

Mosaics



VITA STORY CLUB

Mosaics

by the Storytellers at the Park Slope
Center for Successful Aging and

VITA STORY CLUB
A LIFE STORYTELLING WORKSHOP

Vita Story Club, Inc
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“Writing, if nothing else, is a bridge between two people, a bridge made of language. And language belongs to all of us. If I enjoy a poem, that just means I am recognizing within it something of myself, something I must already possess. Therefore, to love a poem is to love a part of myself revealed to me by another person.”

-Ocean Vuong

“We all live in one another’s world and they are worlds that are vast. In this one room there are worlds that are vast and it touched me how spiritually profound that is. ...There are conversations here in such different planes in no more than an hour. I want to stop and say that I’m so grateful that I’ve been in this room for this hour. That whatever happens, it’s there.”

-Lois Kellerman

“A story, after all, is best when shared. A gift in the truest sense of the word.”

-Monique Truong,
The Book of Salt

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INTRODUCTION

This is the first ever collection of stories from the fabulous storytellers at the Park Slope Center for Successful Aging. Though I joined the group after it was already fairly well established, it didn't take long for me to understand how remarkable this group of storytellers truly is. On one of the very first sessions I sat in on, I witnessed a level of togetherness and encouragement that was perhaps somewhat akin to what you might find in a long-running support group. People shared deeply personal stories from their lives and found solace in the like stories of their peers.

From the very beginning, I felt grateful to be a part of such a special group of people, and I look forward to continuing to work with them in the future.

To the storytellers at Park Slope Center for Successful Aging, thank you for welcoming me into your community and sharing so many wonderful and profound stories and bits of wisdom with me and Vita Story Club.

-Linnea Guerin, Vita Story Club

ELVA THE DEATHBEATER

Elva Jimenez

In 1941, when my mother was pregnant with me, she had gone from Lima to Chiris, my mother's hometown. At that time my mother already had three daughters, and I would be the fourth. My father was working as an electrician in Municipal Theatre in Lima. My mother was very happy to be with her parents and siblings in Chiris. When the time came for my birth, my father came to deliver me, something not unusual at the time. After a few months, he went back to Lima to work. He worked in the theatre and in his free time he began to play the mandolin, hanging out with his friends and serenading the girls almost every night.

Not sleeping or eating enough, my father became sick with tuberculosis. At the time, there was no cure for the disease. The only thing doctors recommended was change of environment, dry and clean air, healthy foods, and a lot of rest. Due to this situation, my mother had to come back to Lima. Because of the change of weather, I became sick with the whooping cough. Doctors said to my parents that I was going to die because there was no cure for it. So my parents decided that it was time to go back to my father's hometown in Chincheros. Because Chincheros had a beautiful climate and lots of healthy foods. But my parents decided to baptize me in a hurry. My godmother Silvia made me a dress of Mamacha Carmen (Virgen Carmen) (hábito). In

case I died, I would be dressed and buried in it. The doctor gave my mother a pink syrup, telling her to give me one teaspoonful every two hours. My mother did this faithfully.

My family traveled by bus to Chincheros. As the weather and environment was changing, so was I. My fever stopped and my coughing stopped. I was feeling better. When we arrived in Chincheros, after two days of traveling, I was miraculously cured. From then on, my parents gave me a new name, La Vence Muerte (“Overcomes Death”). My father was also cured of his tuberculosis.

JOHNNY APPLESEED

Cynthia Gilbertson

As a small child growing up, my mother told me that I should become a teacher. She told me how wonderful it would be to have the summers off and school vacations free to spend with my own children. Somehow, she made teaching sound glamorous. That was fine, but I had my own secret ambition. I wanted to be Johnny Appleseed!

I played putting an old pot on my head to be like Johnny Appleseed, sprinkled sand representing seeds around the yard while singing aloud the Disney version of “Johnny Appleseed”:

The Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me, the things I need, the sun, the moon and the apple seeds. The Lord is good to me!

I saw no conflict between being a teacher and being Johnny Appleseed, but my mother had a different opinion. She was mortified by her daughter playing a wandering, unemployed male! I just wanted to be like Johnny Appleseed. I wanted to be outdoors, care-free, and feeding the birds.

