

Women, Retirement and Commitment: A Writer's Experience At Florida's Carefree Community

Nancy Seale Osborne

Three years before my retirement in 1998, I began attending fiction writing classes in Oswego's English Writing Arts Program. Like the many non-traditional students whom I taught for nearly twenty years, I wondered if I would fit in; questioned whether my quirky way of looking at the world as a writer would ever find a place in the classroom to which I was returning as a student; completed every assignment with the intensity of a first-year surgical intern; and worked hard to eke out three late afternoon hours to attend class on Thursdays after a hard day's work.

I adored writing and had considered myself a writer during many of my adult years. My *curriculum vitae* highlighted my writing in three categories: Library, Archives and Women's Studies. I was a reference/instruction librarian, a certified archivist, and I taught Introduction to Feminism, the foundation course for what was at that time the Women's Studies Minor (SUNY Oswego's Women's Studies Major was approved in 1999). One of the personnel committees to which I submitted my materials for promotion and tenure had recommended, to my bewilderment: "Remove all of your creative writing from your cv." I initially thought my colleagues were kidding.

"Do you mean that *nothing* I have written in any of my areas of expertise have any creativity in them?" I asked incredulously.

"No, but your poetry and essays and newspaper articles and newsletter editing and writing belong in an entirely different category."

Because I wanted to be taken seriously, I reluctantly created another category, which I entitled "Creative Works." So, with this background of love of poetry and fiction and memoir writing, coupled with the mixed messages an academic gets from her professional milieu, I took something of a perverse pride in taking three years of classes in fiction writing in the writing arts program, at the end of my career and in preparation for my retirement.

The students in writing classes critiqued each other's work in a comfortable setting, replete with good humor, frequent challenges, and occasional eye-opening revelations. Three of the students in one class were taking horror fiction writing classes at the same time that they were taking the fiction writing class in which I was a student. Their interests, style, and content were as different as night and day from mine, but we gave each other the mutual respect and writerly attention that was fostered and taken for granted in this fine writing program.

The other students' comments took note of my writing style and content. "Nancy doesn't know beans about plot, but you just can't put down one of her

stories!”

“Please, oh please, write longer stories! Your Texas way of writing (and talking) just makes me want to know more!”

I didn’t need any more academic degrees; I was simply auditing the fiction writing classes, taught by my good colleagues. I didn’t get a grade, but I completed each and every assignment on time, in a thorough manner. I contributed in class, and never missed a single class. The other students didn’t know I was auditing, so I was simply “one of them.” Some of the students began sharing their work with me outside of class, asking that I share more of my work with them, too. My heart just opened at this opportunity to talk about what I loved with other writers. My teachers were funny, encouraging, and challenging. They expected a lot from me. I expected a lot from myself.

During those three years before my retirement in 1998, I took Thursday night fiction writing classes numbered EWA206, 306, 406, and 506. The EWA 406, I took two times, with two different and wonderful instructors. The EWA 506 class was graduate level, and to my surprise, everyone in the entire class except me had a complete book ready for publication. During that class I decided that I had enough material about my growing up years in West Texas, the stories entitled by my wiseguy writer friend Mary Russo Demetrick as “Nancy’s Roadkill Series,” to publish a book.

Crazy Quilt: Funky Smalltown Texas and Other Pieces of Life (Syracuse: Hale Mary Press, Inc., 1999) was the result of that decision. In my early retirement, I was delighted to be invited to be a reader in the college’s Living Writers Series, in which fifty students utilized *Crazy Quilt* as a textbook. There is nothing more exciting for a writer than the opportunity to answer questions and hear comments about her writing from students who have studied her book. I had readings and booksignings at the river’s end bookstore in Oswego, at My Sisters’ Words (New York State’s only feminist bookstore) in Syracuse, and at the college bookstore at SUNY Oswego.

It was particularly rewarding, when I completed my second book in 2000, *In the Shadow of a Miracle: Loretto Academy of Our Lady of Light for Girls, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1949-1953* (Syracuse: Hale Mary Press, Inc., 2001) to be invited to the college’s Women’s Studies Luncheon Series, to read from the book and to talk about my experience as an Anglo, non-Catholic high school boarding school student at Loretto, in the heart of Santa Fe.

When listeners hear stories from a memoir, they listen with understanding hearts, for they too, have stories to tell. During my booksignings, I have heard funny, heart-rending, and unique stories. When one puts a work of art out into the world, people bring their own perceptions and experiences to it. Being a good listener as a writer is imperative.

My partner Barbara and I have been wilderness canoeists for years; we love the red granite and white pines of the lakes in Ontario, Canada’s provincial parks. We have explored the lakes and ponds of New York State’s Adirondack

Women, Retirement and Commitment

mountains, pulling our canoes over interminable beaver dams, watching loons dance across the lake. We had canoed the Assiniboine River in Manitoba for five days, and another five days were challenged by the rapids of Maine's Allagash River. In retirement, we made a commitment to canoe as often as our location, the weather, and our bodies allowed. That is probably why we ended up spending six months of the year in Southwest Florida.

