

Newsday

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TURNING MEMORIES INTO MEMOIRS



In a
program titled
HERSTORY,
women are remembering
chapters of their lives — and
turning them into books

Chapters of Their Lives

By Rhoda Amon
STAFF WRITER

NIGHT AFTER night, when Lonnie Mathis went to bed in her grandparent's house, she would pray, "Please, God, please, bring my mom here."

Night after night, her mother didn't come. And something scary would happen during the night, something she could never talk about.

Until now. Mathis is weaving the tattered events of her life into a book-length memoir. It's a project she has undertaken after a 14-year struggle with drugs and, later, depression. And it has come about as a result of her involvement in a weekly workshop called Herstory.

She is one of nine women who gather Wednesday nights in the Heart & Soul Community Counseling Center in West Babylon to share their secret moments with one another, with the hope that they can turn their memories into memoirs. Each woman brings difficult episodes to the tablet: incest, abandonment, violence, sexual assault. But they bring the fond remembrances, too, the ones about finding love, giving birth, reaching fulfillment.

They share laughs as each reads aloud. A box of tissues is kept handy, for sobbing is inevitable.

Mathis, a 39-year-old who, at 5 foot 9 ½ inches, has the presence of a gentle giant, is reading from an account of her childhood, when she loved to sit, swinging her legs despite her grandmother's rule that her legs be crossed at the ankles – the way a lady would sit. As she reads, she seems once again to be that little girl – the child who can't keep her legs still, knowing all the while that she'll be feeling her grandmother's sharp rap.

"You dig up things you never remembered," says another participant, Suzy Sonenberg. "No one is writing what they thought they were going to write. Your story takes on a life of its own." As executive director of the Long Island Community Foundation, Sonenberg, 56, is accustomed to writing impersonal proposals.

Now she's writing about "the whole experience of being a fat woman in America."



At the Herstory workshop at West Babylon's Heart & Soul Community Counseling Center, Lonnie Mathis reads aloud from a memoir she is developing into a book. Mathis' story is one of survival, but this reading recounts a scene from her childhood.

Mathis and Sonenberg recently read moments from their past as part of a "Works in Progress" series at Canio's Books in Sag Harbor. The readings are organized by Erika Duncan, a Sag Harbor novelist and essayist who runs the West Babylon workshop, an offshoot of her older group in Southampton. She hopes to expand the program so more readings are held in western Long Island.

Sonenberg's reading is titled, "A Day of Eating." At 12 she was brought by her mother to a "fat clinic" where a doctor prescribed a day of consuming anything and everything – probably in the expectation that she would become sated and lose her appetite. It didn't work.

Now, she says, writing for the first time "from inside myself" has worked. "I've lost 85 pounds."

When it's Mathis' turn, her voice breaks. "We're with you, Lonnie," calls Hazel Sharon Saunders, a member of the Southampton workshop who has had parallel experiences. The subject: childhood abuse.

Erika Duncan started Herstory in the Southampton Cultural Center almost four years ago. "It's not a therapy group. It's a celebration of life," she says.

The healing that comes with "breaking the silence" is a byproduct, she says. The

ages of the women in the Southampton workshop range from the mid-20s to the 80s. Those in the West Babylon group are mostly in their 50s.

The Southampton workshop recently celebrated the completion of the first books by two of the writers, Saunders and Pat Gorman. Both are now polishing and trimming their manuscripts in the hope of publication. In Herstory, unlike some other writing workshops, every participant is crafting a book.

But the connection to their pasts is not the only one.

"How can you not form deep, meaningful friendships with people that you share so much with?" asks Saunders, 53, who has worked almost three years on her story. The only African-American in the Southampton workshop at the time, she wrote "things I never talked about even with my family." Her memories include incest, losing three siblings to sickle-cell anemia, having a child out of wedlock and thus "disgracing" her religious family, and raising two children as a single mother – her own and the baby of her dead sister.

An "outpouring of caring and understanding" kept her going. The whole workshop came to her mother's funeral in the First Baptist Church in Southampton

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two years ago.

Duncan urges writers with painful secrets to go slowly. "You can't have your characters die or make love on page two because the reader is not yet able to care," she says. Saunders was ready to plunge into her most traumatic experience on page one. With Duncan's guidance, she instead eased into a flashback of an 8-year-old alone in her backyard, happy when her uncle comes and plays with her. Later, the uncle abuses her.

Duncan, 53, grew up with a mother who was a psychotherapist. ("My sister and I wrote emotional problems on file cards for our dolls — our dolls had absentee fathers and devouring mothers.") Experience taught her "respect for the dangers." She doesn't ask the women to "tear out their insides before they're ready."

"We're encouraged to be completely honest," says Pat Gorman, 52, a Bridgehampton acupuncturist. That's the hard part. "It's daring to go places in your heart and in your mind where you've never been before." She's part Irish, but also part Sioux, and recalls her mother's denial of the Sioux contribution from her husband's heritage. "She insisted we were white."

Gorman faced reality when she was diagnosed with a rare blood disease, a form of infectious arthritis that shows up in the American Indian population. She was given two to five years to live. Her body became a microcosm of history, she says. "My white cells were killing off my red cells." Her workshop writing was good enough to get her accepted in the Blue Mountain Center art colony in the Adirondacks, where she finished her book last summer.

