MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

Double Issue!
Collective Health & Books/Arts

ANNUAL MINNESOTA WOMEN'S DIRECTORY INSIDE

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Minnesota Women's Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as the longest continuously run feminist print publications in the country. It is freely available at more than 400 locations.

Our mission: Authentic community-based journalism that amplifies and inspires the stories, action steps, and leadership of powerful, everyday women (cis and trans) and nonbinary people.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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Cover: Dralanda Larkins. See her story on page 22. Photo by Sarah Whiting.

Minnesota Women's Press earned three photography and two writing awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association for 2024.

Upcoming double issue magazine topic for November/December: Guns & Changemakers

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PHOTO SARAH WHITING

"We need to recognize that care is a public good."
Ai-Jen Poo, family care activist

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Challenge Agents

by Mikki Morrissette

This is the third in a series of magazine themes this year focused on Collective Health. The March issue — titled "Changing the Future" — was focused on how Minnesotans are creating stronger villages based on values that respect all human beings, giving people a glimpse of the potential that comes from dreaming bigger. The May issue — "Solving Pain Points" — shared solutions to child care gaps around the state, a deep conversation we had with changemakers in Winona about housing needs, and how the Saint Cloud justice system is changing its culture around gender-based violence.

In this issue, we share the voices of parents, partners, and professionals who discuss caregiving gaps, as well as insights from Anne Mavity of Minnesota Housing Partnership about three solutions to the housing crisis.

Our summer intern, Diane Meyer, spent many days talking with coalition organizers in Farmington — most of them retirees. She shares her perspective about the unusual position of being a journalist in a world that increasingly needs people to care — not simply observe from the outside looking in.

As Diane writes: "This issue — and all issues — come back to neighbors talking to neighbors. Backyards and yard signs. Dining room tables and petitions. County fairs and T-shirts."

We believe in inspiration and rest that come from the arts, so this magazine — our first double issue — also includes a lengthy section about books, including a synopsis of trailblazing women who broke barriers. We offer stories reminding us why immigrants are here — the start of a new series called "This Is US" — and a glimpse of Cathryn Nakhornsak's new Lao dance program in Worthington.

Going forward, our magazine will come out every other month, not only enabling us to reduce print and distribution costs, but allowing us to go deeper in the topics we focus on. Together with active members, we are already at work planning coverage and funding of our core topics for 2026.

We are the longest continuously run feminist publication in the U.S. because — as our vision statement indicates — we showcase the perseverance of progressive minds and hearts who understand that healthy ecosystems and economies are about interconnection of the whole. Our uncommon media space gives platforms directly to powerful everyday Minnesotans who are not necessarily leaders of companies and political parties, but are working to open minds, correct wrongs, and solve local problems.

Please support what we do by becoming a sustaining member, now with multiple levels of support (womenspress.com/membership).

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My "Can Do Canine" Has Helped Me Hike Thousands of Miles

submitted by Crystal Gail Welcome

I am an author, storyteller, educator, activist, and Nature lover; I capitalize Nature because to me it is a living proper noun. I am known for promoting inclusivity in outdoor spaces and sharing my experiences as an Afro-Indigenous, disabled backpacker. Originally from the South, I moved to Minnesota in 2019 and now call Grand Marais home.

With nearly 8,000 trail miles under my feet in my nearly decade-long backpacking trail, I've hiked sections of the:

- Appalachian Trail
- Continental Divide Trail
- Grand Enchantment Trail
- Great Western Loop
- Superior Hiking Trail
- John Muir Trail
- Arizona Trail
- Presidential Traverse Trail
- Tahoe Rim Trail
- Grand Canyon Rim-to-Rim Trail

In 2023, I became the first known BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) person to thru-hike the 1,100-mile long Florida Trail. I am also the first person with a neuromodulator implant to summit Mount Whitney, the largest mountain in the contiguous U.S., standing 14,505 feet.

In August, I set out to hike the 65-mile Border Route Trail and 55 miles of the Superior Hiking Trail in northeastern Minnesota. It was a fundraiser for Can Do Canines, in honor of my partnership with DeOhGee, a trained Can Do Canines diabetic alert dog. Can Do

COURTESY PHOTO

Canines is a nonprofit organization that partners specifically trained assistance dogs with disabled individuals living in Minnesota and Wisconsin free of charge.

