

New Writers on the Horizon



Writings from Deborah's Place

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The journey of life provides us with countless experiences that impact us as individuals and shape how we relate to others. Sharing these experiences through storytelling and writing provides each of us the opportunity for greater understanding, a way to connect to experiences not our own.

I am grateful that Literacy Works' Writers' Circle provides this opportunity, not only for the writers who gather at the table each week, but for each of us who engage in reading the stories in this book. Thank you to all the women who shared their stories and for Literacy Works for making this program possible.

Alison Szopinski

Program Director

Literacy Works

It has been such a pleasure working with the women at Deborah's Place. I am truly impressed with their hard work and commitment to growing as writers. I have learned so much from their thoughtful and honest stories. Thanks to all of the women for their participation in the Writers' Circle!

A special thanks to Tina Beine and the staff of Deborah's Place for their support of the Writers' Circle, and to Betsy Rubin for the wonderful photography.

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Writings from Women at Deborah's Place

Writers' Circle, Fall/Winter 2007

Kay Graham

Mary McFadden

Jackie Parker

Nancy Thomas



“Be spontaneous, be truthful, be free,
and thus be individual.”

- Lydia Maria Child

Kay Graham

KAY

Humorous, serious, curious

Daughter of Mr. Ralph Graham and Jeanne Graham

Sister of Carol Friend, Ethel Gynn, Linda Woods

Who feels uncertain, goofy, and very attentive

Who likes Backstreet Boys, the color pink and truthful friends

Who needs more people using “common sense”

Who lives in Chicago, IL

GRAHAM



My Autobiography

Hello, my name is Kay Graham. I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota. However, I was raised mostly in a small town of Illinois called Kankakee. My memories of growing up in Kankakee are somewhat dim and very dysfunctional. I grew up in a family of two parents and older sisters, so the best part about growing up was having sisters to play with, talk to and they advised me. I'm older now and I live in Chicago, IL. I am forty-five years old and I feel the best part of my life is keeping in touch with my family. I now have more best friends than money.

One of the people I admire the most is my dad. The two main things I like most about my dad are his humor and his knowledge. Another thing I really admire about my dad is his devotion and love for his kids to get a real good education. He was very proud of me the year I graduated high school. It gave him pride to brag about how all five of his girls finished and graduated.

Of course the most important memory of my childhood was the time I had told my dad I had plans to become a journalist. He explained all I needed to guide me directly to success were these three tools: a) strength, b) devotion, c) be serious! This encouragement took me to where I am today, still in the process of becoming a great journalist.

Thank you!



Coming To Chicago From Another Place

“No matter where I go, I meet myself there.” --- Dorothy Fields

Up until now, I had never thought about why I came to Chicago. Now that I'm here, I can remember that the trip was a process. I can also remember that I had almost no say in the matter. I wanted to come to Chicago, but my mother's reasons were never explained.

I call myself a civil rights or a 50's baby. I was almost out of my teens during Viet Nam. I suppose that nothing can be done about the climate of the times. I can only reflect on how those times have affected my life. I grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. The city was a large and progressive city: home of one of America's most productive steel mills where my father worked. There are also several Historically Black Colleges and Universities sprinkled throughout the state. But Birmingham, along with Selma and Montgomery, Alabama are a few of the cities where history was made. During that time I was too young to really know what it was all about. In 1963, when John Kennedy was killed, I was in the sixth grade. Before that time, I have only vague memories of the bombing at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where young children were killed. I did not understand anything about racism or bigotry, or civil rights. But I knew there was always tension in the air. By the time I entered high school in 1968, children were being bussed and schools were desegregated. At my school only the teachers were being bussed in.

My mother decided that I would go to another place and Chicago just happened to be that place. To this day, I do not know why she made this decision and she died before we could have that conversation. Even though she only plays a small part in the overall process, perhaps she thought it was for the best (I'm still wondering). Even though she did not raise me and I only lived in her house for five years, I learned a lot from her in a very short time. There was quality if not quantity. My mother's sister, Florence, was the first person I called momma. She had no children of her own and, in hindsight, I could tell she did not know what she was doing. She was nothing like my momma.

