Nonfiction

Character Trait: Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from a major setback. In this article, Bethany Hamilton shows incredible resilience. As you read, look for examples of this character trait.

**Halloween 2003.** It was a gorgeous morning on the north shore of Kauai, Hawaii. The sun was starting to rise, lighting up the horizon in brilliant pinks and purples. Out on the open sea, Bethany Hamilton was in her own personal version of heaven: on her surfboard, waiting for a wave.

She was only 13 years old, but already Bethany was one of Hawaii’s most promising young surfers. From the first time she stood on a board at age 5, the feeling of riding waves brought her an indescribable thrill. Her talent was unmistakable. She was winning major amateur surf contests by her 10th birthday. Only the most elite, most dedicated surfers make it to the professional level. Few doubted that Bethany would get there one day.

Just moments later, however, Bethany’s life would change forever.

As Bethany floated happily on her board, a 15-foot tiger shark, one of the deadliest predators in the ocean, was stalking her. Her arm dangled in the water; perhaps the metallic glint of her watch attracted the shark. She did not see the shark...
“NOW WHAT?”

What happened next was a blur. Bethany recalls being laid on the sand. Bystanders rushed to help, covering her with towels. She winced as Holt removed the bandage and tied off the stump with a surf leash, which is like surgical tubing. Someone produced a first-aid kit and wrapped the wound with gauze. The bite had caused the arteries in her arm to tighten, so the wound wasn’t spewing blood. Still, even with the leash tightly bound, she was bleeding badly. Time was running out.

After what seemed like an eternity, the ambulance finally arrived at the remote beach. Drifting in and out of consciousness, Bethany listened to the siren’s shrill wail and longed deeply for her mother. She didn’t know that her family had already been alerted, and that her mom was trailing behind the ambulance, trying desperately to stay strong for her.

By the time she reached the emergency room, Bethany had lost more than half of her body’s blood. As her shocked parents and two brothers held vigil in the waiting room, the doctors went to work. First they cleaned the wound; those who survive a shark bite can die from infection later. Then they tied off the nerves in what was left of her arm. This, they hoped, would reduce phantom pain—a common condition in which a person feels an excruciating sensation of pain, itching, or burning in a missing limb. Despite the blood loss, the doctors were confident that Bethany would pull through. Holt’s quick thinking and Bethany’s cool-headedness had saved the day. If Bethany had panicked, her fast-beating heart would have pumped even more blood out of her wound.

When Bethany came out of surgery, she was relieved to see her family, but she found herself staring at the bandage around her shoulder, trying to grasp that her arm really was gone. *Now what*? she wondered.

Within 24 hours, Bethany’s strength was returning. A steady stream of visitors lifted her spirits. Soon, her hospital room was overflowing with flowers, cards, balloons, and stuffed animals from people around the world. Alana brought her a stack of newspaper articles about the attack. It seemed Bethany had become a celebrity.

Even though the support was galvanizing, she couldn’t help but notice how everyone looked at her. “I remember seeing sorrow on people’s faces,” she says. “They wanted the same Bethany they had known before.”
Bethany set them straight. True, she was lying in a hospital, wrapped in bandages and missing her arm. But, she told them, “I am the same person on the inside.” Indeed, by her second day in the hospital, Bethany had only one question: “When can I get back in the water?”

Her doctors said that it would take time to adjust to life with one arm—that simple tasks like tying shoelaces would be more difficult, that a therapist would teach her new ways of doing things. She tried to pay attention, but her thoughts kept drifting to the sea, to the memory of the warm salt water and the rush of catching a big “gnarly” wave.

She made herself a promise: to be on a surfboard by Thanksgiving Day. Then, to stand up, she had to place her hand on the center of the board, rather than grab the sides as you would with two hands. Lifting her feet turned out to be a big challenge, and she fell on her first attempt. She tried a second time. No luck. She tried a third time. And a fourth. Again and again, she struggled to stand until she was exhausted. She hadn’t expected it to be so hard.

Just when she was thinking of quitting, her dad called out: “Try it one more time. This will be it!”

Preparing herself, Bethany spotted a wave. She put her hand firmly on the board. She planted her feet and slowly stood. Ecstatic cheers erupted from her friends back on the beach. Bethany burst into tears of joy.

With this personal victory behind her, Bethany still had a long road ahead if she wanted to be ready for competition. With the help of her two coaches, she launched into a rigorous regimen of swimming, running, and strength training.

**“BIGGER AND BETTER”**

A little more than a year after the attack, Bethany astounded the world by coming in first place at the National Championships, one of the toughest competitions for amateurs. That win launched her professional career—fulfilling her lifelong dream.

Today, Bethany is a professional competitive surfer—one of the best in the world. Everywhere she goes, fans beg for her autograph. A movie about her life is playing in theaters.

So how does she get in the ocean day after day? “Sometimes my heart pounds when I see a shadow under the water,” she admits. “But to dwell on what might happen would totally suck the joy out of the sport.”

Bethany’s incredible comeback is not only part of her story. As she found her way back to surfing, she was flooded with letters thanking her for being an inspiration. She realized her purpose was greater than just being an elite surfer. Now she uses her fame and fortune to help children with disabilities who live in poverty get the care they need. She also sponsors her own organization for amputees in the U.S. and gives motivational speeches around the world.

“I made the decision early on not to mourn the loss [of my arm], and I’ve stuck to that,” Bethany says. “Past is past. On to bigger and better!”

Bethany had to learn to surf all over again. First, she had to figure out how to paddle evenly with one arm. She made herself a promise to be on a surfboard by Thanksgiving Day. She had to learn to surf all over again. First, she had to figure out how to paddle evenly with one arm.