
East End Literacy

A Women's Discussion Group

East End Literacy is a community-based reading centre for adults who live in down town east Toronto. In 1987, we began a women's discussion group. We didn't have much of a plan. We were developing a series of basic readers at the time, written with adult learners about their own lives. We thought that there was a shortage of women, and women's concerns, in what we had done so far. A women's discussion group, we thought, would generate manuscripts to "correct the imbalance." But of course the group did much more than that. It changed the way we looked at literacy. This article is about what happened to three of the women in the group: Rose, Debbie and Dorothy: what they learned and what we learned from them.

To get the group started, we called all the women in our program and asked them if, and when, they could come to a group. There are about 40 women learners in our program. Most work with volunteer tutors for about two hours a week, whether here at the reading centre or in their own homes. No one seemed to mind that we didn't have a plan, other than to talk. "I have some things to say that nobody wants to hear," said Eleanor darkly. "You mean no men? Great!" said Rose. But some women felt too shy. They valued their personal, private relationships with their tutors and they did not feel ready for a group. A lot of women wanted to come, but they were too busy. They worked days or nights or weekends or all of these; they had small children and other family members to take care of and it was just too hard to get out, even with babysitting money provided. That was the first

thing we learned. The rate of illiteracy in our society may be slightly lower for women than for men, but the barriers to taking advantage of literacy programs are much higher.

Still, about a quarter of the women in our program did attend the women's group at one time or another, with some coming regularly. We met once a week. After a few weeks, it was pretty easy to identify the factors that enabled these six women to come regularly. They were childless. They had been labelled mentally retarded in childhood and had never been trained for the workforce. They were "free" of the responsibilities of adult life.

One day in May, we decided to walk through the conservatory in Allen's Gardens, a park in our neighborhood. We were sitting outside eating sandwiches when Eleanor said, "It's time we did another book."

"What would it be about?" we asked.

"About how our parents make us give up our kids, and they shouldn't have done it," Eleanor said.

"Children's Aid shouldn't take our kids away," said Linda.

"Social workers shouldn't butt in," said Eileen.

In our early meetings, we had spent a lot of time talking and writing about experiences like these. Several of the women in the group had lost their children and/or been sterilized against their wills. It seemed to us that everything we heard in the early meetings of the women's group was a form of the question, "Why don't we have the right to grow up?"

One day we showed the group the Video "Stand Up For Your

BY SALLY MCBETH & VIVIAN STOLLMAYER

Rights,” by the Catalyst Theatre Company of Edmonton. This is the best resource we have ever seen for people who want to talk about the issues surrounding the label of mental retardation. It is about taking control of your life, and fighting for the right to make informed decisions about love and work and having a family. “The public should see this!” said Eleanor. “We are the public, Eleanor!” we said. But Eleanor meant that it should be seen by her parents and the professionals who had always made the important decisions for her.

Then we read the book *I've Come A Long Way*, by Marguerite Godbout. Marguerite is a learner in our program. Her book is always popular because she has had such an interesting life and has faced a lot of challenges, including a physical handicap. Everyone had been writing stories up until this time, but this was when Rose decided that she was going to write a book about her own life. Since Rose did not know how to write many words, Eileen, who could write but not spell, offered to put the words down as Rose dictated. This is what they put on paper in the first two weeks:

First Week:

Nightmareurys

*About my father
he bet me with his belt
In My dream, I told him
leave me alone
after the dream I take dizzy
don't touch me
and Paul had to awak me
When I was six years old
My father starting beting
I have barse om my body
I had burns on my back
I was sixteen I left home
I went to see paul
My clothes were all ript
Paul gave me some of his clothes
Paul clean me up all the blood from the
noise...*

Second Week:

*My Dad take me to the hosptoul
got my cords tied and burn't
I don't understand what was happening*

*When got hosptail They gave me needle
My older sister take home
I ask my sister where am I when I woke up
My sister said to me
shouldn't get your cord tried and burn't
My sister said to me I can't have
children.*

This was not an easy story to tell. Rose did not know the words of many things she wanted to say, and she had a hard time remembering things in sequence. The women in the group gave Rose a lot of support. One day, when we were reading over an early draft, Linda smacked the table and said, “He was *cruel*, Rose. You did the right thing. You got out.” Then she left the room and had a cigarette, and came back in and said it again: “He was cruel. You did the right thing, Rose.”

