

FEATURED EDITOR'S PICK

# Stories Of Hope And Healing: Umbrella Events Highlight Recovery, Resilience

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Sally Stoddard shares her story at a program about hope and resilience presented at St. Johnsbury Athenaeum by Umbrella on Thursday evening. (Photo by Amy Ash Nixon)

ST. JOHNSBURY — Sally Stoddard shared her piece *Healing by Secondary Intent* at an event hosted by the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum on Thursday night, one of eight women whose stories were publicly read at an event presented by Umbrella as part of Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

The program was titled *Stories of Hope & Healing: An evening with local storytellers offering insight into recovery and resilience*.

Stoddard learned of the term ‘healing by secondary intention’ after she was poisoned and suffered a near-fatal infection.

The medical term helped her to draw a metaphor for her earlier life trauma, the years she endured domestic violence.

Using that metaphor of healing oneself from within, Stoddard read her story before a packed house at the Athenaeum.

The event was the second such storytelling evening in recent weeks presented by Umbrella, the nonprofit organization that supports people seeking help after experiencing domestic and sexual violence; the first was held a week earlier at the Goodrich Memorial Library in Newport.

Healing by secondary intention - the parallel metaphor Stoddard created in her writing - happens when the sides of a wound are not opposed, and the healing takes place from the bottom of the wound upwards, according to a definition of the medical term.

What Stoddard’s body did to help her survive, her mind and soul had done once before: healing from the bottom of the wounds that were invisible to the world during the years of abuse she survived.

Those wounds did not just go away after her divorce, Stoddard shared, and she explained how she distilled years of trauma into a short work of prose in which she explained how she had fought like a warrior, and that today she carries her scars, both the visible and the invisible, like a talisman.

“I see my writing like a maple tree,” said Stoddard. “It was wonderful having to come down to 1,500 words. How do I show you violence without lingering on it?” she asked aloud.

“Hopefully you just tasted some of the sap, that’s how I tried to write,” she said.

Stoddard shared in her carefully pruned prose that she had married young, an older man, relying on his truths rather than her own. His truths were ugly and dangerous, “so that’s what my life became ... ugly and dangerous.”

“I call the scars my shark bite,” Stoddard shared of the incision she was left with after she was finally sewn up following the terrible infection she recovered from - and when she learned of the term *healing by secondary intention*.

She could not walk, people who love her had to hold her up with both arms for her walk, and they did. “People showed me the ways they loved me.”

“I realize I carry a shark bite from my marriage as well,” Stoddard went on, referring to the violence she endured and how that trauma haunted her.

Stoddard drew out the parallel to how she had also healed wounds from within that the world did not see when she was living in a violent marriage.

“The first time he slapped me across the back of the head for cooking the eggs wrong,” Stoddard shared.

There were always bruises, hidden under her hair, and painful to the touch, severe enough she suffered headaches.

One night, a woman they knew arrived at their doorstep bruised and bloodied, and sought help with her own husband from Stoddard's husband - who she believed was a good man.

They let her stay and her husband, himself an abuser, intervened on her behalf to try to get the friend's husband to stop hurting her.

"Three days after she left, my husband broke my jaw," Stoddard looked up, reading from her story.

"Like any woman who has been beaten, I can tell you a myriad of these stories," she said.

One night, she ran through the woods, trying to escape gunfire from her husband.

She escaped, and friends took her in.

"But the years of violence followed me long after I thought I had gained my freedom," Stoddard shared.

"I fought for my recovery like a warrior," she told the crowd of more than 40 people.

Umbrella's Mission: Freedom from Abuse

Umbrella Executive Director Amanda Cochrane welcomed people to the event and thanked them for being there. Her eyes glistened with tears as she watched the seven women she knows so well bravely take to the podium.

"Umbrella's mission is to cultivate a Northeast Kingdom where all people thrive free from abuse and oppression," Cochrane said.

Showcasing real stories written by people in the Northeast Kingdom was chosen as the vehicle for marking Domestic Violence Awareness Month, said Cochrane, adding that not all the stories chosen for the program were about domestic violence, but all shared a theme of healing and hope.

“Some of the stories you will hear tonight are hard to hear ... they’re real stories,” said Cochrane, noting there was an advocate from Umbrella available if anyone needed to take a break and talk with someone.

## Stories

One of the women who shared her story said that some of her early life trauma growing up in a rural, back woods part of the Northeast Kingdom was resurrected after her apartment was broken into, leaving her feeling vulnerable. A friend suggested she write about it. “All of a sudden, it was like Pandora’s box had opened.”

“I wrote this as a way of me facing the ghosts that are in the Kingdom still,” she said, and as a way “of me taking back my power in a place that I always felt took away more from me than they had a right to.”

After the women’s stories were shared, an audience member asked where forgiveness fits in.

A few answers were offered, and then Sally Stoddard asked if anyone in the room minded rough language, and she said, “I don’t forgive. He can go f\*\*\* himself.”

She said her abuser is still alive.

“Only the good die young,” she said, adding, “He has no power in my life, none, not at all. He does not deserve forgiveness and I don’t need to forgive him to feel whole. I feel whole by dismissing him. I am not a forgiver; I’m a self-healer.”

