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Putting Pain on Paper to Heal Their Hearts

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

TRUE confessions. Fifteen women are gathered on sofas and chairs in the Veterans Hall of the Southampton Cultural Center, and each has a story to tell. One by one they read aloud from the loose-leafs, notebooks and clipboards where secret moments of their pasts are stored. Sometimes funny, often heartfelt, haunting remembrances.

Snatches of memoirs in the making, kiss-and-tell tales of incest, violence, squashed anger, sadness and abandonment.

Theirs are the voices of Herstory, a special writers' workshop.

Women from ages 25 to 80 – most of whom have not written before – meet once or twice a week, three to four hours at a stretch, to deal with the traumatic events in their lives and seriously craft them into book-length memoirs.

Hazel Sharon Saunders starts her tale when she was 22 years old, saddled with an unwanted pregnancy that disgraces her religious black family. Upon her return home to Southampton, her younger sister, ill with sickle-cell anemia, tells Ms. Saunders she is also pregnant and makes Ms. Saunders promise to raise her baby if she dies.

Ms. Saunders, 51, drifts to earlier memories of incest and the multiple personalities – gesticulating wildly as she animates the imaginary broker who bargains between her conflicting selves – that helped her to cope.

Before she started the writing workshop



Members of Herstory, a writers' workshop, listen to Hazel Sharon Saunders read from her writings.

a year and a half ago, Ms. Saunders had never told anyone about the incest.

"I promised my eight-year-old abandoned self that I'd never betray our secret," said Ms. Saunders, the only African-American in the group. "Worse than that, I told a whole audience of white people."

"When I started writing in this group, it was like a floodgate opened," said Ms. Saunders, a physically disabled child care worker. Homebound, she has become a prolific writer and is considered to be clos-

est to completing her book.

She was shaken – not that she finally told, but that the other women actually cared.

Pat Gorman, a 51-year-old Bridgehampton acupuncturist, grew up in Queens. Her mother was Irish but her father was a Sioux Indian who secretly taught her rain dances in the backyard. Two and a half years ago, when Ms. Gorman was diagnosed with a

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genetic, racially-linked blood disease and given two to five years to live, she started examining the denial in her upbringing.

And writing about it. One hundred and fifty pages' worth.

"There's a lot of anger," said Ms. Gorman, her eyes welling with tears. "There was a myth in my family that we were all white. We weren't allowed to talk about being Native America at all."

"It's like a little microcosm in my family and even in my blood. I have my white cells fighting the red cells. I fell like, as a victim of an autoimmune disease, unless I can resolve these issues between the two cultures in me, that I am not going to live. The writing has helped me get better."

Created in 1996 during a weeklong women's conference at the Southampton center, the workshop began as a forum for women who had no other way to acquire narrative skills, explained Erika Duncan, a novelist and essayist who established and leads the support-style group.

"The initial attraction was for women who felt that there were stories they had kept silent and secret," Ms. Duncan recalled. "It was a time in history where women were being given a voice. There were women who had never been taken seriously, who had never been given the tools. Memories of everyday kinds of people were just on the cusp of coming into vogue."

Several of the memories have a chance of being published.

"They don't want it to be seen as stories of victims," Ms. Duncan said. "These are stories of survival that even children in great moments of distress seem to find."

Increasingly, women from diverse walks of life joined the group, which will receive a new \$3,000 grant this week from the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls. They also receive funding from New York State on the basis of art, not mental health. So far, about 80 women have participated.

"I'm a therapist's daughter," Ms. Duncan said. "And that is part of the story."

Once the founder of a women's literary salon in Manhattan and a longtime teacher of writing, Ms. Duncan, 51, instructs the budding authors to set a scene and to realize that "you can't let a character die or make love on page two."

"Not letting it matter how traumatic the story is or how poignant and moving, we need the space on the page or in the reader's heart to make somebody care," Ms. Duncan said. "The healing is definitely there and it's an important side effect."

Women become writers to share the secret moments of their pasts.

There are links to psychoanalysis. "It's almost like you find the wisdom," she said. "You go back to the moment and feel it. Everybody has to reclaim herself and actualize it."

But they also must develop a self-caring. "We don't want to make our stories into case histories," Ms. Duncan said.

It was the third week Claire Pasternack, a high school gym teacher who summers in East Hampton, had come to the writers' gathering. "I always wanted to write but I couldn't as long as my parents were alive, especially my mother. I felt I would betray her," she said.

Admitting she was nervous, Mr. Pasternack read "French Doors," her childhood memory of running through the house when it was so big and she was so small.

"This is to help clear me out and be more present in my own life," she said. "I'm 55. I wouldn't have gotten through the past 20 years without therapy. This is very different. There are memories that come up through writing that I didn't have

in therapy. It's not analytical. It's not taking apart. It's very supportive. There's a comfort in being with people who have the same feelings."

Part of learning the craft of storytelling, after all, is learning to find the universals.

"We are struggling trying to find our own voices so others can hear it," said Beth Heyn, a retired 70-year-old schoolteacher from Port Jefferson whose daughter-in-law asked her to write her memoirs. As the child of a Jewish mother in Nazi Germany, Ms. Heyn took piano lessons. As she finished playing one day, she recalled in her reading, the teacher patted her on the head but didn't say she'd see her the following week. Ms. Heyn was puzzled. When she got home, her mother told her it had been her last lesson. The piano teacher was afraid to have a Jewish child come to her home.

Dorothy Vocht of Speonk pulled out old black-and-white photographs of her family.

"I'll be 57 this month and it's the age my mother was when she died," she said. "I'm trying to honor her with this story. No one ever listened to be before."

Neither was she allowed to tell.

Ms. Vocht, an alcoholism counselor, was 8 years old when she walked in on her father molesting her two sisters. Taken away and put into an orphanage, she spent her childhood behind bars. Years later, her boyfriend molested her own daughter.

"The unspeakable was never to be spoken by me," Ms. Vocht said. By writing, Ms. Vocht said, she hoped the pattern would be broken.

"I started out writing about surviving a childhood with a mother who was very mentally ill," said Marsha Benoff, a freelance artist from Shirley who had written 100 pages in her first three months at the workshops.

"As I progressed," she said, "I realized it was not only my voice but I was also giving voice to her pain and her life. All of the years of listening to her moaning and complaining. I've been putting into focus. It's not destructive. it's all constructive."