As an adult, I worked as a social worker, but I didn't place a pot on my head.

SIX AND A HALF TERRIBLE

PHOTOS

Clyde Coreil

When I was 21, one day I graduated with a BA in English and History, and I thought I was God's gift to the world. So, I went home, and my mother didn't agree. I had written off for lots of jobs, but nothing. After a couple of weeks, I saw an ad for an experienced reporter with a flair for feature stories. I haughtily answered, saying that I had no experience in journalism and barely knew what a feature was. I didn't think there was a chance that any editor would hire me. In fact, I hoped not because my opinion of journalism majors could hardly have been lower. Sure enough, the very, very low-paying job was mine if I wanted it. My mother didn't say, "Good Riddance," but I am decidedly psychic about things like that.

So, I went to Lafayette, which was about 40 miles away. I was given a desk across from an alcoholic reporter with whom I got along swimmingly. The very next night there was a tornado that hit Abbeville, and the editor said there was no one to cover the story and take seven photos of the broken buildings. I looked at the camera he handed me and I saw that it was a huge press model that I had no idea about how to operate it. "What?" he said and I realized that all journalism students at that time knew all about cameras that made a huge negative that was 4 x 5 inches. He became

quite demanding and said that each shot was made on one side of a holder that held two negatives. "Any fool can get good photos with a negative that big." He demonstrated once and said that if I got in the company car, I would get to Abbeville in half an hour, spend 10 minutes taking photos and be back in time for the afternoon edition. I gulped. He gave me 4 film holders and told me not to dilly-dally.

I got in the car and drove myself to Abbeville. The tornado had twisted buildings and turned cars over something awful. I put flash bulbs in the camera to make certain that I had enough light for the seven shots to win a contest. They really were good shots. My ten minutes were up and so I thought that I needed one more insurance shot so I opened the car door and stood on the inside of the open door.

At that moment, I realized that I had not pulled out the slides on any of the shots I had taken. They would all be perfectly blank. All six and a half shots. I panicked and took the only shot I had time for. I was so rattled that I did not really know what image was on the film. I drove back to Lafayette and deposited the film holders in the developing shop and went to my new desk across from the alcoholic reporter. He saw that I was not too far from crying.

The one shot I had taken was very, very good and the editor ran it in four columns smack dab on the front page. At that time, I was somewhat religious, and I thanked the good Lord before accepting the congratulatory handshakes. Once more, luck had saved me as it would on more occasions than I deserved.

A GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT

Judith Evans

I'm an art therapist, and I went to the art institute and got a master's degree in art therapy. I'm now retired, though I do volunteer work.

I've been thinking of one person, one of the early art therapy clients that I had. It was at King's County Hospital, which was a God-awful state hospital, very grim. I worked for a program there. People who came to these state treatment programs had generally been hospitalized in state hospitals, psychiatric hospitals for years at a time. And this was supposed to be a way to shift them back into the world, and it was very hard to make that transition.

There was one young man - his name was Gregory. He was very withdrawn. He used to sit with his head slumped down in my therapy groups. I was told he did like to do art. People had seen him do artwork. He liked artwork. So we brought him into the art therapy group. He would sit there and I would put paper in front of him and a pen, grab him pencils, crayons, and maybe we'd have music or we'd talk about something. And it was so interesting to watch. He would lay there for a while and then he would pick something up and he would make something. He would make artwork. And he

would draw things, whatever it was. He would quietly do that. We would do that every week and would always come. He very rarely spoke. I don't know if at that point he spoke at all.

And after a while I started working individually with a few of the people there. He was one I chose, I thought he could get a lot out of using art materials. And he did. What happened was, very slowly, his whole world opened up to me. He would draw something and then he would talk a little bit about it. Some words would come out. It was a way of bringing him forth. And actually, to see the person inside through the pictures he drew and the people he drew. The stories. He was actually able to tell a story too. I think it's a great way for people to express themselves, whether they're joyful stories or not.