Peeling off the past has apparently also improved her health. Four years into her illness, she quotes her rheumatologist: "You've improved dramatically and I don't know why. It's nothing I've done."

Survival is what it's about, Duncan says. She began holding a women's literary salon in Manhattan's West Village in the mid-'70s. Moving to Sag Harbor 11 years ago, she conducted fiction workshops. Four years ago she co-organized a weeklong women's conference at the



Marsha Benoff, Hazel Weiser and Lynn Cryer discuss a story that Cryer read to the workshop. Many of the stories contributed for evaluation and discussion deal with difficult personal issues: Cryer, for example, has written about alcoholism in her family.

Southampton Cultural Center. It opened a floodgate of women wanting to tell their stories, some with secrets pent up for decades. "I couldn't leave those women stranded," says Duncan. She continued the workshops as a volunteer until Linda Coleman, a participant, said, "Hey, we want this to be around in 10 years," and organized Herstory as a nonprofit entity with a board and a fund-raising arm. Coleman, 46, still writing her story about leaving her privileged home to join a radical anti-Vietnam War group, is now president.

Betty Schlein, a retired Southampton consultant, contributed the first seed money, \$500, matched by Deborah Ann Light, a Sag Harbor donor. Schlein led the group to the Long Island Fund for Women and

Gary Washington.

Support also came from the Town of Southampton Arts and Recreation Program and the Huntington Arts Council, which oversees grants to Suffolk arts groups for the New York State Council on the Arts. "Herstory's focus is art, and it's very exciting," says grants administrator Sara Bluestone.

At a New Year's Eve party last year, Duncan met Tina Calabrese, a social worker who owns the Heart & Soul Community Counseling Center. Duncan was looking to expand Herstory to serve women in western Long Island. Calabrese was looking to expand her center with activities that were not therapy. "I want it to be a community center," says Calabrese, herself a playwright. "Since Freud we've lost something .. I want to bring back community, people of all classes sharing ideas." Herstory opened there last March.

The World War II generation, the children of war, have brought their poignant memories to both workshops.

Beth Heyn of Port Jefferson, a retired teacher, now 73, was a half-Jewish child in Hamburg, Germany, as the Nazi noose tightened. Her assimilated German-Jewish mother had her hastily baptized at age 12. The two left Germany for Spain in September 1984, on one of the last trains before the border closed Oct. 1. "It's a personal story," Beth Heyn says. She began writing it for her sons and grandsons, who know little about what happened.

Another retired teacher, Amy Maiello Hagedorn, 63, also writes vividly of war-

**"You dig up things you never remembered ...
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Girls, which she co-founded, and to Suzy Sonenberg of the Long Island Community Foundation (who visited Herstory and stayed to write her own story).

The Southampton Cultural Center provided a home for the group as a community resource. "I've heard astounding writing from people whom you wouldn't expect to be writers," says center director

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time terrors, but hers were experienced in childhood imaginings. In the comparative safety of Queens, she had fears of "being taken hostage by the enemy."

At the weekly session, the women bring chicken soup and couscous. They nibble cake as the reading begins. Duncan coaxes them to high levels of craftsmanship. "The Greeks never separated art and healing. They go hand in hand," she says

MARSHA BENOFF of Shirley is writing about life with a mentally ill mother. "Now I'm 8 and I realize there is something wrong in our house," she writes. "I see that other families have TVs and refrigerators and no roaches." She describes an argument between her mother and older sister. "I hate it when people yell and spit comes out."

Duncan reminds her that she is 8. "Never leave the child's voice."

Lynn Cryer of Huntington has written about her parents' alcoholism. Cryer, 57, a social worker accustomed to dealing with

other people's problems, is told she needs to put more of herself in the narrative. "It's you who the reader cares about."

Hazel Weiser, 51, a lawyer from Oyster Bay, says she was "born into an incredibly conventional family." She fled, but returned to the bedside of her mother, who was dying of cancer. Frustrated at her helplessness and angry at her father's denial, Weiser writes of breaking down in uncontrollable sobs in the office of a cool hospital social worker.

"It's very powerful," Duncan tells her. Still there's a section that doesn't work.

Duncan lets no one "hide." "Erika has an unbelievably intuitive ear for authenticity," Sonenberg says.

The monthly readings at Canio's Books began after Maryann Calendrille and Kathryn Szoka took over the Sag Harbor landmark bookstore last fall. "We wanted a connection with the community and to help writers," says Calendrille, a writer herself.

At the next "Writers in Progress" ses-

sion Feb. 11, two writers will explore childhood in diametrically different ways. Benoff, 51, experiments with the simplified language of a child. Christine Giordano, 27, managing editor of the Three Village Herald, embroiders a "Secret Garden"-type tale about bonding with her grandmother one summer in Sag Harbor.

On March 10, Janessa Rick, 41, a Sag Harbor physical therapist, will read a coming-of-age tale, about leaving home and discovering she was pregnant at 17. Leslie Ayres-Seiden, 44, of East Quogue, a chef in Sag Harbor, will return to her adolescence. She is hesitant to read the part about being assaulted as a 15-year-old European exchange student, something she couldn't talk about until she was in her 40s.

"The most unlikely friendships are formed," Duncan says, as the women of various races and walks of life hug each other and depart.

"It's the way the world ought to be," Sonenberg concludes.