

Belaina

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In October 2014, I was assigned a partner through a service-learning course at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee called *Writing in the Community*. This class was centered on the idea that writing is a powerful tool for healing, and that in sharing one's story, everyone is less alone. The class was supplemented with writings by authors who were confronting aspects of their identity such as age, ability, economic status, and race. We discussed in class how knowing and studying these memoirs guide us in conversation for understanding of and awareness for the authors' circumstances, and for our place in the midst of these stories. The service-learning aspect meant that we would in some way interact with a community outside of our course, which is a required form of study for students at Belmont, a private, Christian university.

Service-learning gave the class the unique opportunity to take a writing course combined with first-hand experiences related to the topics; these experiences would guide our critical thinking about the issues that were being read and researched. It was an active and engaging way to broaden my understanding, particularly in how economic status effects an individual, as it related to the woman I was eventually partnered with. There is an argument that writing courses such as this "raise issues of class distinctions and replicate divisions between the service provider and the service recipient ... [students] replicate condescending models of charity and missionary work that do more to undermine than advance the goals of multicultural education and social transformation" (Julier 2001, 142). However, in this course I discovered that my fellow students and I were not so much focused on making social changes or counseling as we were in being able to articulate well what we were learning about social mindfulness. The passion for this stemmed from our desire to write the stories of our partners honestly.

Awareness is a powerful ability, and what struck me throughout this project was realizing what an asset it is. I grew up in a predominately white, middle-class suburb in the South. My sheltered and safe upbringing is something I try not to take for granted; I've had a wonderful and privileged life, and am truly thankful. However, it did shield from me the roughness life can hold for people in different circumstances and thus stunted my perspective. Simply being aware calls me to action and encourages me to decentralize my own experiences in my life and make room for people who have been pushed to the margins. This assignment to express a person's perspective of her life on paper puts her circumstances in my reality. It is intimate work that cannot be done without one another. In the case of this assignment, I was able to use my privilege and education to work collaboratively with someone who had neither.

At the time I was in this class, I had just begun participating in a group of women that take homemade meals once a week to the strip clubs in the Nashville area to share in community and build relationships. I became a part of this group through classmates of mine, who had established this routine over the previous four years. After going for just a few weeks, I was overcome by the voices and stories that I might have never heard, and inspired by the common ground of humanness. This work echoed what I had been learning at Belmont, a school that strongly values being in community and demonstrates that through the classes available, community service requirements for graduation, and opportunities for student involvement. Being in a community, in my experience, means listening and giving weight to every voice and

supporting that weight with love. It means honoring individuals in a way that can make an impact. This work was inspiring to me, and the more voices I heard, the more I was led to advocate for them.

When the Oral History Project was assigned in the *Writing in the Community* course, we were given the opportunity to tell our professor what community we felt inclined to work with. Based off of my recent experiences connecting with women who are in very distinctly different settings than me, I felt drawn to work at a rehabilitation center for women in Nashville called The Next Door. This is where I met Belaina, who understood the project and volunteered to be a part of it before we even met.

For the project, every student was aligned with a community partner in various locations: hospitals, nursing homes, primary schools, etc. In addition to our time in class, students met the individuals they were to collaborate with on the project. In my own time, I began to write about my experiences in class, which became "...an ongoing, recursive process in which self and community challenge, affirm, serve, and extend each other in the drama of personal and public history" (Anderson and MacCurdy 2000, 17). That is, to have an ongoing conversation with Belaina led to understanding another level of community that was bigger than the two of us. It extended to the women I met with weekly at the clubs, to my professor and fellow students, to the citizens of Nashville: the list goes on and on. To record it week to week and to add to history through writing is a glimpse of what writing is all about. We each had to remove ourselves from our own worlds to meet, extend ourselves towards one another, and affirm one's place in the family of things. Here I was, giving validation and affirmation to Belaina's story, and in return she validated me as a student and writer.