He was so touching. And I really looked forward to seeing him every week. He would come every week. I would always collect postcards from museums. Things I really like. I'd offer them to people to use as inspiration. And they did. And he did it, but he would change them. He wouldn't just copy a picture. His pictures were so different from the ones I gave him. He'd tell a story. A whole world in there, he saw in that Degas or van Gogh. It was his own version of it. But it inspired him. He liked it a lot. The group that I worked with, we all encouraged Gregory. We supported him, a network of people. I wouldn't say he was cured of his illness, because he probably will never be cured. He will always be disabled in a little way. But he has a much fuller life. And more things he can draw from.

Before that I wasn't sure if I believed in art therapy or not. It was something I pursued because I was in therapy myself and I was an artist, and I said, "I need a career." And I knew I wanted a master's level degree because I'd have more options. But then, I saw that it could be a powerful form of therapy or it could be part of the therapeutic process.

Later on, I had a private practice for many years, that I recently retired from. And I offered people art therapy. A little different than with Gregory, but we'd figure out something that the person wanted to work with, to deal with. Often people came to me for art therapy were interested in art or music, and we'd just pick up some materials, a few materials and, maybe or maybe not have a topic, and see what came out. And then talk about it. Drawing first sometimes helps open people up So, maybe things will come out that they didn't even expect.

It's sometimes hard to give yourself credit, to know how much you are achieving. But I did. As time went on, I knew that there were people who I really needed to help. I couldn't help everyone, but I did help some people.

PERSONAL HISTORY

CONCERNING AIDS IN THE 1990S

Ilene Guttmoehner

Over a period of about five years during the 1990s, a total of nine young men, two or three, sometimes four at a time, rented rooms on the second floor of my house. I moved my bedroom into what was the dining room of the first floor. Each person on the second floor had a room of his own and shared a bathroom. One of the rooms, with a little back porch, became a common room with a modest kitchen. The second floor became a kind of dormitory or something like a few guys sharing an apartment.

They were all HIV+, or people with AIDS, trying to live independently, unable to find affordable housing, unable to hold full-time jobs, struggling with many problems. I thought that in my big, old, comfortable house, they could find some respite. If this worked, it could be a model for others to follow.

I was naïve. Ultimately, it didn't work. Sharing that space, instead of making life easier, proved to create insurmountable problems for them and for me. Although, for a while, for each of them, I believe it was a wonderful gift to live in my home. And I was happy to be able to give that gift. It is no secret that helping others feels good.

Some died. One is a successful artist. I don't know what happened to the others.

I didn't really think through this whole idea or discuss it with many people. Discussing it with neighbors was risky and would also be an invasion of my new tenants' privacy. And I didn't want to be talked out of it. My kids thought it was a great idea and a few close friends agreed. Luckily one friend, a gifted and creative builder, with his simpatico workers, could do a few renovations just under the permit wire, like second floor plumbing.

After the first flush of giddy enthusiasm, I did begin to think a little more seriously and contacted the AIDS Action Committee (AAC) to see if, in fact, the idea made any sense. Then I got the following letter from Cyndi K., Housing Coordinator for AAC:

May 15, 1991

*Hi Ilene,
I spoke with one of our case managers who thought your housing would be well received and in great demand by his clients. I also updated Ann B. who would like to see it when we know a target date for this occupancy. Here is some of the info I promised to share with you. Don't forget to walk June 2!
Cyndi K.*

And then I plunged ahead. A few months later, my heavy-duty writing began with a couple letters to Cyndi. Thereafter, I wrote my heart out from time to time to a bunch of friends, ostensibly to record how things were going, to

document the project, thinking it would be helpful to others who want to do what I was doing. I didn't think I wanted to be talking about what was going on all the time. But of course, I really did. It consumed me. It was cathartic to writer. It was my way of coping with increasingly bizarre and stressful situations.

The letters just came pouring out and reflected my various states of mind during those years. I also think the things that happened and the stories of the people who lived in my house are pretty fascinating. They may be cautionary tales. In any case, they are a part of the history of that horrendous time before "the cocktail" became available to people suffering with AIDS.

The last letter I wrote says that things were basically calm in the house. Richard, my last very sick roomer "...seemed to be holding his own and taking good care of himself."