Linda had a better sense of what needed to be said than we did. In the beginning, we asked Rose a lot of rather stupid questions about her father: What had his life been like? Did he beat her because he was drunk? And Rose dutifully tried to answer. Then we began to wonder if we had the right to encourage Rose to re-live these experiences. Michele Kuhlmann, who works at a shelter for battered women and their children, gave us some good advice. Nothing, she said, not his old war wounds, not liquor, made it okay for a father to beat up a little girl. Michele said it was wonderful that Rose was determined to write this book, and that many women and children would benefit from her courage. But it wasn't Rose's responsibility to make excuses for her dad.

So we decided that whatever picture Rose painted of her father, through her recollections or her nightmares, would be the true picture. And we decided to illustrate the book through a series of photography workshops, with volunteers acting out the scenes of Rose's life. We were going to show the blood and bruises and cigarette burns. Haley Gaber-Katz, the 12-year-old daughter of a literacy colleague, agreed to play Rose's part. This enabled us to use make-up and costumes to show Rose's life as both a child and a young woman. It also freed Rose up to direct the action. She cast friends at the literacy centre in the other roles, and helped to choose props, such as the vicious army belt similar to the one her father used.

Rose was a good director. We were all

afraid of recreating some of the scenes, except Rose. She became more confident and more articulate as the production of the book went on. We published it at the end of the year, under the title *My Name is Rose* [see p. 57-60 of this issue for an excerpt]. It is very popular among literacy learners, although it has been criticized by literate women. One social worker returned her book order because, she said, her “clients wouldn't be able to identify with Rose, especially the happy ending” (Rose's book ends with her marriage to Paul, which is a happy one). However, most of Rose's mail is enthusiastic “[The book] helps us to become strong like Rose and go after our dreams and to be happy,” one learner wrote in our literacy newspaper, *Starting Out*. “Something we never knew much about—being happy and having dreams.” One day Rose received a letter from a literacy policy advisor at the Department of the Secretary of State. He told Rose that he kept her book on his desk, because “It helps me to see it there while I work.”

It will take along time for Rose to learn to read and write, and perhaps she will never be literate in the way that people who learned in childhood are literate. But the experience of making a book with Rose taught us that breaking the silence about abuse and violence is part of the process of becoming literate for many adults.

At the same time as we were working on Rose's book, the women's group continued to meet. One of the women who could not come very often was Debbie. As a single mother of two, she was not “free” in the way the other women were, and she had never been labelled mentally retarded. However, she wanted to work with us on the issue of childcare for women in literacy programs. After many days of hard work getting her thoughts on paper, Debbie came with us to a conference sponsored by the Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues. On June 20, 1987, she submitted this brief:

My name is Deborah Sims. I am 31 years old, a single mother raising two young children. When I was a child, I had polio and did not have the opportunity to get an education. When my older daughter was 5, I tried to get grade 1 but the Board of Education refused me because I was an adult and

not a child. I did not know what to do but I went to a day school and quickly found out it was too advanced. I did not know enough. I tried another school but it did not suit me.

Three years ago someone referred me to East End Literacy because I could not fill out a form for an apartment and, in a matter of weeks, I had a volunteer tutor who came to my home.

In 1985, I had my second child; it seemed to work out fine because I worked with my tutor when my daughter slept, but I cannot do that anymore because she is older and more active. She needs daycare. My volunteer tutor is only available two hours a week. The only suitable day-care I can find will not accept my daughter for only two hours a week — the minimum time is five hours. I have to pay \$100 a month out of my Family Benefits Allowance for this service. That is a lot of money out of my monthly income of \$600. It's strange but if I were in a class for 25 hours a week, I could be subsidized for day-care. I have tried to get into a 25 hour/week program but I have been refused because I am not yet at a Grade 5 level.

I have just finished Adult Basic Literacy, Parts 1 and 2, a Ministry of Education correspondence course. It was necessary for me to work with my tutor to complete this.

I am happy with the progress I am making at East End Literacy and want to continue there until both of my children are in school all day, and then, by that time, I expect I will be ready and able to go into full-time education.