Together, Belaina and I wrote the story of her life through weekly conversations, crafting her memoir one day at a time. Coming from a past community where her reality was minimized, she was eager to tell me all that had happened to her. I asked her permission to record audio of our time together, and would take it home to construct something I hoped she would be proud of. Her tragic story was difficult to listen to over and over in my home, and she had given me all the details. For weeks, the heaviness of it filled me with compassion for her and anyone with experiences like hers, and drove me to write her story well. I felt passionately that this should be mine and Belaina's most honest work. Belaina was special because she was determined to have the stamp of her name on this piece. She fervently told me what has happened in her life, speaking openly of the tragedies and the joyful moments.

Simultaneously, I was in class reading and discussing the beauty and enlightenment of telling one's stories. When reading the extraordinary Maya Angelou, this quote stood out: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (1969). I came to realize the importance of this project and of the woman vulnerably sharing her identity with me. It was a safe place to expose her story, because Belaina had control over what she shared, how it would be interpreted, and how it was told. We worked together on the wording and clarifications needed to make her understood. I learned from this strong woman that writing can help heal even the deepest of wounds, as she courageously wrestled with her life, trying to make sense of how far she's come. Being a witness to the self-awareness she was discovering was beautiful. The work we shared made me feel not only more connected to her, but to the women I visit in the strip clubs week to week. I was stretched to analyze my own place and displacement in the communities I am involved in. This project quickly, as tears fell together on our first meeting,

became a meaningful experience for both of us, which resulted in the peace that sharing one's story makes everyone less alone.

In addition to the impact she had on me as a student, Belaina's story contributes to the conversations involving class and gender escalating in society today. She had passion that verberated off of her for making her story known, and made it clear from the beginning that it was hers and meant to be shared with the stamp of her name. You could feel her conviction and desire to contribute in every word she spoke. It was an honor to sit with her and to watch the layers of her story, her personhood, unfold – so very real in the window of her eyes. It didn't matter who was sitting in front of her, this was something she was determined to share so that others wouldn't feel isolated in their experiences similar to hers. Researcher Judith Herman supports this idea that sharing an experience, such as Belaina did with me, begins to rebuild a sense of community and social ties. "Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community ... trauma isolates; the group recreates a sense of belonging. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity" (Herman 1997, 214). Belaina's hope, she expressed to me again and again, was that others would read her story, and experience freedom by sharing their own. I watched the color return to her cheeks as she narrated her life to me, releasing any power it had over her.

I took my audio clips of her story home and transcribed them, making as few edits as possible to make it cohesive and organized. These are Belaina's experiences, in her words, her voice, her phrasing. These are tragedies and memories that this sheltered, middle-class girl at a private university has mourned and celebrated for the woman who survived and became my friend. It was a privilege and enlightening experience, and one that I will always cherish.

Belaina

Well, my name's Marie. Well, Belaina Marie, but I go by Marie. I'm 24 year old. My birthday's May 7, 1990. I have a little boy, he's five year old, his name's Christopher. Or CJ. I have two sisters and a brother. My brother's birthday was yesterday, and me and him's really, really tight. I'm the oldest outta four. They're all half, but we don't look at it like that. My favorite color's black and pink. I'm tellin' my story, cause I think it could help somebody, comin' from someone who's been through it. I been through it.

I grew up in East Tennessee. It's a little town, but you won't believe how much stuff goes on. The drugs, the violence. I been surrounded by it my whole life cause my mom done it. Yeah, my mom done it. And I done it, too, cause of her. The first time I ever smoked pot I was five year old. I'm not even playin'. *My mom* gave it to me. I come home from school, from kindergarten, I remember it to this day. I mighta been six. I come in from kindergarten and I said, "Mommy, you *gonna* have to quit. You *gonna* have to stop. It's gonna kill you, blah blah blah." I was cryin', I was so upset. She was always just layin' there on the couch, an' bein' so little, it made me so scared. She's like, "No, it doesn't. It's not gonna hurt you. I promise." She said, "Here, I'm gonna show you it's not gon' hurt you. It's like a cigarette."

