

Herstories... Healing Stories

BY KATHY ROSENTHAL, CSW

Marsha's four-year-old self draws readers in to her intricate pattern of icicles on a basement window, the icy pattern that helps her escape from her abusive, mentally ill mother.

Beth is up to the chapter when she walks into the room and to the window from which her brother jumped, 16 years ago, to his death.

These two are among the nearly 80 stories which have been worked on by women in the Herstories Writers Workshop over the last 2 1/2 years; many of which are being shaped into book-length memoirs with the goal of publication.

Observing the workshop is a bit like walking in on an intimate conversation. A group of women sitting on couches, drinking coffee, eating homemade muffins and cookies, taking turns sharing their stories. There's a leader and, at first, it seems like the participants are members of a therapy group. But the observer quickly understands that the focus is something else.

This community seminar, offered two times a week at the Southampton Cultural Center, helps women with traumatic life experiences tell their stories, a process that facilitates healing for the individual and, according to Erika Duncan, author, essayist and Herstories founder and instructor, "is a catalyst for change." Duncan and Linda Coleman,

Herstories President and workshop participant, explain that by focusing on the craft of writing and finding ways to illicit compassion in the "stranger/reader," these women are able to move away from their victim identity ("a path of exodus," is how one group member puts it) and, in the long run, their stories will help raise awareness about the struggles they have experienced.

The Herstories Writers Workshop, created in March 1996, grew out of a week-long celebration of women in literature, dance and music, hosted by the Southampton Cultural Center. Witnessing Herstories fill an unmet need, and feeling passionate about its purpose, Erika Duncan agreed to continue facilitating the workshop on a largely voluntary basis when the project first began. Early enthusiasts, Betty Schlein and Deborah Light, contributed seed money that helped Herstories get off the ground. Then, four months into the project, Linda Coleman realized that Herstories needed more significant funding if it were to continue for any length of time. "Erika was working at least ten to eleven hours per week and I knew it was only a matter of time before she would get burnt out. It was then I offered to volunteer to help establish not-for-profit status and write grants to raise money," explained Linda. One of the first and more significant funding sources has been The Long

Island Fund for Women and Girls (including the donations of Schlein and Light who are members of the Fund), a philanthropic organization that works to build a permanent endowment to support Long Island programs and organizations that address the needs of women and girls.

"The Herstories grant proposal struck an immediate chord with the entire committee," said Karen Lutz, Long Island Fund board member and Chairperson for the 1997-98 Grants Committee. "By providing such a unique and powerful way for women to work together, the result of which is emotional and spiritual healing for individuals from diverse backgrounds, the Herstories Workshop sets out to accomplish exactly those goals identified by the Fund. Suzy

Sonenberg, Executive Director of the Long Island Community Foundation and founding board member of the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls, added, "It is tremendously rewarding to fund a program where it is so easy to see the direct benefit for the women involved. Herstories is the most extraordinary vehicle I have ever seen for giving women a voice. The project offers a totally safe, supportive environment in which women can put into words, the circumstances that have shaped their lives."

"Financial support from groups such as the Long Island Fund for Women and Girls has enabled us to keep the group running regardless of the number of women who can or cannot pay," says Duncan. "The group members come from widely diverse economic backgrounds, and to this day, a large proportion of the people pay little or nothing," Coleman adds. "Those who are able to pay a fee for the workshop do so, but many participants have serious disabilities and financial difficulties."

The project is also funded by the Town of Southampton Arts and



Erika Duncan, founder and writing instructor, Herstories Writing Workshop

Recreation Program and the Huntington Branch of the New York State Council on the Arts Decentralization Program. Between twenty-five and thirty women constitute the active pool involved in the workshops. The

project has attracted an ethnically, racially and economically diverse group of women whose ages range from the two 23-year-olds just out of college, to several women in their seventies who were refugees from World War II, including one who was

a translator at the Nuremberg trials.

Among the current members is Hazel, an African American woman who is writing about her Baptist childhood in which she survived incest and the tragic death of three of her nine siblings from sickle cell anemia, Pat, a Native American woman with a serious blood disease that is the product of the heritage she is seeking to understand, Joy, who ran away as a teenager from her abusive parents, and Elizabeth who was a half-Jewish child in Nazi Germany.

Many of the members have never written before, while some, like Beth, Pat and Rita have published work in genres other than memoir. "Everyone is at a different level in their writing, but we all learn from each other and from Erika's comments," explains Beth. Duncan predicts that Hazel's manuscript, now over 400 pages long, will be the first work ready to be presented for publication.

An outside observer might experience an insensitivity in Duncan's insistence on looking with "hard eyes" at flaws in the writing technique, especially when people are exposing, often for the very first time, such occurrences as incest, "pouring out their hearts." During a recent workshop, after one group member read her latest chapter Duncan unflinchingly became "the stranger/reader, mean devil's advocate." What followed was her clear declaration that "there are several problems" and the "writing is not working." Amazingly, the criticism was not only accepted, but welcomed. Beth clarifies: "We trust Erika. She is a cheerleader, but not in a mawkish way. Erika's not interested in telling you you're good. She just wants your work

to be the best it can be." Capturing her colleagues' perspectives, Pat offers, "Erika is uncompromising. We're not allowed *not* to tell our stories."

The focus of Duncan's teaching is on helping these women develop their writing so that the reader will care. She drives them to become

"vulnerable," an act that results in

what the group members unanimously refer to as a "byproduct" of the workshop: it's therapeutic aspect.

"They are learning to tell their stories in a way that will create change and, in doing so, the healing happens almost accidentally," Duncan explains.

The structure of the workshop is what regularly leads to its most surprising and ironic results. On one level, the workshop provides a safe, consistent space in which intimate, traumatic life events are being spoken aloud. Often for the first time. Then there is the fact that the group is open, so the audience is ever-changing.

Hazel, looking back on her first workshop, recalls, "There I was, divulging my black self to a room full of white women, sharing with strangers things no one in my family knew. The reaction was truly shocking. I was overwhelmed by all the love and caring." Duncan adds, reminding the group, "I was incredibly surprised that what bothered Hazel so much, after sleeping on the revelation for a few days, was not the material of the revelation itself, but rather the overriding feeling that she had betrayed her inner child by revealing long-held secrets. That was a real

turning point for me," reflects Duncan.

"I suddenly understood that while many of these women had come believing they wanted to share their stories, once here, discovered that after a lifetime in which listeners were not available, now when they finally had listeners, they could not trust and were unable to take in the compassion of others. At least not initially. By focusing on the writing, learning how to craft their stories so they would be moving to others," continued Duncan,

"invariably, the bridges this process forced them to build for the stranger/reader, allowed them to feel empathy for themselves and accept the same from others." And ultimately, as one member put it, "we are moved from the deep ruts of victim consciousness to a more lively space of self-esteem and quality of writing."

For the core group of women who regularly attend the workshops, Herstories has been called a "lifeline." Important as it is, the individual impact is not the only goal of the project. Both Duncan and the workshop's members are quick to point out their "deep concern with breaking the cycles of abuse and

repetition." They strongly believe that this task is possible, "if each woman is able to contribute her own story to the collective pool of understanding." Duncan's vision for the project, from the beginning, has been to "find ways to help other writers leading workshops and women in the healing profession take bits and pieces of what [she and] Herstories writers are discovering, and bring it to their own work, each in her way."

By the end of the workshop, the muffins and cookies are fairly well picked over, the armchair covers and couch cushions are askew. But the writing, the stories and the healing are further along. ■