

Jen Bricker



# THE AMAZING POWERS OF JEN BRICKER

**NARRATIVE NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction  
but it's all true

**An incredible story of love, grit, and dreaming big. BY KRISTIN LEWIS**

**AS YOU READ** Think about the meaning of the title.

**J**en Bricker hangs 30 feet above the ground, cocooned in red fabric suspended from the ceiling. The audience gasps as she rolls out of the fabric, unfurling her body like a flag, her long dark hair tumbling down behind her in a wave. She moves with the grace of a ballerina and the strength of a linebacker.

Jen is an aerialist, an acrobat who performs daring feats high in the air. She's appeared on stages from Malaysia to Germany. In the country of Qatar, she made a grand entrance dangling from a hot-air balloon. While on tour with Britney Spears, she performed a high-flying trampoline act. Jen's career is impressive by any measure, but it is all the more extraordinary because Jen was born without legs.

## Alone in the World

Jen was born in 1987 in Salem, Illinois. With her big brown eyes and thick black hair, she was adorable. But something was different about her. Because of a **genetic defect**, her legs never formed. Her biological father decided he couldn't handle raising a child with a disability. He insisted on leaving Jen at the hospital, forbidding her mother from even seeing her.

And so Jen came into the world utterly alone: without parents, without even a name.

Special-needs children can be particularly vulnerable; they are statistically harder to place for adoption. Today in the U.S., more than 110,000 special-needs kids are waiting for permanent homes.

Jen's future seemed uncertain at best.

## "She Was Ours"

Less than 100 miles from Salem, in the small town of Hardinville, Illinois, lived Gerald and Sharon Bricker and their three sons. The Bricker home was a happy one. Still, Gerald and Sharon felt something was missing from their lives.

They had always wanted a little girl but couldn't have more children. So they decided to adopt one. A friend told them about an infant, born





without legs, who had been placed in a foster home not too far away. The Brickers set out to meet her.

“She was this tiny itty bitty thing,” Sharon recalls. “She was so beautiful.”

“She just looked up and smiled at us, and she was ours,” Gerald says.

Though there wasn’t a doubt in their minds that Jen was their daughter, the Brickers wanted to understand what kind of medical care she would need. They consulted with doctors, who painted a bleak picture of what Jen’s life would be like. One doctor even suggested Gerald and Sharon carry Jen around in a bucket.

The Brickers didn’t come away with a clear idea of what exactly Jen would need, but they were determined that whatever it was, they would find a way to provide it. They knew Jen was destined for a lot more than life in a bucket.

### Agile and Fearless

As it turned out, Jen was a natural athlete—**agile** and fearless. She quickly learned to get around using her arms.

Jen “walks” by placing her hands on the ground in front of her, lifting herself up and pulling herself forward. Indeed, Jen is as adept walking on her hands as others are walking on their feet—though she

does have to be careful where she “steps,” avoiding bugs, dog poop, and any other hazards lurking on the ground. (She uses a wheelchair when she doesn’t want to get dirty.) Not surprisingly, her upper body is incredibly strong.