In the meantime, I wish there was more financial help toward daycare while I have my two hours of tutoring a week. There are a lot of women in the same position as me, who need daycare while they are working with their tutor.

Debbie was shaking as she stood up and pre-

sented her story to a room full of educated women. But she succeeded in raising an issue that had not occurred to very many people. Debbie doesn't need full time, government sponsored job training right now. But she does need to read with her kids, help them with their homework, and get to know the school system. Because of what we learned from Debbie and many women like her, East End Literacy is working to get recognition of literacy as a family issue. That recognition would include flexible, part-time childcare for parents who are learning to read and co-operative programs with our libraries and schools that help illiterate parents to help their children.

Meanwhile, back at the women's group, we had started to talk about sex. Rose told us one day that she had a lot of pain when she had intercourse, and we were trying to figure out where it came from. Rose believed that it was a result of her tubes having been "tied and burnt" years ago, but that didn't make sense to us. To back up our argument, we drew a picture on the blackboard, showing the location of the ovaries, tubes, uterus and vagina. Then we asked Carolyn Klopstock, a sex educator from the Department of Public Health, to come in and talk. Carolyn helped Rose to figure out that she had a bladder infection.

The picture we had drawn on the blackboard was of particular interest to Dorothy. She had just found out that she

was three months pregnant. She dictated this story:

It showed how the egg gets to the uterus. It showed how the sperm reaches the egg to make a baby.

It was very good to know how this happens.

Through discussions like this, we realized that many of the women had not received basic information about their bodies when they were growing up. We tried, then, to focus the group on gaining this information, with help from Carolyn. There were problems, though. For women like Rose, Eleanor and Linda, knowing about their bodies did not repair the damage that had already been done to them as children or adolescents. Knowledge could not bring back their ability to have children. In a way it was too late for understanding, and so they lost interest. Perhaps the only thing that held the group together at this time was Dorothy. Dorothy's family had never pressured her about sterilization. She had not planned her pregnancy, but after a night of tears and soul searching, she decided to "face up" to everybody and have her baby. The next day, she came to the women's group for support. Deciding to have a baby was a difficult choice for Dorothy, but it was her choice. For the group, Dorothy became the one who was going to break out of childhood.

Dorothy could not read, but she was hungry for information. Because there did not seem to be anything for adults in an easy-to-read format, the thought of making a resource book ourselves began to grow on us. After we finished *My Name is Rose*, we began work on the second manuscript, *I Call It the Curse!* a book about periods, conception and menopause.

Like Rose, Dorothy had a limited vocabulary with which to describe the dramatic things that were happening to her emotionally and physi-



East End Literacy Women's Group

Photo by Sally McBeth

cally. She told us again and again about her decision to keep the baby; how she'd "faced up" to her parents, who stood by her, and "faced up" to her boyfriend and his family, who denied responsibility. Five months into her pregnancy, her doctor told her to have an abortion "because she said I am a slow learner and the baby will probably be a slow learner, too." Carolyn helped her to find another doctor.

Dorothy delivered a healthy baby girl on November 9, 1987. Recently, she wrote this article for our student magazine, *The Writer's Voice*:

I have been learning how to be a good mother.

My mum, my doctor Cathy and the nurses at the hospital have been helping me.

They showed me how to breathe and push the baby out.

I called the baby Natasha.

After, I went to different classes at the hospital.

They showed me how to bathe the baby, how to change the diaper, how to burp the baby

and how to feed her.

Now at home I do all the work and I also play with Natasha.

She has a bath at 7:00

and goes to bed at 8:00

My life has changed a lot.

I am happier now

and I am much busier than I was before!

Dorothy had been coming to East End Literacy for several years before she got pregnant with Natasha. She had always been extremely quiet and inarticulate. She had not made much progress at reading and writing. She could copy letters, and read simple stories that she had dictated herself.

When Dorothy got pregnant, she needed information and support. Because we were having a women's group at the time, she probably got more of these things from us than she would have before. After Natasha was born, Dorothy

was away for a while, learning how to care for her newborn. The women's group, which had only been funded for one year, ended. But soon Dorothy returned to the reading center for her weekly sessions with her tutor, Marty.