That happy state didn't last long. Richard soon became sicker. His vision progressively worsened. Mark, the other roomer, did more and more bathroom cleanup for him. Every time I tried to talk to Richard and his family about his failing health, he exploded in anger at me, accusing me of wanting to get rid of him.

Well, I did want him to leave. The burden on Mark, the steady stream of nurses in and out of the house, the frequent ambulance trips to the hospital were getting to us. His bitterness and anger were understandable but hard to take; they were always directed at me. The months and years of understanding and compassion

were taking their toll. Finally, his increasing blindness frightened him into deciding that he was no longer safe in the house. He died after spending his last days at a nearby hospice.

My third-floor tenants moved out and Mark, my last roomer, who was very healthy and also my dream tenant moved to the third floor.

Now all my second-floor rooms were available for the Hospitality Program (how called Hospitality Homes). This wonderful program provides housing in host homes for families coming to Boston for medical treatment.

My project ended. Rereading these letters now, close to 30 years later, I admire my spunk and good intentions, misguided as they often turned out to be. They also fill me with sadness, for the boys in my house who didn't make it and for so many others who didn't make it, and for all the people who loved them and will always mourn their loss.

LET LIFE BE LIKE MUSIC

Anne Suessbrick

For as long as I can remember, I have had a love for music and had it in my life. My mother always had classical music permeating the house. My favorites were “Peter and the Wolf,” and “Clair de Lune.” My mother’s whole family was a musical one. She and her two brothers formed a trio—piano, saxophone, and violin—that would perform at family gatherings. And I sang from the time I was a very young girl. I always had a good ear and could carry a tune. I didn’t know it was a gift, thinking everyone could do the same.

As I grew older, I began singing at social and community events. Of course, I was always in the choir and the chorus, usually having a solo. I sang first alto at this time. At one of these events when I was about 13, a friend of my father’s, a musician, thought I could benefit from some voice lessons. Then my singing became more serious. My teacher processed to train me in opera and lieder. I had a spinto soprano voice—a range between a lyrics and contralto. At that time, she encouraged me to sing in public as often as possible. I never liked this very much, thinking my new vocal range was not my best. On other occasions, I reverted back to my alto voice, singing pop and jazz at school dances. I much preferred this, feeling more comfortable.

My happiest days in college were as a member of a Capella Octet, The Griffs. We were very good and in demand at local hotels and restaurants. Later, when I lived in New York, there were many venues where there were bands for dancing. I remember going to The Stork Club and The Martinique, where, for the price of a drink, you could spend the entire evening dancing and listening to the music. I started singing with the bands at these places, getting to know the musicians and having the time of my life.

Later, when I started to work in advertising, I would work with the account people, recording their commercials for the client. I also got to know composers for whom I would record demos that they would play for producers and publishers, hoping they would get a recording deal. I loved doing all of this. After I married and had fewer opportunities, I would still enjoy going to clubs and singing with the bands. The musicians that I got to know always encouraged me in this since, I must say, I was pretty good.

I also made sure that my children were brought up with music in their lives. I sang to them all the time—when we would go for walks, on trips and around the house. They, too, from very young ages, had good ears, could carry a tune, and had a love for music. When they were very young, in elementary and middle school, they formed a trio—the Ali-Cats—and would perform at family gatherings. My oldest—the most musical of the three—would write out parts for the group. It made me happy that I was successful in imparting in her especially, a

love and talent for music. She now sings in a chorus and accompanies us all on the piano at family sing-alongs.

When I moved back to New York in the '80s, I virtually stopped singing except for myself or among my children. Unfortunately, as I aged, I lost most of my voice. Now, I sing in the chorus at the Center. It is a wonderful outlet for my love of singing, not being as demanding as doing solos. I still sing to myself and with my girls—something I still enjoy and will do always.

STYRON AND ME

Clyde Coreil

Sometimes, you just don't know when one thing, seemingly of little consequence, will become something of great import later in life. The following was just such a series for me. I first heard the name "William Styron" in 1958 when I was a freshman at a smaller college in South Louisiana. An English professor said that he was reading Styron's new novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*. I found it, read it and was impressed.