At the Resort on Carefree Boulevard in Fort Myers, Florida, we've found women who canoe and kayak with us at least once a week. The flora and fauna are wildly different from our northeast favorite canoe places; we are like neophyte naturalists as we explore and discover what writers Marjorie Stoneman Douglas and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings called the "true olde Florida." Wading cypress knees, golden and bright green saw palmetto fronds, silver-gray salt march grasses, arbors of red mangrove... all there for the exploring. Most of our friends are experienced birders, and we're learning gradually to distinguish an ibis from an egret, a green heron from a yellow-crowned night heron, a cormorant from an anhinga.

We have canoed through sawgrass for miles to get to a lake with over two dozen roseate spoonbills under surveillance by nearly thirty submerged alligators, with seven feral pigs intently grazing on the far shore. We have glided around the bend in a creek, to be unexpectedly chided by two river otters. It doesn't surprise me that there are many Florida poets and writers. There's so much to explore, and so much to write about.

The Southwest Florida community in which we live, Carefree, has provided both Barb and me the opportunity to become involved according to our interest and capabilities. A former dean, she is vitally interested in organizational management, has been elected to the association board, and is an active member of the by-laws committee. I have been able to bring my love of writing to Carefree in a variety of ways, with the encouragement and assistance of many new friends.

Carefree has an active Arts Committee, which serves as the umbrella group for a variety of artistic endeavors: claywork, painting, handmade bookmaking, cronestick carving, dreamcatcher-making, mosaic work, stained glass, pine basketmaking, drama and video, and relief and bird carving. When I began offering writing workshops at Carefree, it was suggested that the Writing Arts fit beautifully under the Arts Committee's umbrella. This was helpful in getting the workshops on the community's calendar and in seeing that they were publicized through the proper channels.

My friend Carol's statement about taking art classes at Carefree says it best: "All the years I worked, I never tried anything artistic. I've been creating as many pieces as my calendar allows since I came to Carefree. I think I am trying to decide who I am in my post-retirement years!" It appears to me that Carol, like many of us new retirees, is developing some exciting new identities. She played Billie Holliday at the Bourbon Street Follies. She wrote a fine story in the writing class, beautifully detailing family relationships. Her video about "The Three

Women, Retirement and Commitment

Sisters' Reunion," a Kentucky-made film, received an award at the 2001 Lily award ceremony, a video celebration named after our generous sponsor Lily Tomlin, which is Carefree's version of the academy awards.

In the Carefree writing workshops, I've tried to create a safe and comfortable environment in which writers of all skill levels and backgrounds are able to write and to share their writing. Honoring women's busy lives, I make sure they know the classes begin on time at 7 pm and go no later than 9 pm. I encourage participants to share their writing outside of the classes. And within the classes, I have been heartened to see each and every participant write in each and every class. I structure the class so that we write two times during each class session, and if someone wishes to read their writing, they read to eager listeners. My experience has been that everyone writes twice, and before we vacate the room and turn off the light, every participant has read at least one of her pieces. This is amazing to me, that so much trust has been generated, that these women write from their hearts, that there is no competition—only encouragement and respect.

Two of the writers have asked me to read their work outside of class; one has completed a memoir and a novel and the other is writing the history of her unique artistic family. I feel honored to have been asked to participate in their writing. And my own writing has continued to come: poetry about the natural history of Florida, "in memoria" pieces for friends who have died, the beginnings of my next book, songs to celebrate two friends' new canoe, the dedication of a new gate to Carefree's Greenspace in memory of two beloved departed dog friends...

The Carefree Writers Group has offered several evenings of Women's Words, a cordial and enjoyable evening experience for the community, replete with good poetry and stories, homemade cinnamon pinwheel cookies, and the requisite coffee and tea. At one Women's Words, we distributed a small booklet, "Mardi Gras: Tidbits of Remembrance," the result of one of our writing classes in which we remembered the memorable moments of our outrageous, flamboyant, and delightful Carefree Mardi Gras celebration. In combination with Women's Words readings, we celebrated a "Meet the Author" night, in which a new novel by a Carefree resident was highlighted through a reading and booksigning.

Within the writers group, there is one writer of witty feminist satire, one former theatre professor, two psychologists, three potters, several former administrators, half a dozen ex-teachers, several photographers, at least one watercolorist, and a novelist. Some have never thought of themselves as writers, but they all have stories to tell and are delighted to discover a vehicle for their storytelling. Some come to the writing group with hesitation, then find themselves picking up their pens with enthusiasm, and reading their results with a chuckle. Some are working through difficult pasts, since they finally have the time to think things through and analyze them through the lenses of wisdom, age, and time.

We are all indeed, as Carol so beautifully stated, "finding out who we are in post-retirement." I like what I am discovering. My granddaughter Alexis

Women, Retirement and Commitment

received a small vanity for a Christmas present. She was looking in the mirror, not at herself, but at me. And I was looking in the mirror at her. She said, "Nana, just look at yourself!"

Not really thinking it through, I made a casual side comment to her, "Oh, lovely!"

She said, "Nana, yes, you *are* lovely. You have white hair!" Thank you, Alexis!