

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The Healing power of the pen



BY MARJORIE OLDS

Growing up in rural Katonah, New York, Ellen had chickens and goats, but New York City was not out of reach. The children of European immigrants, her parents had many guests from around the world as she grew up. She developed a strong interest in how others in the world lived. In high school she lived on a farm outside of Helsinki in Finland, and in college spent a year in Southern Germany, studying at the university in Tübingen. After graduating from Tufts University with a degree in German Literature, Ellen returned to Tübingen and married native Oskar Schmidt in 1970.

For the first 10 years of Ellen and Oskar's marriage Ellen worked in Tübingen in a psychiatric hospital and a school for children with multiple disabilities. She came to realize that the worst suffering they experienced was from the attitudes of others who didn't see them as whole people, but saw only the disability. For Ellen they weren't stutterers, cerebral palsy or spina bifida victims, but Hans-Jorg, Elke, and Heike. They loved what others kids loved; they laughed, played

pranks, argued, made up, helped each other; they were gifted in ways that often went unnoticed.

When Ellen and Oskar's first child, Nora, was two years old, the family returned to Ellen's childhood home and began 18 years of intergenerational, bi-lingual family life.

In Katonah the extended family watched farmland be cut up as wealth moved in, jacking up taxes and making for a homogenous community. After their son Robin was born, they wanted to find an affordable area that highlighted more than affluence.

After Ellen's father died, Ellen, Oskar, Nora, 14, Robin, 4, and Ellen's mother Jeanne, 81, a retired social worker, decided to move to a college town. They considered other college towns before focusing on Ithaca, but loved the four state parks, the forests nearby. They felt Ithaca had many of the advantages of a big city without the challenges of city life.

Soon after the family arrived Ellen saw a notice about an interactive theater group which explored community issues. The Community School of Music and Art, in

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cooperation with the Mental Health Association, sponsored the group and Ellen soon became the coordinator and director. She knew a powerful role playing with the Cayuga Community Role Players could help community groups visualize new ways to solve problems. Four years later she was hired as coordinator of community education at Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service, and brought the CCRP under a new umbrella agency.

Area teens and adults of all ages volunteered to assist Ellen by role playing in training. Ellen would present on, topics ranging from causes such as bullying in school, or an elderly person's fear of moving to a nursing home. The scenes were tailor crafted by Ellen in advance of each training program – people with drug problems applying for jobs, nurses or police officers training to communicate effectively, prison inmates feeling powerless to raise their children from inside prison. Each Role Player was given a specific role – bully, victim, bystander, patient in pain, nurse, the overwhelmed parent, angry teen. Ellen would prepare the audience for the scenes they would see, saying "You're going to see some scenes that may be familiar to you, but you might want to handle things differently. A lot of times in life you don't get to say what you really think, but this isn't one of them. You can talk with the players who will remain in character throughout, and provide suggestions because you are the experts."

Since the family's arrival in 1989 Ellen and Oskar have thrived despite many challenges which could easily destroy less determined people. Ellen's older sister was killed in a train-car collision, rocking the family in many ways. She has faced some challenging times raising teens, dealing with severe illness, and caring for her mother as her health declined and as she died.

As her mother aged, Ellen became increasingly impressed by the stores of experience older people hold within them. For 15 years she volunteered in a local nursing home helping elders write their life stories. The process of collecting their stories, dictated to Ellen, led to friendships with people till the ends of their lives. One woman was a blind Holocaust survivor. Another woman told stories of growing up in the mountains of Virginia. When she suffered a stroke and could no longer speak, Ellen read to her the stories from her life that she had dictated, validating her life to her and helping staff see that she was more than the wordless woman they cared for.

After 15 years guiding Cayuga Community Role Players, Ellen envisioned a quieter, deeper way to help people gain insight into heartfelt issues. Ellen had always loved to write, taken many writing workshops, and written professionally. Most of all she found that writing can create clarity in challenging times. "I became very interested in the midwifery of writing," she said. During difficult times writing had helped her see things more clearly, manage something that felt overwhelming, or by writing from another's

letter. She decided that her background as a teacher, workshop facilitator, and writer wove together well.

Ellen designed Writing Through the Rough Spots, a workshop based writing class to help writers address challenges in their lives. "I wanted to shape a class that I would feel comfortable attending. I didn't want people to feel pressed to publish or perform. Instead I think of the classes as mirrors and windows – mirrors into self discovery and windows connecting to others in ways unlike other situations. We write quite differently than we speak or think and are often surprised to understand something through the process of writing about it."

Writing Through the Rough Spots has drawn an enthusiastic audience since Ellen first offered writing courses year-round in 2006. Her venues have broadened over the years to include a conference center on an island off the coast of Portsmouth, New Hampshire; workshops at the Tompkins County Public Library, the Cancer Resource Center and an annual weekend workshop in Morristown, New Jersey. The Dean of Students Office at Cornell brings Ellen's workshop each semester to campus to alleviate the feelings of isolation students, especially international students, experience as they cope with school and relationship pressures and emerge into adulthood.

Workshop participants have recreated joyous and funny times, explored confusing, tragic and hopeful times in fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. The writers in Ellen's workshops say they came to know themselves in a deeper way, and were able to gain clarity about sensitive issues in their lives through the act of writing about the concern. Ellen likes to quote E.M. Forster: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Writers reported they found their writing helpful in their daily lives and in their inner thoughts.

Fledgling and experienced writers describe Ellen's workshops as warm, relaxed, supportive. "No one is pressed to share their work, but I have found that when you read aloud you often hear yourself for the first time."

Marjorie Olds is a columnist for the Ithaca Times. Her column, Community Connections, appears monthly.