

Silenced women we need to hear

Toronto Star - Toronto, Ont.

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Date: Nov 13, 2011



"Every person in this room is a major hero because of what they've been through and are still living. Here are some stories from Toronto's Women Speak Out program."

If you feel sorry for yourself, there's a spirit spa in Parkdale you should go to. It's in a long yellow room above the community centre for the poor, where ragged men drink coffee and type emails. Three mornings a week, 12 women gather here to learn how to talk again.

If you need to be inspired, you should come here too.

Ana Maria Cruz introduces herself like this: "The radio station where I worked for 17 years in Peru was blown up by terrorists. I left my children and everything I had. I spent eight months waiting in a small room in the Presbyterian Church. The only job I could find here was sorting clothes in the Goodwill."

Across from her, a bird-thin woman named Adrienne Magennis says this: "As a child I was bullied. In the 1970s and '80s I developed an eating disorder. I was so severely ill that I was put on a palliative care unit and told I would die at 57 pounds. People around me died every day."

A long box of tissues slides up and down the table. Hands squeeze shoulders.

Judy Cong says with a slight slur: "Two years after coming here from China, I was diagnosed with a brain tumour. For the first six months, I couldn't speak properly or feed myself. Even today I still have problems hearing from my right side."

These are the unspoken stories of Toronto's ghosts - the women who disappear in broad daylight on Bloor St. They are poor and sick and lost and beaten. Their stories scratch your insides like glass. After years of silently bleeding, they are learning the curative power of their voices.

The antidote to marginalization is speaking up.

These 12 women are part of an incredible new program called Women Speak Out.

Think of it as activist boot camp. Over three months, they learn everything from the history of feminism to conflict resolution.

Provincial bureaucrats teach them about how the government works. Long-term activists lay out how to make a deputation at city hall.

Lawyers go over the Charter and Canadian immigration policy. I arrived to teach them about the media.

I was so moved by their stories, I asked to return and record some of them. (Go online and see for yourself. We've posted videos of them at www.thestar.com.)

When I dropped in recently, facilitator Pat Capponi was discussing that gruesome video of a Texas judge savagely whipping his teenage daughter. What would they do if a child came to them with stories of abuse? How would they help?

"One thing that would have really helped me as a child is if there had been an open conversation in the classroom," says Magennis, 50.

"I contacted my professors by email," says 25-year-old Leanne Abdulla. Her parents were conservative and she was not, so they beat her until she fled.

Theory is good. Experience makes it better. These women are learning to mix the two.

It would be hard to find a more varied bag of sorrow. There's a Bengali woman with two degrees who was flogged in school because girls were meant to be at home, helping their mothers.

There's a recovering drug addict who decided to break her habit in jail.

There's a Mexican woman, exhausted from working two jobs and fighting to stay in Canada. There's Shelagh Klavir, who went bankrupt at 65 and suddenly found herself in social housing. That was 12 years ago.

"Every person in this room is a major hero because of what they've been through and are still living," she says. "I am so honoured to be one of them."

The program is run by four non-profit agencies - two that help women, one that helps newcomers, and Voices from the Street, a program that trains people with mental illnesses to become advocates. The federal government is funding it through Status of Women Canada.

The mission isn't just self-realization. It's social change - to get these women on boards and task forces, whispering into power's ear.

There is a precedent.

Mike Creek graduated from the first Voices from the Street program six years ago. At 37, he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and told he would never work again.

He lost his job as a hotel manager. His bank account emptied out. He was homeless for a year. He can teach you how to make tomato soup with ketchup and the water left over from boiling soup-kitchen hot dogs.

Today, he facilitates the program, co-chairs the multi-agency 25-in-5 Network for Poverty Reduction and has Health Minister Deb Matthews' cellphone number programmed into his phone.

His fellow graduates speak to city welfare case workers about their experiences. They do grand rounds with emergency room doctors at St. Michael's Hospital. They go into Ryerson University social work classes and University of Toronto psychiatry auditoriums.

"Usually, when we speak, you can hear a pin drop in the room, the room goes so silent," says Creek. "Up till then, they've only learned about mental illness in a power point."

Anyone who has survived middle school believes in the power of stories. You got drunk and passed out at a dance? You will forever be known to some people as Pass-Out Paula.

Stories are what lure people to Canada. We are the land of health care and compassion.

Countless wars have been waged over one story (the Bible) or another (the Qur'an.) The story of how a lone vegetable vendor in Tunisia lit himself on fire sparked protests across North Africa and the Middle East. In today's politics, whoever can better shape their story and holler it louder wins the election. Just think: "Gravy Train."

Stories inspire us, define us and teach us. Listen to these women's stories. They will change you.

The first Women Speak Out graduates will tell their stories inside Toronto City Hall council chambers on Monday Dec. 12, starting at 5.30.

Credit: Catherine Porter Toronto Star