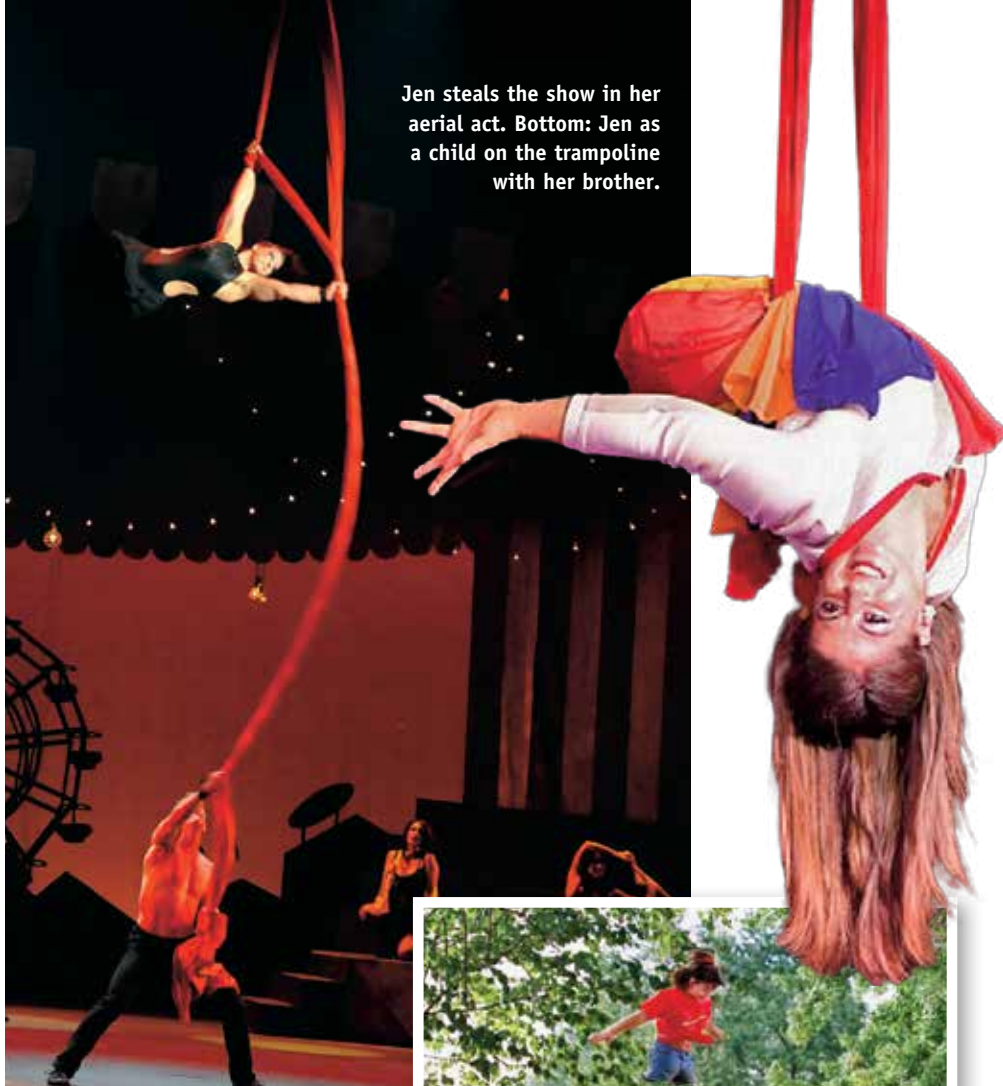
Growing up, Jen was always playing with her big brothers, scurrying up rocks, swimming, and bouncing on the big trampoline in her family’s backyard. When she was about 2, a doctor outfitted

her with **prosthetic** legs, but she loathed wearing them, preferring to move on her hands instead.

### Can-Do Spirit

Technically, Jen has a “disability,” which is defined as a physical or mental condition that

Jen steals the show in her aerial act. Bottom: Jen as a child on the trampoline with her brother.



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BARRY KING/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF JEN BRICKER

limits a person’s activities. But Jen says she’s fortunate. Growing up, she felt she could do anything she put her mind to—whether it was playing on the volleyball team or stealing the ball on the basketball court.

Jen’s positive outlook was **instilled** in her from a young age. “Can’t” was never part of her vocabulary. In the Bricker house, the word was simply not allowed.

“We were always telling her, ‘You can do anything you want to do,’” Gerald says. “We just had to figure it out and off she’d go.”

Perhaps it’s not surprising that Jen was something of a **prodigy** in sports. In elementary school, she could speed around the softball diamond on her hands. She snowboarded and fished and rode horses. She even taught herself to roller-skate on her hands.

But gymnastics was where Jen really shone. She started training at a nearby gym when she was 7. She would race down the mat on her hands, launch herself onto the vault, then rocket into the air, flipping with power and ease. When Jen was 11, she took home gold at the state gymnastics championship, beating out the able-bodied gymnasts.

She would often gaze at a poster that hung in her gym—a poster of her idol, 1996 Olympic champ Dominique Moceanu. One day, Jen announced to her family that she was going to go to the Olympics too—just like Dominique.

That may have seemed unlikely, but the Brickers knew their daughter would continue to defy expectations.

### A Lot of Attention

Jen’s success **garnered** her a lot of attention. Articles were written about her. News crews came to her school to film her. She was even flown to New York City to be on a popular talk show.