But I digress.

Nothing and no one prepared me for the first major journey of my life. I was put on the bus and told “Bon Voyage!!!” A family friend met me on the other end. This is where the southern girl hits the big city. Back in the day, pimps and other such predators would hang around the bus station and prey on women who were traveling alone. Thanks to good pre-travel advice, I didn’t fall for that. I spent the next few weeks job searching with a little sightseeing thrown in for good measure. After all, I had to learn how to get around on my own. One of the first things I noticed was that the neighborhood had plenty of small businesses that were doing well. When you take into account that the year was 1973, there was a look of prosperity on the south side.

Back in the big city, the next move was to try and find the family members that are already here. At the time, I had two brothers and a sister living on the west side. However, I really did not know where to look. These siblings were from my father’s first marriage. They had been here for a long time and were at least ten to fifteen years older than I. I didn’t know whether they would accept me; seeing as how I was part of my father’s second family and all. Since I was expecting a little resentment, I was truly surprised when they appeared to want to help “lil sis” get a job and move to the same part of town. Ain’t it amazing how some members of a family feel the need to right an imaginary wrong by trying to make you feel so guilty that you must obligate yourself. In other words, my family was the master of the art of shakedown. They were older and were able to make you feel guilty over something our parents did. They only made me want to stay away from them as much as possible and not have them suck the life out of me.



Eventually, I began to find out about the city. Once I got past its ugly civil rights history, I began to see a city with culture and opportunities. Once I got past all the burglar bars on the windows and doors, I began to see the politics of the city. I was disappointed at the devastation on the west and south sides, but I know why. I was intrigued by all the people that inhabited every nook and cranny. I was not afraid to venture out once I learned how simple it was to move around the city.

I've lived in the city of Chicago longer than in the state of Alabama. I've lived on all sides of the city and ten years in Aurora, Illinois. I've visited other cities in the west and mid-west. The reasons I've remained here have nothing to do with family or familiarity. I believe that the reason I was sent here and the reason I've stayed is that someone knew that there were going to be better opportunities. The past thirty-five years have been about growing up. It's been slow; with twist and turns, ups and downs and a lot of near misses and wipeouts. That's life! Chicago is full of life and energy. There's a reason for every thing and I am along for the ride. As far as I'm concerned, this is home and the title of this piece *should be*: Coming Home via Somewhere Else.

"We go on.

Because it is the hard thing to do.

And we owe ourselves the difficulty."---Nikki Giovanni



Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness

“Prejudice is a great timesaver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts.”--- E.B. White

January 18, 2005 was the day I was blessed with an apartment at Deborah’s Place. I’d been semi-homeless for about two and a half years and living in a shelter for one year. I was impressed with the visions the founders of Deborah’s Place had for helping with the problem of homelessness and low income housing. A few months after I moved into my new home, an opportunity arose for me to express my humble opinions on how best to address the problems of homelessness.

First, there was a question needed to be asked and answered: Do I know enough about homelessness and its effects to render an opinion on so serious an issue? Before 2003 the answer would have been “no way!” But as the saying goes, I had lived to tell the tale and can now honestly express my thoughts on a possible solution.

In order to break the cycle of homelessness, we must first address the social ills that affect the women who are at risk. Some of these ills include lack of education, poverty, unemployment, prejudice, and abuse. There is a tendency to put a band-aid on a festering and painful social ill; when in fact, major surgery is required. We need to replace the band-aids with awareness, education, employment, tolerance, and respect.

I believe that from birth women are raised to be victims. Daddies should teach their “little girls” how to survive without being a servant at a man’s beck and call. Girls need to be aware of the gender bias that can affect them in every stage of life. Women need to know that their rights or opportunities do not depend on being male or female. They need to know that their successes in life do not depend on a man deciding their worth. They need nurturing just as well as boys. After all, being the *best possible person* is what is important. Awareness should be one of the sharpest tools used to break the cycle of homelessness.

Women should have the opportunity to receive the same education as men. Too often they are raised to believe that certain careers or opportunities are off limits to them. We need to stop stereotyping women and make more options available. While I do not think women should not be on the front lines of battle, other opportunities should be made available for women to show their patriotism. While I believe that men are suited to heavy work, I would like to see women given the right and encouragement to choose what they want to do. Education is another tool that should be as sharp as any other.

