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Breaking a Silence and Finding Strength in a Story

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

THIS column starts with true confessions and it will end that way.

The aspiring writers wore dreary green scrubs, their uniform at the Riverhead Correctional Facility. They sat on pews in the chapel, clutching stories they had written. The inmates – most of them in jail on drug-related or robbery charges – are members of Herstory, a memoir-writing project for women.

During a two-hour class each week, they spill onto paper intimate details about rape, sexual abuse and violent encounters, and share with their peers their words and remembrances of childhood, young motherhood or falling in love, turning their reflections into literary works.

Standing at a lectern, several guards and prison personnel within earshot, Stephanie Harrison took a deep breath. Her eyes welled with tears as she began to read out loud about how she was sexually abused.

An uncle, “said he had a surprise for me,” said Ms. Harrison, her voice as small as the 6-year-old girl running innocently across the grass that day to his front porch.

“If I show you something, you promise not to tell? Nobody? Not even mommy, O.K.?” she recalled the uncle



Herstory facilitators Lonnie Mathis, back left, and Linda Coleman talking with Stephanie Harrison, left, and Adeline Acevedo, far right, who are taking part in the writing project at the Riverhead Correctional Facility.

saying. “Yes, our secret.”

“We twisted our pinkies and crossed our hearts.”

Ms. Harrison, 40, said the molestation continued for many years, and she said nothing, because she had been threatened and feared her sister would also be hurt and her mother would send her away. She was sharing her story for the first time.

“This writing project has helped me begin the healing process for the little girl within,” Ms. Harrison said. “That has been in there wounded and scared to come out for so many years, for 32 years now.”

It was difficult to start writing, she said, but if it could help change one person’s life, she was willing to try.

“It has caused me to have nightmares to the point where my drug addiction started,” she said of the story she related.

Ms. Harrison was encouraged to write about her past by Lonnie Mathis of Bay Shore and Linda Coleman of Springs, Herstory facilitators who wrote their own life stories through community workshops founded a decade ago by Erika Duncan, a writer

Continued on next page

from Sag Harbor. Now there are 15 weekly workshops on Long Island, including an East Hampton Latina program and bilingual group from the Workplace Project in Farmingville that published the first of a planned semiannual literary magazine this spring.

Ms. Mathis and Ms. Coleman were eager to start the prison workshops two years ago.

“Since Herstory is really about breaking silences, we wanted to come to a place where we thought women were the most profoundly silent,” Ms. Mathis said.

The inmates were so enthusiastic that the class was quickly extended to two hours from an hour and a half. The waiting list became so long that a second class was added. Last month another Herstory group, including women with substance-abuse histories, was formed at the Yaphank Correctional Facility. More than 100 women in the prison system participate each year.

Lt. Darlene McClurkin, commanding officer of the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Office Rehabilitation Unit, said the writing programs, though not therapy, shifted the inmates’ mood.

“When they write it down and then they read it, it is like the first time they have ever gotten it out, so it is like a breakthrough for them,” Lieutenant McClurkin said. “Just listening to some of their stories, you can understand how they got here.”

At 20, Nicole Costanzo of Albertson was the youngest writer. She started her tale with the morning of her trip to a drug-rehabilitation center upstate where she and her father, accompanied by her family, were going to be voluntarily admitted. “I secretly wished they would forget our final destination was rehab and that this was one of the rare occasions the three of us went out for the day,” said Ms. Costanzo, who used drugs alongside her parents for a year and a half.

For the second-anniversary reading, the nine women in the Yaphank group were invited on a rare field trip to join the Riverhead session.

Jonathan Scherr, director of Yaphank’s drunken-driving facility, said the Herstory workshop helped the women maintain sobriety.

“It just opens up their floodgates and they are really able to communicate much better,” Mr. Scherr said.

Ms. Duncan said that like psychoanalysis, the autobiographical writing helps bring memories back.

“Although the making of art is our mission, healing is very often an important byproduct,” she said. “As each woman learns to convey her story so that a stranger/reader can be moved by it, she too discovers a lost and often more lovable part of a self she had banished or left behind.”

While there are many writing programs in prisons across the country, Ms. Duncan said what makes Herstory, which has enjoyed the support of the Long Island Fund for Women and

Girls and the Long Island Community Foundation, different is that the women learn literary structure and focus on generating book-length memoirs.

“It’s not necessary to have a traditional literary background to spend week after week consciously crafting a single scene or elongating a moment of darkness or revelation, as the patterns of memory ebb and flow,” Ms. Duncan said.

A documentary detailing the group’s writing methods and the voices of the writers, both incarcerated and free, is being produced. Ms. Duncan hopes to harvest the women’s voices in an anthology.

June Mills of Bay Shore, who is in jail on charges related to a drug sale, read the story she had written in her cell about coming out from under the veil of feeling that she was an ugly duckling when she was 12, “knowing and dealing with the fact that I would be teased and taunted on the bus by the town bully” and her classmates.

“She is so ugly and black,” they would say,” she read. “It would seem as if the whole class was laughing at me.”

Ms. Mills said that writing about the verbal abuse she endured allowed her to take a good look in the mirror.

“It made me look at why my life turned out the way it did,” she said. “It made me take a look at why I use drugs, why I drink. For the first time in 40 years I am facing myself and what I have been through. I faced my addiction before, but not like this.”