Dorothy was different. She was bustling, chatty and competent as she showed off her daughter and bundled her back into her snuggli. And she also seemed able to learn faster. One day, we were working on the manuscript for *I Call It the Curse!*, and we dropped in on Marty and Dorothy's tutoring session to test it for readability. We did not expect Dorothy to be able to pick out more than a few words, but she read the whole thing with very little help.

"Dorothy! You can read so well!" we said.

Dorothy, preoccupied with getting home to Natasha, didn't seem particularly moved by this discovery. But after their tutoring session, Marty came into the office. "I'm so glad you noticed," she said. "I don't know how it happened. Before she had a baby she could read a little, but since she had her baby she has really made terrific progress."

Of course we are not recommending having babies as a way to become literate. But Dorothy is a dramatic example of the way that self-respect and self-confidence affect people's ability to learn. There were many times in the course of the women's group, when we wondered if what we were doing — sitting around and

talking— had anything to do with literacy. Rose and Debbie and Dorothy taught us that it did. For many women, literacy does not start with instruction. It starts with getting the things that prevent learning out in the open and out of the way: the ugly, debilitating memories, the lack of social and economic supports, and the years of being told, over and over until you believe it, that you can't learn.

Community-based literacy programs are under a lot of pressure right now, from some funders, to justify the way we teach, and to report on learners and their progress in ways that can be easily categorized and measured. This kind of reporting helps our funders to justify the money they spend, but it does not help learners to learn and tutors to teach. The Secretary of State Women's Program, which funded our women's group, allowed us the flexibility just to get the women together and see what happened. If we had been required to have a plan, we might never have found out what they wanted to learn, and what they needed before they could learn.

We do not know how to measure the learning that took place in the women's group. We hope that we have shown in this article why, sometimes, it is important not to try to measure, but rather first to listen, and to understand, and then to tell what happened.



During photo-shoot of "I Call It the Curse!"

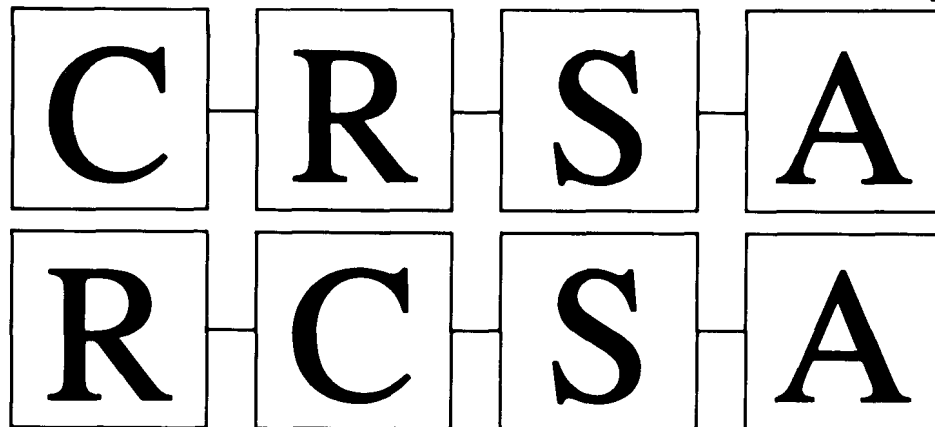
Photo by David Smiley

Vivian Stollmeyer became a volunteer at East End Literacy in 1985 and has been a member of the staff collective for two years. Before that, she worked in the theatre. She is pregnant, and looking forward to a different kind of learning experience in 1989.

Sally McBeth has been a member of the East End Literacy staff collective since 1983. Before that, she worked in community journalism. She is the mother of a three-year-old boy.

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CONTENTS

Introduction
Pat Armstrong and Roberta Hamilton

Conceptualizing 'patriarchy'
Bonnie J. Fox

L'évolution des formes de l'appropriation des femmes: des religieuses aux
'mères porteuses'
Danielle Juteau et Nicole Laurin

Feminist theory and critical theory
Barbara L. Marshall

Re-thinking what we do and how we do it: a study of reproductive decisions
Dawn Currie

Dividing the wealth, sharing the poverty: the (re)formation of 'family' in law
in Ontario
Mary E. Morton

Male culture and purdah for women: the social construction of what women
think women think
Sylvia M. Hale

REVIEW ESSAY
The construction of women and development theory
Joan McFarland

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