So my mom gave me some pot, tryna show me that it wasn't bad. Well, I got it in my mouth – I didn't inhale, I was little, I didn't know. She was like, you gotta – and she showed me to take a big, deep breath – and I started coughin'. It felt like it was burnin' me. I puked and some more stuff. I was feelin' so sick, so hurt. And she *left me*. Out in the yard, layin' on my back, just starin' because I was so messed up. And I liked the way it made me feel. I couldn't feel a thing. I wasn't worried, I wasn't upset, it just pushed all them bad things...away.

And I was usually feelin' all that cause I had to be... mom. And I was so little, and had so many worries. But yeah, I had to be mom. My mom she was gone all the time even if she was sittin' right there. I started takin' care of my sisters and brother 'cause she would just pass out. My baby brother would be hungry, and I'd have to lift her shirt up and put him on her boob. I had to feed us. I learned how to make eggs in the microwave for my sisters, and I bet they were so nasty, but they ate 'em cause they were hungry. I remember goin' out in the garden – and watching Mom, I knew how to do it – dig up potatoes, and we would eat 'em with the peelin' on 'em. I didn't know how to peel 'em. Didn't know how to cook 'em, either, but I made it work 'cause I had to.

When Harry, which was my stepdad, all left, it was all put on Mom. I grew up without a dad, even though he was around all the time. My biological dad left my mom because he wanted her to get an abortion, and Mom didn't want to so she moved back out to Tennessee. She got married to my little brother's dad, Harry, when she was pregnant with my sisters, the twins. She stayed with him for seven year, and they partied *all the time*. And, I mean all the time. And Harry was very abusive. Very, very abusive. Only to me. Mom had to pull him off a' me a couple times. So, it was good when he left but that was a lotta pressure on Mom and she couldn't really take it. So she started drinkin' even more, she started usin' even more. She just done pot and pills every once and a while before that. But I was, I was around it. And that was not good for me.

When she would pass out, with a joint or somethin', I would take it, and I would hit it, or I would eat it if it was not lit. I didn't know; I was little! I would eat it! She would give us, when she was rollin' a joint, she would give us the seeds and stems out of it. Said, "Here, here ya go, that won't hurt you." I would take it away from my sisters, and I would do it, just because I didn't want them to do it. I didn't wanna risk them findin' it later and doin' it on their own.

I was mom, bein' so little. And when I got older... Umm, my mom... I remember pullin' women off of her. Because they be gettin' in a fight. They'd be redneck. And I remember pulling them off of her desperately cryin' and sayin', "Please don't hurt my mom. *Please*." I would have to follow her around when she got drunk because she always wanted to leave. We lived in a neighborhood of trailers. A trailer park. And she would always wanna leave, and she would always want to go start somethin'. Or wanna walk down the road and lay in the middle of the road. And I had to watch out for her. I had to drag her out of the road, me bein' little, cause she passed out on me one night. And I prayed harder than I ever have. I said, "God, *please* don't let a car come." I probably had never been that scared. And a car did not come for, like, I know she lay there for two hours. And I was tryin' to get her up, but the liquor and the beer when she mixed it – it hit her.

She would pass out all the time, I would wake her up layin' next to different men most mornin's. I would have to tell her to get up, we're hungry. She wouldn't even look at me. She'd tell me to go the fuck on, that she wasn't cookin'. So, I'd have to do something. When I learned how to make ramen noodles, I burnt my arm, which I have these scars all up 'em. And I was *little*. I burnt my arm cause hot water fell on me. I remember pushin' a chair up to the stove, and cookin' ramen noodles for my brother and my sisters. Cause we didn't have nothin' to eat in like three days. Cause she wouldn't do *anything*. I was there for my sisters and brother a lot. And I didn't get to be a child. I didn't get to be a teenager. I was doin' drugs by the time I was twelve. Not excessively. I didn't really like alcohol because of what I went through. Absolutely, I hated it. I hated a drunk cause *of what they put me through*. All them drinkin' friends my mom had, all

them drunks always tryin' to start somethin', or start somethin' with me. And my dad, my sperm donor, was a drunk.

And he didn't want me.

Period.

When I would say, "Mama, what does my dad look like?" She said, "Go look in a mirror. That's what he looks like, you look just like him." That hurt my feelin's. My dad didn't want me, and my mom didn't care at all.

