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At the book club, from left: library program coordinator Nancy Farmer, Herstory workshop founder Erika Duncan, and correction officers Capt. Helen Geslak, Lt. Darlene McClurkin and Sgt. Noreen Fisher.

A circle for sharing

BY ZACHARY R. DOWDY
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After Stephanie Harrison-Mason read the last word of her short tale, “The Dark Side,” she wiped away a tear.

The pain she described in the account touched the nearly two dozen women and men who had gathered recently in a circle to listen.

Harrison-Mason’s story

tells how a possessive lover gradually tightened his grip over her life to the point that he felt quite comfortable choking and punching her to keep her in line.

“The man I had fallen in love with had a side I had never seen,” she read, closing the story with, “I am a survivor of domestic violence.”

It’s an all-too-familiar tale to women like Harri-

son-Mason, whose thorny predicaments and the choices they made in response have landed them in correctional facilities like the Suffolk jail across the street from where she took part in a “reading circle” at the Riverhead Free Library.

That kind of story is also familiar to the listeners, who have come together in literary gatherings like this since March.

It’s not your normal book club. They are correction officers from the jail, formerly incarcerated women like Harrison-Mason, activists and concerned citizens who gather to read the writing of women held behind bars but who find in memoir writing a freedom and

means of personal empowerment.

The memoir-writing process, said Erika Duncan, who in 1996 founded Herstory Writers Workshop, a Centereach-based project that encourages women to write about themselves, allows their stories to be told through memoir — a method that she said transforms their lives.

“Memoir isn’t true confession,” said Duncan, of Sag Harbor, who in 2004 brought Herstory into Suffolk County’s jails, a project that led to the publication in 2009 of *Voices: Memoirs from Herstory Inside Suffolk County Correctional Facilities*.

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The reading circles outside complement the writing going on inside the jail. It's one of many ongoing Herstory projects across Long Island, which also include reading and writing programs for immigrant women and for students at 10 area colleges.

This year, reading circles from the series titled *Voices Out of Incarceration* took place on alternate Mondays at the Riverhead Free Library from June through August.

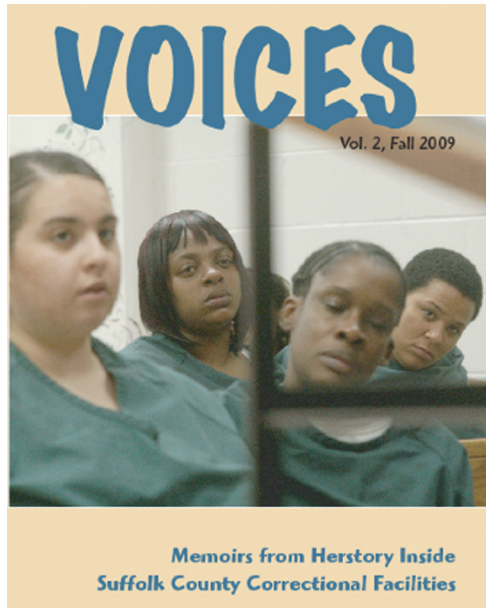
Participants said the memoirs provide context to the lives of women who end up in jails.

"The stories make the choices make sense," said Serena Alfieri-Liguori, associate director for justice and immigration programs for Herstory Writers Workshop. "They have found a way to reinvent their identity through writing their stories."

HarrisonMason — and her former jailers — agreed.

"Some officers need to know what got some of the women there," said Harrison-Mason, who added that her past included abuse as a child and in her relationships. She served time in the Riverhead facility for selling drugs, she said.

"They need to know we're not bad people," she added. "We just made bad choices."



The magazine *Voices* contains memoirs from women in Suffolk County's jails.

But she attributed her new life, which is free of drugs and abusive relations and grounded by her marriage and role as a deaconess of a Hempstead church, to her transformation through Herstory.

Such change is typical, said observers, who note that the writing program inside the jail has a positive effect that reverberates through the facility.

"When they join the writing group, they come together," said Lt. Darlene McClurkin, a correctional officer at the Suffolk jail, who has seen women in the DWI program transformed by participating in the Herstory's writing program. "That takes a load off us. They end up helping each other."

The work of some of the women, some of whom did not consider writing their forte, often undergoes dramatic change because of rigorous coaching by Herstory facilitators, Duncan said. The result for some is publication in an anthology of their work.

Harrison-Mason's "The Dark Side" will be included in an expanded *Voices* collection to be published in October.

"People are being trained in the storytelling technique used in any good writing," Duncan said. She added that the women's memoirs, though candid and disturbing, are well received. "You invest in this person you've read about. You want to know what happened to them."