Societies need to learn tolerance for women who are at risk. I do not mean the kind of tolerance where society feels like they are doing them a favor. We need to understand that homelessness is a no-fault situation. Abused, handicapped, and mentally impaired women should be treated with the respect that they are entitled to as human beings. We must not let these women fall through the cracks. What is even more important is for these women to know that they are loved and respected, and have something to offer.

The cycle of homelessness will not be broken unless we, as a society, begin to respect others and ourselves. Wars are fought because humans have stopped respecting their neighbors. Respect is basic to the needs of everyone, and women seem to be the most disrespected of all. Low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and abuse all stem from disrespect. We must teach and practice respect and set an example for our young. Respect for self, respect for others, and respect for God's laws are what make for a well-rounded society.

When people in Chicago and all over the world realize that homelessness can be managed to the benefit of all, advocacy will increase. Advocacy is a powerful tool used to show women that they have a voice. I look forward to the day when all disadvantaged men and women are treated fairly, and know that they can hold their heads up with pride. Only then will the cycle of homelessness be broken.

“Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” --Martin Luther King, Jr.



A Woman Who Made a Difference

The woman who made a difference in my life was my mother. My mother was a very strong woman indeed, a loving wife, a wonderful mother. She cared about people and she showed it by helping people in various ways by putting them before herself.

My mother was the mother of ten children, six boys and four girls. We were a close family who loved each other very much and we could always count on each other for whatever. Whenever someone was going through something or needed anything, everyone was there for each other.

I can recall events that happened down through the years when we all were growing up together. For instance, the games that we would make up and just have so much fun outside playing them or how my mother taught me and my sisters how to cook at the ages of eight or nine years old. I can recall how much we enjoyed learning from our mother and just spending time with her was so great. The laughter, the love, we enjoyed every minute, learning how to cook from our beautiful mother.

I often think about my mother. She is no longer with me, but I have such beautiful memories that I can think about and will always have these special memories in my heart. Whenever I am feeling sad, worried, or trying to make an important decision I think about what advice my mother would give me. Then, I find comfort and make the decision. You see, when I lost my mother I lost not only my mother, but my best friend. I could talk to my mother about anything and just talking to her would make everything alright.

Whenever I thought about my mother I would call her long distance just to talk to her and hear her voice and how much that would help me. I would even ask her what she had cooked and she would say, "It's not like you can eat some of what I cooked." We would laugh and tell each other that we loved each other, say good-bye, talk to you later, take care of yourself.

I miss my mother so very much. I can't express in words how much I miss her and love her. My mother, my best friend, my joy, and my all, an exceptional mother. I was very fortunate to have had such a wonderful mother that I had. I was blessed because I was able to pass along some of the things that she taught me, to someone else like my grandchildren. I will enjoy passing that wisdom on and not keeping it to myself.



When I think about the wisdom that my mother passed on to me what comes to mind is she taught me about values and how to trust people. For instance, you treat people the way you want to be treated. How we are to love our families and our fellow man. How not to deliberately hurt someone because when you do that you end up hurting yourself. She also taught me how to instill in my children good morals and values. I am so grateful that I had the kind of mother I had. I was truly blessed in that area.

My mother gave me strength to follow her directions in raising and teaching my children what is important in life. Sometimes you will have to make some important decision in your life when you are growing up and when you become an adult. Then you can remember these things that I pass on to you through way of my mother.

My mother was good to people, whether they were children or adults. That was her way of showing you that she cared about you. She made herself available if anyone needed to talk to someone or needed to just have someone to listen or give some advice to. That was how my mother helped in the time of need.

I feel that if I can be just half the woman my mother was I am truly blessed and the richest woman in the world.

My brothers were also close to our mother, especially my younger brother. He would spend more time with our mother because he was younger and was able to spend more time, but that doesn't mean that the other five brothers weren't close. It only means that they weren't available as much as the younger brother was.

