory—miserable, lonely, and certain I was meant for something else. Back in Los Angeles, I landed my first professional theater role, a small musical that rekindled my ambition. Soon I found myself at the Pantages Theater, watching Sam Harris—a fellow Star Search alum I'd idolized—perform Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Sam was strong, confident, and shirtless for most of the show. I wanted that kind of freedom.

So I joined another gym. I lifted every day. My body changed fast, faster than I'd believed possible. The acne medication helped, too. For the first time, I could look in the mirror without flinching. I saw not the frightened boy my mother raised but someone new—someone capable.

Six months later, auditions opened for a Los Angeles production of Joseph. It felt like fate. On the application, I lied about two things: my age (I said nineteen, not eighteen) and my job (I wrote Personal Trainer instead of print-shop clerk). It was wishful thinking—but the wish came true. I got the role.

I played Joseph twice before leaving theater behind at twenty-four to become, for real, what I'd once pretended to be: a personal trainer. The "day job" became my purpose. I still sing, but now it's for myself. My work is for others—for every person who's ever felt small or unseen.

And then came the full-circle moment. In my mid-thirties, the very same Sam Harris called to hire me as his trainer. We'd never met before; he didn't even know I'd once looked up to him. After our first session, I told him how he had inspired me all those years ago. We both cried. It was one of those rare moments when life folds back on itself, and you can finally see the pattern in the burn marks.

So thank you, Sam, Nando, David—and yes, He-Man. You helped me find my strength.

Today I live to share that strength. I lend others the optimism and steady support I never had, because I know what it means to build yourself up from nothing. I've walked through fire to stand here.

Walk with me.

About the Author

Lance Callahan is a Los Angeles-based personal trainer and lifelong advocate for self-esteem through strength. A burn survivor, former performer, and wellness coach, he helps clients build both physical and emotional resilience—one rep at a time.