

Once Upon A Time . . .

“I’d like to hold out hope to other women . . . to let them know they aren’t alone; they aren’t the only ones these things happened to, and they can survive.”—Ellie

In the idyllic land of Door County, Wisconsin, far away from the crime and violence of big cities, is where this tale began. This peninsula in Lake Michigan, dubbed “the Cape Cod of the Midwest,” is filled with farmland, tiny towns and extraordinary artists. Everyone knows everyone, and no one locks their door.

But behind those doors, violence against women and girls happens as much as it does in any city. It’s just that no one knew, and no one talked about it . . . until the summer of 2003.

That was when the women of Door County decided to reclaim their power, their bodies and their lives. It was when they realized that being safe doesn’t mean hiding in shame; it means speaking out. And that being beautiful isn’t about looking like a supermodel; it’s just allowing who they are on the inside to shine through. It was when these women decided to step out of the shadows and into the spotlight to tell everyone what went on behind the doors of Door County.

When the idea for this project first began rumbling around in my heart, I asked my good friend Sheila Sarey-Saperstein what she thought of it. I knew she was a domestic violence survivor, and wondered what her reaction would be. Would she, or any other woman in Door County, be willing to go public with her hidden past? What would she think of my idea for the portraits? Mostly, would she be brave enough to be the first one to step forward?

Sheila is a photographer herself. She is educated, vibrant, outgoing—and one of my best friends. I felt that if she weren’t willing, no one else would be. Sheila’s response was a characteristic explosion of enthusiasm. She not only agreed to be my first subject, but also my partner in creating what would become the *Out of the Shadows* photographic exhibit.

The next week, I went to an art opening, and with typical small-town serendipity, I met the coordinator of a domestic violence agency called HELP. Cindy would become my next subject, and also be instrumental in referring many of the other women who participated. Once we established this alliance with HELP, the project seemed to move into fast-forward. That is when I knew I was doing the work I was supposed to be doing.

We received a grant from the local arts association that would take the project in a new direction. I wanted to interview women all over the country, and eventually did, but the grant stipulated that it be used only to interview women who lived in Door County. What I initially perceived as a limitation created an entirely different, and ultimately more powerful, approach for the project. It opened the eyes and hearts of a community to see beyond its outward beauty, to the pain beneath the shiny surface. Since the first twenty women I interviewed lived in the same community, we were able to come together on several occasions, and a bond developed. The camaraderie added a

new dimension, allowing a larger impact on themselves and their community, and opening doors for others to speak about the unspeakable.

Sheila's theater background, combined with the growing connection among the women, led us to a decision to add a performance component to the exhibit. This was something I never would have imagined, but it became another important step in healing.

We were uncertain if any of the women would want to participate in a performance, but we put the idea out. We were surprised when over half the women gave enthusiastic thumbs up, and the performance began to take shape. Some women wanted to write poems about their healing, some decided to do music or dance. All would participate in an emotionally revealing and empowering exercise we called tone poems.

Gayle, one of the women I interviewed, put together a kind of fill-in-the-blank exercise based on common threads I noticed in every interview. They were titled "Shame," "My Body" and "You." Every woman I interviewed carried shame and guilt about her abuse, had body image issues, and strong feelings about the perpetrator (You). These were the issues we wanted to address together.

We all gathered one evening, with plenty of chocolate and other comfort food. We filled out the sheets Gayle gave us with one or two word answers, then put them all in a pile and passed them out so no one would read her own. The exercise required spontaneous answers, and knowing it would be anonymous allowed everyone to feel free to express her deepest feelings. Every woman was able to walk in someone else's shoes as she read their responses, and she could also to hear her own words in someone else's voice. It was extremely powerful, and we all agreed it had to be part of the performance.

Gayle offered to put everyone's answers together into the tone poems we would read as a group during the performance. I didn't know how she would do this, but decided to trust the process, and let it go. This became almost a mantra for me as I saw things happening with this project that I had never imagined possible. Instead of trying to make things happen the way I wanted, as I have been known to do, I just got out of the way and allowed it to take shape. I realized it was no longer *my* project; it now belonged to the women who *were* the project, and I was happy to just drive the bus and turn where they told me to.