Whenever the older brothers were able they would spend some special time with mother and she would light up like a shining star to have her sons all together. All of my brothers had that same closeness to our mother as I did. We are all in agreement that we had a beautiful mother and we miss her dearly and thank God that she was our mother. We love you Mother always.

Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit fall down on me
Shower me from head to toe
Dwell in my mind, body, and soul

Keep me from day to day
Teach me the way to go
Lead me, guide me along my way

Don't let me stray from thee
Keep me in your will
Let your love abide within me

Keep me day after day
Then I won't stray away from thee
Holy Spirit have your way.



One of the Most Important Things in My Life

One of the most important things in my life is my children and grandchildren and my family. I was raised in a family where there was lots of love for each other and caring about other people and not always focusing on ourselves.

My mother and father instilled those qualities in me. That is why I was able to pass it on to my children. When my children became parents they could pass it on to their children.

I feel when the right values are instilled in you from the time you are able to understand them, if you stray away the values will always remain with you. Then you can find your way back on the right track.

We need to have love for one another. When people know and feel that they are loved it will encourage them to pass it on to someone else and so on. Then that person passes it on to another and another and so on.

My children are my pride and joy. I am very proud of them knowing that I played a very important and major part in the way that they became loving and caring people always striving to improve, to be better.

I can remember when my children were small toddlers growing up especially when Christmas was coming. I would get such joy watching them wait for Santa to come. When it came time to do the cooking for Christmas dinner I would ask each one of the boys what they would like me to cook. They would tell me and it was great to see their little faces all lit up and they had such happy smiles on their faces.

I can truly say that I have been blessed with three beautiful sons and I have enjoyed all the special moments that we shared together: the laughter, tears, fun times, serious talks, the quality times that I spent with my sons.

Now that my children are all grown up with families of their own I am very proud of them and I am very glad that I was an influence on their lives. We are still close with each other. I miss them because I don't see them as much as I would like to but I still talk to them on the phone and see them from time to time. Whenever we get together we talk about our special times and the love that we have for one another.





Excerpt From a Dream

Several years ago as I matured, I became more conscious of making right and wrong decisions that affected me, family, friends, and my life. I wanted to make the right decisions, but I felt I needed information, understanding, and most of all, I needed truth.

My parents didn't introduce me to or discuss the spiritual side of life. I needed to know, I needed information, understanding and most of all, I needed truth. I have met people with all kinds of life styles, but some people were dishonest and deceitful. I didn't understand why. In my life, I purposely worked to be fair, honest, and kind. I never questioned the intentions of others. I assumed the feeling was mutual.

Growing up, there was always a Bible in our home, but my parents didn't introduce me to or discuss the spiritual side of life. I was told by an acquaintance that it had all the information I needed to better understand human nature so I decided to start reading the Book of Knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

After studying for a while one night, I fell asleep right into a dream! In the dream people in my whole neighborhood were preparing dishes for a special celebration. My neighbors and I seemed to be very excited. Everyone was laughing, joking, and talking. The children were playing and running from house to house.

I was busy cooking like everyone else. Suddenly I heard loud noises and blood-curdling screams from people outside where the celebration was to be. My two children ran inside close to me. They were terrified, but I didn't know why. I looked out the window and I saw bare-chested, dark-skinned men with jagged white teeth chasing and hacking people who had gathered outside for the celebration. There were at least a hundred or more of these men waving large, sharp machetes and destroying all of the food and decorations. Terror fell over me. My children and I ran to what seemed to be a hidden closet that just appeared, where the terror could not see or find us. There was only enough room for the children. I pushed them in and locked the door. Somehow I knew they would come to no harm, they were safe.

As the terror came towards me, my dream flicked to the desert. I was safe, but only for a moment. The desert sand was hot and white. The brightness of the sun was beating down, there was no shade. I was very thirsty. At a short distance away, I saw a small tent. I wondered if water was there. When I got to the tent I entered. It became very large. I was amazed!

I looked around, there were people in small, sectioned off rooms. I felt as though I was being watched, so I looked up. I saw her! A giant ancient Egyptian woman lying on a bed covered with jewels. I could not speak, only stare. She softly beckoned for me to continue through the tent, and I followed her directions. In the rooms, there was every face of man and woman, as if sculptured by Michelangelo. In each room, there were groups of people with all kinds of sexual debauchery.