Forward to 1968 when I was in Hue, Vietnam as a teacher with International Voluntary Services, which could use U.S. Government mail. A friend in the States sent me Styron's new novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, as a Christmas gift. I started it and could not put it down. I was so engrossed in the book that I skipped the Christmas party for the other 45 volunteers who had come from around the country to Dalat, Vietnam. I regretted somewhat this rash decision, so when New Year of 1968 rolled around a month later, I left Hue on a week-long vacation to Singapore. I got into a small airplane which is all that could land at the airstrip across the Perfume River and changed in Dalat to a passenger jet.

When I crossed the River, it was 9 a.m., New Year's Day in the lunar calendar--and the

Vietnamese city was alive with celebrations for Tet, 1968. Because I was a volunteer teacher receiving only \$70 each month, I had free access to flights chartered by the US Government. During the following night, the infamous "Tet Offensive of 1968" got under way in all parts of South Vietnam. The other side had used the holiday lull in a military attempt to end the war.

To make a long story short, three females and my two male housemates were captured by the North Vietnamese Army. They had over-run all of Hue except the U.S. military compound. Because they were volunteer teachers, they were well treated. The females were released after three months; the males after several years. Because of Styron's excellent book, I had unknowingly escaped.

Fast forward again to about 35 years later. Teaching at New Jersey City University, I was attending a reception given for the celebrated author William Styron. He had been invited as guest speaker. No one knew that, indirectly, he was responsible for my being in the room. I walked in and there he was, in an old fashioned dark blue suit with a white cotton shirt and a necktie. Frankly, I was in awe. I told a fellow professor of the relation between Vietnam and Styron. I thought the guy would keep it to himself. Naturally, he didn't. He caught my arm and pulled me to the author and blurted out that Clyde here has something to tell you. Styron looked at me and waited. In as few words as possible, I told him the story.

"So, I am in part responsible for your longevity," Styron said.

"Indeed, you are. Thanks," I said and sidled away.

ON BECOMING A WRITER

Lois Kellerman

I was raised in New York City. I had parents who were writers. So guess what I thought I would do? I would write. Though, I decided instead to become a teacher, which had set me up to teach everybody else how to write, which was a lot of fun. And that's how it started. Although later on I did write my own book. So that's it. I wanted to be a writer when I was very young because my parents were writers.

I remember sitting there when I was three and my mother put down a piece of paper and said, "Here," with one of these, "Here, write a novel." I never wrote a novel. I was very young. I think I was probably four and a half or five. I saw them on a typewriter all the time. And they were these old ones that you've had to like paced your fingers on, and they had such narrow fingers and I look and I have the same narrow fingers, but I think it was more just hereditary. The old, old ones, with the red and black ribbon. They worked in the 1920s through 60s. They were very large, but on the other hand you had clearer print. The typewriter that I was on with my parents and they had to kill themselves to get down. I'd hear them all day. They were soaking their hands. It was difficult.

My mother wrote a best seller, I think it was in E.P. Dutton and it was in the 1970s. It was called *The Amazing Nellie Bly*. The story came from her, it wasn't a made-up story. But of

course, by the time you got to publication it had to be jazzed up some. My mother was a stickler for telling the truth, you know, so that was something I've always remembered, that she said, "It doesn't pay to lie."

And I remember that I perfectly knew what writing was about because that's all my parents talked about. Usually crying because they hadn't gotten their checks because they were freelancers during the Depression and then even out of the Depression. But they did manage to feed us and to get me in a good public school, luckily. We didn't have any money for larger dreams at the time.

I decided later as I was growing up that I was going to be practical, because my parents had been really broke so many times.

So, I became a high school English teacher and that's what I thought would be my profession. And I like the kids, I love being with children. I went from K through 12 in terms of the different times that I was teaching. And so, I had a very rich background for myself, and I didn't want to write, because I remembered how miserable my mother was.

But writing has always been in my heart, no matter what I've done. Eventually I wanted to break out myself and to write as a creative writer. It was difficult to do because my mother was a best-selling author and it made it harder for me. She was very supportive of me by not being overbearing and letting me go my own way and decide whether I really wanted to do it.