At the time, she found the attention bewildering. She remembers thinking, “This is dumb. I am not anything special. Why am I an inspiration to you?”

Like many kids in middle school, Jen sometimes longed to blend in. But as she learned, when you don’t have legs, anywhere you go, people are going to notice you.

### It Seemed Impossible

During the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia, Jen, who was 8 at the time, sat glued to the television, watching **rapt** as Dominique Moceanu tumbled her way to a gold medal. Long after the Olympics ended, Jen continued to

Jen and her adoptive parents, Gerald and Sharon



admire Dominique. Yet she felt like more than a fan obsessed with a famous athlete. Jen was struck by the similarities between herself and her idol. They were both gymnasts, they were both of Romanian descent, they both had big eyes, tan skin, and long dark hair. Even Jen’s mom had to admit that her daughter and Dominique shared an **uncanny** resemblance.

It turns out, that resemblance was not a coincidence.

Seeing Dominique’s name on the TV screen during the Olympics, Sharon suddenly remembered something: the name of Jen’s biological family. The name had mistakenly been included in Jen’s hospital records.

That name was *Moceanu*.

It seemed impossible—and yet it made perfect sense. Jen and Dominique were sisters.

### Now What?

Gerald and Sharon decided to wait until Jen was 16 to tell her about Dominique. When they revealed the truth, Jen felt like she was living in a dream.

“The girl I idolized, the girl I watched on TV . . . she’s my biological sister?” Jen thought.

It took Jen four years to track down Dominique’s address. While searching, Jen discovered that she had another sister, Christina. Finally, in 2007, Jen sat down to write Dominique an old-fashioned letter.

By the time Dominique—who



had since retired from gymnastics—got to the end of Jen’s letter, she was weeping. She immediately called her mom, who confirmed the story. Soon after, Dominique and Jen spoke on the phone. They were overjoyed to have found each other, yet sad to have missed so many years of being in each other’s lives.

## Everything Is Possible

Today, Jen is 29, and her life has been a whirlwind. She went to college, worked at Disney World, and created an aerial act with another acrobat. She has also forged a close connection with Dominique and Christina.

And of course, Jen remains as adventurous as ever—she scuba dives, kayaks, and surfs.

But when asked to reflect on her extraordinary achievements, Jen resists a bit. She insists that there is nothing special about her. That she has no superpowers. That she is just a normal person who works hard and doesn’t give up. At the same time, Jen, who credits her faith with helping her overcome challenges, has come to understand that her life is an inspiration to others.

And that may be where her greatest power lies. Because if any of us had to face the obstacles that Jen has faced, wouldn’t we

hope to be able to respond exactly as she has? With fearlessness, with hope, with heart?

In the introduction to her new memoir, *Everything Is Possible*, Jen shares a quote from a William Shakespeare play. The line she chose could not be more fitting: “Though she be but little, she is fierce.” ●



Jen with her sisters Dominique Moceanu (left) and Christina Moceanu Chapman (middle)

### Poem

Read this poem and you’ll see why it reminds us of Jen.

## Can’t BY EDGAR ALBERT GUEST

Can’t is the worst word that’s written or spoken;  
Doing more harm here than slander and lies;  
On it is many a strong spirit broken,  
And with it many a good purpose dies.  
It springs from the lips of the thoughtless each morning  
And robs us of courage we need through the day:  
It rings in our ears like a timely-sent warning  
And laughs when we falter and fall by the way.

Can’t is the word that is foe to ambition,  
An enemy ambushed to shatter your will;  
Its prey is forever the man with a mission  
And bows but to courage and patience and skill.  
Hate it, with hatred that’s deep and undying,  
For once it is welcomed ‘twill break any man;  
Whatever the goal you are seeking, keep trying  
And answer this demon by saying: “I can.”

EXCERPTED FROM ORIGINAL POEM

## WRITING CONTEST

Consider the theme, or big idea, of the poem “Can’t.” How does it apply to Jen Bricker? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Send it to **I CAN CONTEST**. Five winners will each get *Grace, Gold, and Glory: My Leap of Faith* by Gabrielle Douglas. See page 2 for details.



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