I was fortunate to exhibit at the Fairfield Art Museum, perhaps the most prestigious venue in Door County. This community is very supportive of the arts, but art usually means the beautiful side of life: the flowers, barns and lighthouses that grace the countryside. So I knew it was a risk for the Fairfield to show my work. The subject was one no one talks about, and there was some nudity—which always has the possibility of being controversial, especially when it's your neighbor.

The exhibit was one of the most talked about and well-attended they have ever had. The opening was packed and the air was electric. There were tears and hugs and a huge outpouring of respect and support from the community. Watching as women saw their portraits for the first time, and seeing them watch as others saw their image and read their story was an experience none of us will forget. Three of the women who'd chosen to use pseudonyms came to me at the end of the night and said they would like to use their real names. They were astounded that they'd shared their dark secret and no one turned away. This support allowed them to own their story, to embrace their shadows as part of what shaped them. By the time the book was finished only four of the forty women chose to use pseudonyms.

The next week there was another reception—for the performance. We had one rehearsal the night before—and it was a complete disaster. It was the first time I really had an idea of what this performance Sheila had

Women in Shadow and Light

talked about would look like, and I have to say it wasn't good. But I knew how important this was. It took immeasurable courage for these women to bare their souls and their bodies with me to create this exhibit. Now they were going one giant leap beyond that to stand up in front of their community and share their hearts. It's hard for most people to speak in public at all, but to speak publicly about matters so private, with words that have never been spoken before, seemed almost heroic to me.

We arrived an hour early to organize, getting more nervous as we saw the gallery filling to capacity again. One last group hug and we were on. The performance went flawlessly except for me trying to turn on music for a dancer; but even that seemed okay, as people laughed and lightened the mood a bit. My body tingled with goose bumps the entire night, as one woman after another shared her pain and her power and her healing. These were not actresses, but real women sharing their once-broken hearts. At the end, one of the women, Jeanne, sang *The Rose*. The other women stood in front of her as one, arms wrapped around each other. I heard one voice, then a few more, then the entire audience, singing along softly. Every man and woman there embraced all of us, eyes glistening with tears for our pain and our joys—human hearts connecting to one another.

Several of the women told me later their sharing had been so deep it brought them back to their abusive experience and their nightmares. It made me realize the healing process is not linear, but is a continuous journey, with many peaks and valleys. Yet when they were invited to do the performance again the next month, none of them hesitated. They had seen men, along with the women in the audience, shedding tears. They knew how deeply their sharing would affect others, and how much awareness they were creating, and how many other women would know they weren't alone. So they did it again. And again. And they will continue to do it because it might help even one person each time they open their hearts to share. The shadows of their past can help someone else see the light.

So much has happened that I never could have dreamed, and the work has truly taken on a life of its own. There has been a great deal of healing, and some tears, but also plenty of laughter and fun. The women have found that being able to express their healing through nude portraits has been an empowering experience for them, but it also made for some grand adventures and fits of giggles. These were not studio portraits, so trying to find a place private enough for the women to feel comfortable was often challenging. We found ourselves photographing in such diverse places as a campground, a courthouse mediation room, a very cold lake, a very hot yoga studio, climbing a tree, lounging on boulders and in a New York City hotel room. As Gayle said to me, "Being able to laugh in the nude! What a concept for me, after hiding for all of those years." The making of each photograph was a moment I, and I'm sure each of them, will always cherish.

The interviews moved beyond Door County to include women from every corner of the country, of all ages, and from diverse racial and economic groups. Even though the branches of this beautiful tree have grown in many directions, it is deeply rooted in Door County. Lives have changed because of this, and the women are eager to help others do the same. Someone who saw the exhibit asked us to make a video that can be used by agencies and women's groups everywhere. During the taping it was exciting to hear the women speak of their healing and growth, exuding a confidence that wasn't there the first time I interviewed them. They have become advocates, doing public speaking, and reaching out to others at every opportunity. The wounded have become healers.

The women in this book have woven together the shadows with the light, wrapped themselves in the fabric of their lives, and found their way back to the beautiful and extraordinary woman they always were.