My Papaw raised me, and my Mamaw. My Papaw was my everything. I loved stayin' with him and Mamaw cause I was his girl. His and Mamaw's. They were Mom's foster parents. I stayed with them all the time when I could. I loved it. I was little and I hated goin' home. There was yellin' and screamin', and drugs and drinkin'. But I felt bad cause I left my sisters and brother there, too. They was little, and I guess Mamaw and Papaw took up with *me*. I was the oldest, and when I was a baby Mom left me there and then partied all the time, so they just took up with me. I bet they woulda taken my brother and sisters, too, 'cept they never even met them I don't think. I would throw fits not to go back home. I didn't wanna go. I hated leavin'.

We, me and Papaw and Mamaw, lived on top of a mountain, so it was really cool. People would come up there and try to pay him to see his view. For fireworks, or just to come up there and look, but he wouldn't charge 'em nothin'. He'd tell 'em to just go on 'round the porch. He had like a big wrap around porch. It was like... beautiful. Very beautiful. And we used to go to church. It was Baptist. It was called Little Cove. I felt love and peace in there. Me and Papaw would start off walkin' cause he'd say Mamaw takes too long to get dressed. She would get me ready, and we'd start off walkin', and she would come in the car an' come pick us up. Cause he loved to walk, he got me walkin'. We would walk eeeeeverywhere, I mean everywhere. Papaw liked wrestlin', too. We went to church, we went to wrestlin' games, er, matches, like UFC. We went there. And he would give me any kind of animal. I had ducks, I had rabbits, I had dogs, cats. I had... I think it's called a guinea pig? It was huge, and I had it. I had gerbils. I had possums, yes, I had like, twelve of 'em. They were little. You could curl them around your finger, you had to help 'em. They would just hang there like, all the time! It was so cool! I had a raccoon, I had a baby deer, anything I wanted. He spoiled me bad. And he taught me how to drive. He taught me how to shoot guns. He lived in Sevierville, he and Mamaw. It was almost like two hours away. They would come and get me every weekend. Yes, every, every weekend. I loved it. Yes, I loved it. I felt like it was my hideaway.

When Mamaw died I couldn't really go to Papaw's house anymore. He got sick, went to a retirement home. I'd call him, and tell him how much I loved him. And he couldn't hear really good, and he would say things over and over. He would ask me who I was, over and over. And after I'd tell him he'd say, "Oh, Belaina!" and then he'd repeat it, and would start all over. And it was hurtin' me so bad I couldn't be there with him. Then I was in jail when he passed away. And I still haven't mourned over it, because I couldn't be there when it happened. I couldn't be there to tell him I loved him. I couldn't be there to say goodbye. And he literally waited on me to get there to do that. He was holdin' on, and my mom told me later he asked "Where's - Belaina?" He wanted me to be there. And Mom said, "She couldn't make it, I'm sorry." She started cryin' because he asked for me, and that I couldn't be there was just too much... so she left the room. It didn't take much to know that this was gonna change my life, that Papaw died, she knew that. And when she left, Jim come out, which was his son, and said he's gone. So, he literally waited on me to be there. I blame myself, because if I wouldn't have been on drugs, if I wouldn't of been in trouble, I woulda been there. He was my everything. I shoulda been there.

They raised me, until I got to about seven. Well, I mean back-forth. When I was at school I had to stay at my moms. I hated leavin' that mountain house, I didn't wanna go back to my life at home. I hated it. There, I was by myself. I couldn't be a kid. Goin' to my mom's was horrible. Which, they was big parties at her place, and I would drink out of their glasses so I wouldn't feel... left out. I always hung out with the older ones. I always wanted acceptance from them, from my mom. Or attention. My brothers and sisters, I would put them to bed, and I would turn the music on to keep 'em from hearin' them in the other room. Their words and the music and the craziness of all them.

