



## Telling their stories

### Women find courage and voice through writing

By Nora Underwood

*By setting down in words*

*My thoughts, idea, reflection and memories*

*I can make sense of things and let go,*

*Release*

*Through a song, letter, prose or a poem      like this*  
(from “Food for Thought,” by Annalise)

Readings are a fairly commonplace occurrence in a city like Toronto. But the crowd gathered at a downtown Toronto public library has not come together for any ordinary reading. About 60 people mill around, preparing to celebrate the launch of a new magazine and a reading by several of its contributors. The excitement in the room – coming from both the writers and the audience – is palpable.

Called *Roots to Branches*, the magazine is the product of a 10-week pilot project – a writing group for women at [Sistering](#), an agency that supports homeless, marginalized and low-income women. The creative writing workshop, called Sister Writes, was the brainchild of Toronto author and arts educator Lauren Kirshner, who wanted to find a way to help people in her community develop the tools to tell their own stories.

“The mainstream media says very little about the lived experiences of women facing poverty and mental health issues, and this near silence creates the illusion that these experiences do not exist,” Kirshner says. *Roots to Branches* “is one small step in filling in the many silenced, unexplored and unrecorded voices in our city.”

Supported by Sistering, the Toronto Arts Council, the Toronto Public Library and the Lawrence Foundation, the pilot was deemed to be such a success that two more groups have been added. Most of the women in the pilot say they will join in the second group. “It’s like a family,” says Emily, a woman in her 50s who came to Canada from an island in the Caribbean and who was the first reader of the evening. “You learn from the people, from their experiences. Taking from that helps you to write more, and more positive.”

“More positive” is a necessity for most, if not all, of the women who pass through Sistering. “The majority of women who come here have suffered some kind of trauma – sexual trauma, violence –or have been marginalized because of their sexuality, their race, a disability, their age,” explains Carol Allain, Sistering’s drop-in services manager. Some of the 2,000 or so women who come through the doors every year have mental health issues or addiction or both. “Writing is very healing for women,” says Allain. “When Lauren approached me, I thought it was something the women would really like, and I knew that Lauren would be able to work with women at different levels and make them feel comfortable.”

At a workshop two weeks before the reading, however, the core group of women – Emily, Mary, BJ, Cerima, Wanda and, later, Maggie – are anything but comfortable. Today, Kirshner is leading them through a dry run, getting them to choose stories from the newspaper and then stand up and read them to the group – slowly, audibly, with emphasis on certain words or pausing to keep the audience hanging on. The women are self-conscious and joke around with one another nervously, but once they actually start taking turns, their critiques are helpful and very supportive.

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Kirshner gives out reading copies of the stories the women are to read at the magazine launch so they can practice at home in front of the mirror; none of the women are to see one another’s work, so the finished product – a professionally printed and bound 39-page colour magazine – will be a surprise. “They’re very supportive of each other and have become more and more so,” says Kirshner. “Every week I try to do something to make the group more cohesive. I want everyone to feel that their voices and their spaces are being respected.”

Kirshner, who is working on her second novel and embarking on a PhD in communications and culture at York-Ryerson University, counts some of the inspiration for Sister Writes as a three-month poetry workshop she led with inpatients at Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in 2005. Sister Writes, says Kirshner, is “a way to talk about writing and share writing with a group who would appreciate it.” Throughout the pilot, Kirshner brought in several young writers to act as mentors.

The women in the first group of Sister Writes represented a range of ages – the median was 44 – and backgrounds. But what they shared was a need to find their voice. “They’re

almost all survivors of some kind of trauma,” says Kirshner. “I never asked them point blank, but it’s coming through in their writing. They’ve all had to struggle pretty hard to make their own place in the world.”

Kirshner also hopes that writing creatively will help the women build life skills – how to listen, how to articulate thoughts and feelings. “I want them to become confident speakers, to become advocates for themselves through writing,” she says. “I want to give them the skills to better represent themselves – to write a letter to their landlord, to write to a city councillor, to become active in the community.”

Kirshner has also witnessed the workshop’s therapeutic benefits. Each week, she suggested themes that she felt would be stimulating or provocative, such as “mothers” or “adolescence” – “all the hot buttons that would be hot, especially for them,” she says. There were digressions, of course, that were “interesting sometimes and funny.” But there were also epiphanies and tears, Kirshner says, “feelings that have been buried for a while. It was very moving.”

For Emily, the focus of her writing so far has been on her beloved mother and her own childhood. “I get up in the night and write – pieces that can be put together,” she says, as she lets me read a beautiful story about her mother. “It gives relief.” Emily, like the other women, is soaking up the experience of Sister Writes like a sponge. Another participant, Mary, says she loves to learn, to enhance her life. “I’ve learned the way we can write better and how to view other writers and how to think like a writer,” she says. “It makes me feel good.”

On the evening of the reading, the writers sit near one another in the first couple of rows, well turned out, excited and nervous. Mary cuddles her grandson. After an introduction by Kirshner, Emily, who confesses to having been sick the night before, but who nevertheless looks beautiful in a pink and green blouse and head scarf, reads first. From the moment she starts until the last reader finishes, the audience is transfixed and moved by the stories the women have written about small important details of their lives, about the difficult, upsetting things they have endured, about the people they love and cherish.

The response is overwhelmingly enthusiastic. These women have clearly inspired one another, have inspired and been inspired by Kirshner – for and from whom there is obvious affection and respect. They have affected everyone who hears their stories.

Building on the success of the first group, Kirshner hopes the next group will jump to four hours a week from two, to 12 weeks from 10, with room for more women to join. She wants participants to write longer pieces and become editors of their own work. “I’m trying to break down the division between writers and people who want to express themselves,” she says. “We’re still at the beginning.”

If you know a woman who might be interested in joining Sister Writes, call Sistering at 416 926-9672, or send an e-mail to [info@sistering.org](mailto:info@sistering.org).