My mother said, to her dying day, my mother kept saying, "You haven't written a book yet." And I'd just say, "Oh mom, I just got this big thing going on" You know, always some important thing. And for years that was it.

I actually did not become a writer until after my mother died. And it wasn't something that I was holding out on, it's just I was very busy as a teacher and a philosopher. I was the first woman Ethical Cultural leader in New York City, when I grew up, because I loved Ethical Culture.

It took me about 10 years to write my book because there's just a lot of research, more than I had ever imagined would be. I wanted it to be a real book. I said, there's no reason to do a book on being a writer unless you have something new to say and something distinct to say and I wanted it to be for the kids. You know, the kids, the grown kids and everybody in between. I'm not talking about my family particularly, just all families. I thought that every child should have an education. I had principles that I wanted to get out, but not in a marmy way. That's why it took me a long time to put it together, but it came out and it too became a best seller. I was surprised at that because I wasn't looking to best my mother or anything, we were never competitive.

I worked so hard on that book. Years of grinding and everything. But, what happened was, I had written a book that was really

fantastic. I really put my heart into it. My book is called *Marriage of the Heart: Eight Commitments of a Spiritually Fulfilling Life Together*.

A SICILIAN ADVENTURE:

A TRUE STORY

Alan Kritzler

In 1969, after studying for three months at the Italian Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, I joined a Californian coffee shop acquaintance, John and his friends Steve Butler and his girlfriend Jane in driving south from Rome toward Sicily in John's Volkswagen Van. When we got to the tip of Italy, we took a ferry to Sicily.

The first few towns in Sicily were charming with men and woman dressing in what seemed like ancient costumes. However, the fourth town we arrived at seemed to have only men in the street dressed for a mafia movie. We stopped at a grocery store for supplies. An Italian man introduced himself as Niccolo, a small business owner of the town. After a brief chat; he invited us all over to his house for dinner. This idea did not seem safe to me and Jane tried to convince John not to take up invitation.

However, that evening, John, drove us to the address the Italian had given him. John who had seemed a manipulative type who presented himself as an actor and film maker. When we arrived at the address we have been given, rather than a residential home, the place was a wine factory. Niccolo invited John to this drinking party which included what seemed to be half the men in the village with no women besides Jane. John though this was a fine party, however I did not.

Jane and Steve were wise enough to stay in the van outside. Since, after three months in Italy, I had picked up at least some ability to speak Italian, I tried to find out what this gathering was really about. If this group was typical of Sicilian men, Sicilians may presume that any American woman traveling with three American men must be having sex with all of them. They also presumed she would be available to anyone. This is what they assumed from watching American movies. Niccolo, the owner of this wine factory seemed to be trying to get John and I drunk. As time went by, most of Niccolo's friends gave up on their fantasies and went to their respective homes.

At that point, Niccolo asked me if I would like to sleep with a Sicilian woman. He then said he would arrange if I would ask Jane to sleep with him "just once." I made it clear this was not possible and then told John that he had to drive out of here. However, instead of defending Jane, he just said "Jane was too uptight" and continued to drink.

I then heard Jane crying and looked out where the van was parked. The Niccolo had gotten on his knees in front of the open doors of the van. Apparently, he was proposing his wish that Jane have sex with him. Steve, her boyfriend, was comforting Jane but not really doing anything.

I looked around the wine factory, quickly found John and I had to threaten him if he did not drive us all away from here immediately. I am not sure how drunk he was.

Steve, Jane and I got out of the van so we could take the train back to Rome. John just started up the van and drove off saying he was going back to Niccolo's to apologize to the Italian for our abrupt departure as if Niccolo had been a perfect gentleman.

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ABOUT

Vita Story Club's mission is to promote healthy aging, combat ageism, and reduce social isolation in older adults by sharing and preserving life stories.

If you would like more information on Vita Story Club or if you'd like Vita Story Club to run a life story workshop at your organization, contact team@vitastoryclub.org or visit us at vitastoryclub.org

Find us on Facebook at facebook.com/vitastoryclub

Featuring

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Ilene Guttmoehler

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