I remember layin' there once with my sisters, and a drunk man came in there. His name was Ben, he was my mom's good friend, partyin' friend. And my stepdad's when he was around. And um, he come in there, and he pulled the covers off, and he started touching me. And he said, "If you don't let me do this, I'll tell your mom and she's gonna beat you." Cause my mom was very violent at the time. And I was just seven and it happened. They would have parties all the time. I was molested from the parties they had. Not just once. More than once. And I laid there and I cried, because... I didn't feel like nothin'. I didn't feel like nobody. I still don't understand it, why that would happen to me. I was so alone.

I guess I rebelled because I never got none attention except from my Papaw. When I couldn't stay with him anymore, I started gettin' in trouble. I've been the kid that's been in trouble, cause I had to grow up too fast and I couldn't handle all of it. I've been the kid that's been the outcast, I been that kid doin' everything she's not supposed to do. My sisters, they do their own thing. They do no wrong. They're like, miss perfects, okay? My brother, he's been through it. And, he just, he knows. He knows everything. He knows what it feels like, knows what I been through. I miss him all the time. He picked up and moved, got away from it all. But I was getting' desperate back home. So, I stole from my family. I robbed my aunt three or four times. I mean, I put my family through it. And like I said, I was doin' drugs by the time I was twelve. I got pregnant at 19. I had my boy, CJ. I got real close to Linda, my baby daddy's mom. She cared about me, and I'd missed that feelin'.

Linda was there when CJ was born, cause my mom left the room on me, left me in there. Mom was sayin' things like, "Oh my god!" and flippin' me out. Sayin' stuff like, "You have green stuff comin' out, oh my god!" She was tryin to be funny, but I start flippin' out cause I was so scared. I was so young and havin' a baby and she was makin' it so much worse, and then she went and left the room. My heart goes up, my heartbeat goes up and the baby's goes down, and I coulda lost CJ because of Mom and she left the room on me. Then Linda come in there and took my hand, and she was like "It's okay, you gon' be okay." And she held my leg, along beside of Chris, CJ's dad. She calmed me down. I really don't know if I woulda made [it] without her, and not just when CJ was born.

Linda, she didn't really get to spend time with CJ, though. I got woken up one morning. Amber, the little girl, which is, might as well say my neice, she come runnin' up there. She come runnin' up there and she was cryin' and upset and jerkin' me outta bed and I said, "What's wrong?" She said, "Mamaw's not breathin'," talkin' about Linda. So I go down there, and I'm tryin' to do CPR on this woman. And every time I breath air into her, I can hear her lungs been filled up with water. And I'm prayin', and I'm beggin' for her to come back because she was the mom I never had. She passed away.

I, um, started shootin' up on drugs, right after I had CJ. I'm, um, embarrassed of that. I, um, would go to Mom's and get stuff for him, and I started not to buy stuff for him, knowin' when I had money but I wasn't usin' it for CJ. I remember, layin' in bed sick, him bein' so little

right beside a' me. And him wantin' a bottle, and I would like, ya know reach over, bein' so sick and out of it, and givin' him a bottle, whether it was warm or cold. And I remember gettin' high. And him beatin' on the door. "Mommy *please* let me in, *please* let me in." And... I would yell at him and tell him to go away. Because I was shootin' a pill. He would beat on the door and cry... and he even fell asleep at the door once, cause he cried himself to sleep. I used to go to Mom's and leave him at Mom's and I would sneak out. Cause I'd *have* to. I remember seein' him, bein' on the glass door, sayin', "Mommy, *please* don't leave me. *Please!*" And I would. I wouldn't even care. I would just get in the vehicle and take off. And he'd be sittin' there.

And when I get back Mom's like, "He cried himself to sleep. I wanna letchu know that." I'm like, "He'll be okay, he just went to sleep." Mom's like, "Okay..." and judgin' me, as if she done so much better bein' a mom. And now that he's five I'm missin' out on everything. Everything I missed out on and I can't get back. I can't get when he was a baby back. I can't get none of that back. I want it back and I don't even remember half of it. I don't remember the first day he walked. I don't remember nothin', and that's somethin' a mom is supposed to remember. It's somethin' you're supposed to remember.

