

Senior Circle

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A circle is a group of people in which everyone has a front seat.

SENIOR FOCUS: Ellen Schmidt

One Woman's Journey to "What If"

By Katrina Schickel

Two women, Ellen Schmidt and myself, sit in rocking chairs facing one another. We are warm and comfortable as the cold March weather presses against the glass doors overlooking Ellen's backyard where four or five deer are nuzzling for food. I have a great sense of familiarity about this moment. I am transported to memorable conversations with other good friends.

Ellen and I are women of a similar age. We grew up in the fifties and sixties, married, had children and pursued our professional careers as well. In this manner we share a common cultural heritage. I am chatting this day with Ellen about her retirement and her work as a writer and the freedom she derives from exploring the "what ifs" in her life. Ellen has a curiosity and a respect for the different stories we all have to tell and thus she finds herself at sixty years of age, listening to and writing about peoples' stories.

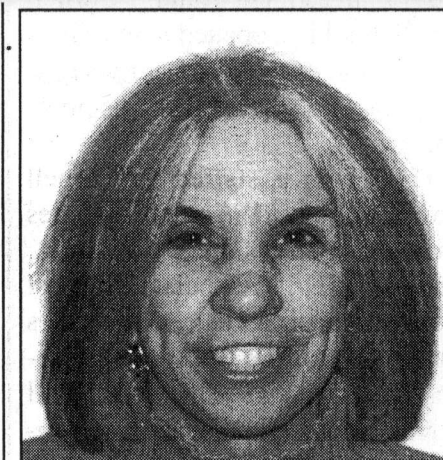
As a young girl, she spent her childhood in Katonah, New York

where her Dad was a psychiatrist and her Mom was a psychiatric social worker. People's stories were part of the fabric of their lives. When Ellen attended undergraduate school at Tufts University in Boston, she chose to major in child development and German literature – both concentrations are littered with tales of people's lives. In her junior year, she studied abroad in Germany for a year where she met her future husband, Oskar. After they married and Ellen earned a Master's degree in education they lived in Germany for seven years where their first child, Nora was born. Many years abroad and away from her family made her miss them all the more. She returned to Katonah with Oskar and Nora to settle into a three-generational family. They lived for 18 years in Katonah, NY with Ellen's Dad and Mother and after her father died, Ellen and her family continued the living arrangement with her mother. "I wanted to care for my mother at home," Ellen revealed.

During this time period Ellen

taught early childhood education as well as teacher training for day care providers. She also wrote from a parent's perspective and a teacher's perspective, articles for a publication called "First Teacher." In addition to writing, Ellen also acted with a company called The Harlem Valley Players in Katonah. These experiences reinforced her attachment to words and their power.

Upon moving to the Ithaca area, she and Oskar continued their intergenerational housing situation, only now they had another child, Robin. Ellen secured a position with Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service as Education Coordinator at this time. An important aspect of her work at SPCS was the development of the Community Role Players. This work with the Role Players tapped into her own acting experience as well as her ability to depict scenes that reflected the everyday lives of ordinary people. The purpose of the Role Players is to educate the public about challenging topics such as suicide, depression and interventions. "I so enjoyed the creative process in working with people of all ages.



Ellen Schmidt.

You develop an understanding of other perspectives, which is so exciting. We had role players who were eighty and role players who were fourteen and it was fun to see how they learned from each other!"

Ellen worked with Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service for fifteen years not only as Education Coordinator, but also doing the public information for the agency. Again, we see her using her writing skills to enhance her work.

A few years ago she made the difficult decision to retire from her

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ELLEN SCHMIDT:

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work at Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service. She had been struggling with some health issues and decided it was time to step back and reevaluate her situation. "I felt both good and bad about the deci-

sion", she told me candidly. "But I wanted to explore who I was. I felt somewhat like I was stepping off a cliff into the unknown when I retired. "What would I do?" The question of how she would now define herself if she didn't have a formal job title was a challenge for her to work through. She took about six months to take time to really explore in her own mind, what kind of contribution she could make. "I like to look at the "what ifs" and write them down. What if I did this or what if I did that? The process is as important as the product that you ultimately get." She considered her past work of teaching, counseling and writing and decided that the perfect amalgam of these interests was in teaching writing to others and thus she created the Writing Room. The Writing Room offers workshops for individuals and groups of individuals. Ellen provides an atmosphere where people feel secure and are encouraged to

let their creative juices flow.

Writing Through the Rough Spots is a particular workshop designed to provide a trusting, non-judgmental atmosphere in which participants write about the challenging events, tough conversations, or tricky situations they may be grappling with. These sessions are not about giving advice, but rather the writing is the focus.

Today, Ellen is busy and yet she has created a balance in her life that meets her needs well. "I love the serenity of my life and my ability to shape it. It took many years to learn this. I turned sixty this year and I feel really good about being inside my skin. I feel clearer about my place in the world! My work with students is an enormous honor and privilege for me, – people sharing parts of their lives with me. This is the midwifery of writing."

More information about the Writing Workshop can be found at