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An anonymous reader shared that her earliest memories “are of things I’d much rather forget.”

“Our Sunday school teacher told us to take our problems to God, and that God would fix them,” she continued. “I begged God every night for the abuse to stop; unfortunately, it never did.”

She relied on rides out to her rural home from people in town willing to give her rides - often men, she said, who were “willing to help me out as they called it,” yet they felt free to grope her, and put their hands places they did not belong without her consent. They would tell her she couldn’t expect a ride for free.

“I fought with them, and the more I did, the more they seemed to enjoy it,” she shared. “The bottom line was I had to get home, and it was too far to walk. I had to pay my father room and board or face consequences that were far worse, and I was trapped,” she shared. She was working an after-school job in a store in town and needed the money to pay her rent.

The woman shared that eventually, she moved out of her home, refusing to be her mother’s protector any longer after her older brother left for good.

That was the impetus for her mom seeking help from Umbrella.

The woman shared that she was hoping to break the cycle of abuse with her own sons.

“I have moved from victim to survivor onto hope,” she shared. “Every tradition teaches this - we are all here for a reason. Some people need to be tempered like steel for what life has in store for them.”

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Destiny Leffel shared the story of an extremely challenging mountain climb for which she was unprepared but faced and survived, another metaphor for her inner strength.

“The hike helped clear up some things,” Leffel said. “I am fierce in the face of adversity and can make due.”

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A piece titled *Walking on Eggshells* written by an anonymous woman, was read by Henekis Stoddard.

The woman endured years of abuse, which were finally observed by a visiting family member who helped her to find her way out.

She called the police and they encouraged her to contact Umbrella, where she found endless amounts of kindness, support and a lifeline to move into a safe home and begin to rebuild her life.

The woman today is eight years into her new life. She's remarried, owns a business, and is "no longer walking on eggshells."

Umbrella's staff and volunteers "held my hand through a brutal time in my life."

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Other stories shared included *The Peach* by Felicia White, a poignant piece about her losing her mother-in-law suddenly due to a car crash that left her in a vegetative state, and her family's difficult decision to let her go. The last time she had seen her mother-in-law was through glass during the pandemic. She had been heading to get a COVID test, and they had not spoken. Then, the crash occurred.

White shared with the audience at the Athenaeum that writing has become a way for her to work through her grief and move forward. She continues to write poetry and is at work on a book. And a piece by Catherine Palmer chronicled a lifetime of suppressing her health concerns and doubting her own voice.

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Cochrane, Umbrella's executive director, shared a piece by Fiona Mackay – "Return to Record."

Mackay is the daughter of Martha Coughlin, the first-ever graduate of Burke Mountain Academy, who is credited as a co-founder of the school.

Coughlin, who passed away in May 2021, was a victim of sexual abuse during her time at the school, Mackay said. She made public her mother's alleged abuse at the elite ski academy before an audience attending the 50th memorial of the school's founding last fall, in which Coughlin was honored.

She said her mother died unexpectedly while writing a timeline to bring her story to light. Cochrane read a submission from Mackay, detailing her efforts to posthumously air her mother's abuse at the hands of a coach.

Mackay lives in Los Angeles and was not at the Umbrella event.

"I must see this wish through for her ... Leaving this half-century-old wound untreated for the rest of eternity was not an option," Mackay wrote. "Whenever I felt doubt or fear, and I certainly felt both, I reminded myself that I alone held the needle and thread that could stitch this wound back up once and for all; because I had the truth and my intentions were driven by love. I had a voice and a stage and the power to heal and, with that, a responsibility to do so."

After publicly naming her mom's alleged abuser, Mackay said, "That speech gave a lot of people permission to care for themselves and their experiences in a way I don't think they ever realized they could up until that point.

"I have faith that my mom is resting now, knowing that so much good has come from this... Self-compassion and healing is a hard-fought journey. Find strength knowing every step of that journey is a marker of your limitlessness and that your courage is contagious."

In response to Mackay's entry, Burke Mountain Academy issued a statement.

"Burke Mountain Academy continues to admire Fiona's courage in speaking out to share her mother's painful experiences while attending Burke between 1970-1973," the statement said. "Fiona spoke eloquently at our remembrance of her mother in October 2022 about a sad chapter in Burke's history that caused lasting harm to a cherished Burke graduate, Fiona's mother. The efforts of Fiona and her late mother to share these experiences continues to motivate Burke's



current leadership to promote the safety and wellbeing of our student athletes as our top priority. Burke now follows national guidelines established in 2017, as overseen by the U.S. Center for SafeSport, to promote the highest standards of excellence for all interactions between Burke's athletes and its coaches, and to advance abuse prevention, education and accountability on behalf of all our student athletes and our entire ski community."

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Filmmaker Bess O'Brien, worked with Umbrella on the storytelling project and exceed the event. The women did one rehearsal with O'Brien before courageously sharing their stories in public, she said.

Thursday night's program was made possible with support from St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, Catamount Arts, Community National Bank, Passumpsic Bank, Northeast Kingdom Human Services, Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital, Union Bank, Drs. Richard and Courtney Kozlowski, Tim Scott Real Estate, North Country Hospital, Orleans County Sheriff's Department, Winterset Construction and Morrill & Guyer Ltd.