My relationship with my mom, it's changed a little bit, but I still keep my distance. And my mom changed, she started goin' to church, now she's married again. Lookin' back, ya know, she was more of a friend to me than a mom. She told me everything. I didn't wanna know, but she told me everything, which, I knew about all of the secrets. I knew my stepdad was not my dad. I always knew it. And just things like that, I mean, she told me, me being young. Knowin' it was messed up, but yeah. She told me. I was mad at her for a long time. I told her she killed my brother. She said, "Baby, I didn't know I was pregnant." It hurt my feelings, I couldn't understand it. I had an older brother an' he died. Yeah, that hurt to find out. I didn't get to meet him. His name was Michael... I think it was Michael Marshall or somethin'. Mom was namin' him after his dad. She had him in Oklahoma, but she was on drugs so bad she lost him. He was older, he was big enough so she could to tell it was a boy and all this. But... I blamed her a lot for doin' that. Blamed her for killin' my brother. She just didn't get how that hurt me.

But, I always said I'd never be like my mom, whatsoever, and I feel like I been worse.

I'm mad at God, you can say. I'm havin' doubts. I'm... Just cause of all the trauma and stuff's happened. I don't understand a lot of it. I don't understand why bad things happened to me, why Papaw had to die, or Linda, or my big brother. I don't understand why my mom left me on my own. I don't know if I'm supposed to understand, but I feel like I need to. And now my mom's different and she's going to church and I feel like God's forgetting me. Going to church everyday, I mean every Wednesday and every Sunday, was with Mamaw and Papaw. Now that they're not here, I don't really wanna go. I'm mad, okay? Because he took one person I love away, Papaw, and then he gave me a child I couldn't even take care of, cause I couldn't even take care of myself. I fell away from God, just because of it. I find myself goin' to this Catholic Church whenever the gates are open, downtown. And I go in there and pray. But... not always.

I feel sad going through the emotions. It's a rollercoaster. Loss of my friends, of my family, is somethin' that I used to feel comfortably numb to. And now that I'm not comfortably numb anymore, I goin' through it. It's a good thing to get your feelin's back, as they say. But it's also a bad thing, that you get your feelin's back. Cause it hurts, cause they all hit you at once. Now that I'm in rehab, I've learned a lot of structure, I've learned how to do things on my own. I'm not used to it, I'm used to bein' dependent on someone. I'm working, and I'm so tired. And then when I get back from work, I gotta go to group, and then I gotta go a meetin', and I have to go to bed, and then I got to get up and start my day all over again. It's, oh my god, it's somethin'

else. It's six months of it. It's a long run. But I really want this. And I'm tired. I'm tired of doin' it. I'm tired of not bein' there for my son, not knowin' him.

There was circumstances that led me here, and I'm thankful for it. CJ is why I'm doin' this, cause I'm supposed to be there for him. I'm supposed to be better than my mom, and remember more than his name. I'm doin' this cause maybe I can understand it better, and maybe I can have a life that's more than what I know. Maybe I can help somebody who's goin through it and then they'll know they're not the only ones. Cause I'm tired. I'm tired of wakin' up and chasin' something that's not even mine.

Conclusion

Belaina's narration of her story reveals not only herself, but also larger systemic, socio-economic, and gender issues. She is contributing to her community by making her struggles known and available for a larger audience and conversation. This kind of work that my classmates and I did with our partners was a beautiful experience in watching communities lean on one another for greater understanding of one another. While the collaboration between Belaina and me revealed a tragedy that's unfortunately too common, other students returned with the dreams of fifth graders at a local school, stories of strives toward racial justice in the 60s from the nursing home down the street, and the heartbreaks of slowly losing someone in the care of a hospital unable to keep up with the costs.

Through this work together, we created a new community of students and individuals throughout Nashville who are now more capable of seeing and respecting the humanity of every person they encounter. Opened was a space for writing, healing, sharing, and a fresh perspective. It was an honor to do this work with my fellow students and with Belaina, all of whom were so gracious to me. I clumsily approached a project that felt overwhelming at the beginning of the semester, and walked away more aware, more focused, and with a peace that when we share, no one is truly alone.

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