As I passed by, the people inside invited me to join them. I declined. All of a sudden, each person that was indulging in these activities was being destroyed by the very same men with the machetes. Terror was running through the large tent with a vengeance. The men were right behind me. I began to run with all the strength that I could muster. Just ahead, there were very large double doors slowly closing. There was a woman telling me to hurry before the doors closed, never to be open again. Just at the last push of the doors, I made it. The woman said, "You're safe now." I woke up from the dream, soaking wet from head to toe and shaking from fear.

Was it just a dream? I don't think so. I believe it was a warning of what is happening in the world today. As I live my life on a day to day basis, I see things happening that were in the dream. People taking people's lives, destroying property, disasters, heartache, and pain. We must wake up. We must do something different.



Unfolding My Arms

I remember growing up at the age of 12 years old. I was in grammar school and some boy said to my surprise, “You have breasts!”

I thought to myself, I am supposed to have breasts, was I so different than any other female? I looked around at the other girls and I did notice that my breasts were larger and more noticeable than the rest of the girls in my class, maybe even in the whole school. I remember being so embarrassed. After school I told my mother what the boy said. It was time for my first bra.

As I grew older, my breasts grew with me. Old men started saying very unpleasant things to me. After a while, I unconsciously began folding my arms across my chest to hide.

Being noticed for my larger size at my age become overwhelming. It was difficult for me to meet boys, or go out on dates when I became old enough. If there were any comments from a potential date or boyfriend, it would destroy any chance of ever dating that young man.

As I grow older, I am finally accepting the way God has made me and loving myself for it. I have missed out on a great number of male friends because of my self consciousness about my large breasts, which have nothing to do with my mind, character, intelligence, or how I feel about life and the world in general. It's so sad that some men see women as objects for immoral intentions. They really are missing out on the straight and worthy women. Finally I have learned to love myself and to unfold my arms.

Growth

Everything that I have ever done in my life, be it good or evil, has a direct impact on who I am, the choices, decisions and experiences all are the sum total of me.

Although I am not happy about many of my choices, I must believe that I have gained more (or some) insight in becoming a fully developed human being, and learning life's most important lessons such as integrity and being grateful for another chance to grow.

Growth is what I strive for, growth is in seed. What a beautiful flower I will be for all the world to see; and the wonder in their faces. "Surprise!" I will say. "This is a gift my good and faithful servant." He will say. And the voices of many Angels singing, "Well done, well done."

One Thing I Would Change About Myself

If I could change one thing about myself it would be to love more, without criticism and to understand more, look into my own spirit – is it in the right frame of thought? Is it in the frame of caring about others? Is it being there for another person in need? Am I a shoulder to cry on? Am I an ear to listen? Am I a happy face to see early in the morning when you need it?

Can I be that strength that you need when you need encouragement? Can I be the light to guide you in the darkness? Can I hold you when you need affection? These are the things that I need to do for you and for the sake of life itself because if no one ever tries, it will never be better, it will never be a future for mankind!



**Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness
through Innovation and Collaboration**

Deborah's Place is Chicago's largest provider of supportive housing exclusively for women and is recognized as an innovative leader among homeless service providers locally and nationally. Since our founding in 1985, we have worked collaboratively with our participants, offered a range of high quality services and tried new approaches – putting Deborah's Place at the forefront of agencies making a difference to those in need in Chicago.

Our Mission and the Values That Drive It

Deborah's Place breaks the cycle of homelessness for women in Chicago. Through a continuum of housing options, comprehensive support services and opportunities for change provided by dedicated volunteers and staff, women succeed in achieving their goals of stable housing, sustainable income and greater self-determination.

Deborah's Place

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“New Writers on the Horizon” is a result of Writers’ Circle, an 8-week writing workshop created by Literacy Works in partnership with the Learning Center at Deborah’s Place.



Literacy Works’ mission is to fulfill the promise of a basic human right: the right to read, write, and interpret the world.

To fulfill its mission, Literacy Works provides workshops, trainings and direct literacy services to member and non-member agencies.

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Literacy