

The healing power of words

Psychiatrist finds joy for herself, others through poetry

By Jon Bell
For The Scribe

Diane Kaufman, MD, grew up with a father who was a chemist and a mother who was a teacher, counselor and poet.

So, it's not really a surprise that Kaufman herself turned out to be not only a physician, but also a psychiatrist and poet who uses poetry and stories as therapies.



Diane Kaufman, MD

"There was this whole science and art thing going on," she said. "I think I was trying to bridge that, but I always just had those science and creative sides."

Now on staff at Mind Matters P.C., a child and family psychiatric clinic in Hillsboro, Kaufman spent her early years in Long Island, N.Y. She said her father's work in chemistry was centered around flavors and fragrances, and he always wanted his kids to think about careers in medicine.

"He always had a very strong desire for his kids to be doctors," Kaufman said.

Kaufman's mother started out as a science teacher before becoming a guidance counselor. She loved poetry and often wrote poems about her own life, Kaufman said. When her mother died tragically in a car accident, Kaufman inherited more than 30 volumes of poetry that her mother had written.

Other members of the family, including a favorite aunt of Kaufman's, were also into the arts, and likely played an influential role in Kaufman's own appreciation of poetry and writing. Yet though she had that appreciation and even wrote some poetry as a teenager, including one voicing opposition to the Vietnam War, Kaufman drifted away from that kind of writing a bit once she headed off to college, though she did spend time learning to play the piano.

"I had a long gap of not writing," she said.

A nurturing community

Kaufman graduated from Mount Holyoke College, then earned her medical degree from SUNY Downstate Medical Center. That was followed by more than six years of training at New York University Medical Center/Bellevue

Hospital in pediatrics and adult and child psychiatry. Kaufman then landed a job as an outpatient child psychiatrist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, which is now known as Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences. She worked there for 28 years.

When she was about 40, Kaufman was drawn back to her personal writing. She started taking some workshops and writing poems of her own. That pursuit spilled into her professional life, as well. Kaufman had been volunteering at a drug treatment facility called Integrity House, and she decided to start a writing group for the women there. She also started a "poetry and medicine" day at the university to encourage others she worked with to write.

"I wanted to develop a community of friends where I could share my passion and also be nurtured by others and nurture them," Kaufman said.

Kaufman's also written a children's book called "Bird that Wants to Fly" in addition to a collection called "15 Poems to Healing and Recovery." She is the founder of Arts Medicine for Health & Healing, and she was the keynote speaker at the 2016 National Association for Poetry Therapy Conference. According to its website, Arts Medicine for Health & Healing "aims to inspire and empower adults and children to recover from trauma through the power of their creativity."

Decades ago, Kaufman also wrote a story called "Missing Mommy" about childhood bereavement, but she never did much with the piece. A few years ago, Kaufman's daughter, who lives in Portland, had a baby. When Kaufman came out to visit, she started thinking about her "Missing Mommy" book again and decided to have it illustrated.

She put out a call for illustrators, and of the 25 or 30 who responded, the first was Hadley Hutton, an artist in - where else? Portland. That, along with Kaufman's desire to be closer to her daughter, led her to move across the country to Portland just a few months later.

"On the plane back east, I had an epiphany that I was leaving my home, not going back to it," she said. "I came out for the birth of my granddaughter in April and was living in Portland by August."

Kaufman now works part time at Mind Matters and continues to use poetry and writing to help in the healing process. She said her creative outlets continually cross between her personal and professional life.

"Being creative is very important to me in my time off, which in many ways is my time on," she said. ■



One of Diane Kaufman's creations, a process painting titled "Bird of Prey/Pray," was made at a workshop presented by the nonprofit arts educational organization The Painting Experience.

Image courtesy of Diane Kaufman

In breaking silence

In breaking silence

*I break the chains inflicting pain
across my body*

*From the past - and even now -
the hand across my mouth*

*From you - and sometimes myself -
I can hardly breathe*

In breaking silence

A beating pounding heart rises in my chest

*A frightened tremor in my voice -
a breathlessness*

A wanting to forget - and not speak at all

*Is overpowered by urgency -
the raging need to express*

In breaking silence

I fear the ridicule

I fear feeling smaller

I fear judgmental eyes

I fear my own impotence

What if words don't matter, too?

In breaking silence

I live my prayer

Having faith - I choose to dare

To dream the impossible love

Secreted in my tears

I take the pen - I own my life and

Write my words

Diane Kaufman, MD

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