I am living with an implanted neuromodulation system for a nonfatal rare brain disease and a rare glucose condition, marked by debilitating hypoglycemic unawareness episodes. Before partnering with DeOhGee, when my glucose levels rapidly dropped, I experienced dangerous low glucose. This resulted in disorientation, confusion, racing heart, and lack of coordination. This is dangerous for anyone, but more so for a long-distance backpacker. I am passionate about the outdoors and honored to have the support of DeOhGee, as I navigate these significant health challenges.

As someone who lives with rare medical conditions, I understand the importance of reliable support. The partnership with DeOhGee has significantly improved my quality of life. I can live independently, knowing that if anything happens to me, he's got my back. He is trained to alert me when my glucose drops below 70 and brings me a juice to help raise my glucose. DeOhGee may also bring me an emergency bag, and he has a special telephone with which to call 911. If asked, he can open the doors, and he sometimes helps to clean up, including helping me with mundane household chores like laundry.

I am an advocate for historically excluded individuals to access Nature and to spend more time outdoors. I want everyone to know — especially people with disabilities — that even a short period of time outdoors is beneficial to your health.

You don't need to go on long excursions, like thru-hiking the Border Route Trail, since the small ones will do. The more time we spend in Nature, the happier we'll all be. I invite all Minnesotans and visitors to spend time exploring our beautiful state. MWP

To support Can Do Canines, consider contributing to this fundraiser:

A Heartfelt Conversation in Mankato

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

As part of our "Where do we go from here?" discussion series — about how neighbors are dealing with community gaps — we sat down with people from the Mankato area to discuss the ways families and individuals can be overwhelmed in meeting caregiving needs for loved ones. Jennifer Andrashko (pictured above) and Yurie Hong of Saint Peter helped us generate an invitation list — participants generally did not previously know each other. What follows is a small selection of the conversation. Some participants did not want their stories shared in print, or wanted to be referenced by first name only. There was discussion of talking together again in someone's living room. One participant said the highly emotional conversation was a healing experience: "It felt good to share and listen to all of your stories — to be in a room with people and their stories and pain shared. It gives me strength."

Introducing Some of the Participants

Jennifer: As a social worker, part of my role is understanding gaps. I worked for people who did not have insurance for five years, and directed a mental health program that served 28 counties in Minnesota and a few counties in Wisconsin. It was my job to understand how to help people get the things they needed, and also my job to troubleshoot when it was clear that those things didn't exist.

Liza: I was a caregiver for my husband who died of cancer. It was five years ago. For the year that he was sick, I was his main caregiver. Then we spent six months in the hospital and he wouldn't really let the nurses do things for him — only me. We have five children, so that was a juggling act.

Alena: My experience is in end-of-life care — for my dad, my grandpa, and my father-in-law. I also have done caregiving for my niece, after my sister died. She left behind five kids. Two of them went to my mom, who had a stroke a year later. So, my husband and I took in my niece when she was 15. I have also been a caregiver to my husband, who broke both legs in a snowmobile accident.

What difficulties have you experienced getting the caregiving you need for children, the elderly, people with disabilities, or physical or mental health issues?

Liza: So much of caregiving is advocating. Much of my time with my husband was spent fighting insurance companies and fighting doctors. One of the reasons I'd never want to work as a nurse again is because I had such a traumatic experience in that year of him being sick. I don't even want to be part of that world again. It's just so much advocating for care — and we had privilege.

I wish I could have been his wife and a mother, and not always the advocate. I had to be in fight mode, and I didn't want to be in fight mode. I wanted to love him and spend the time together.

It was during COVID, so for a while I was fighting to even be there with him. I had to choose between my kids and my husband. My parents were able to be supportive. So, my husband and I lived in the hospital and they lived across the street in the hotel for six months.

The one thing about Mayo is that I was able to get a palliative care team. I had social workers for my kids, but that was because I pushed. We had different grief groups that I was in — any kind of resources that I could get. Health care is understaffed, so many things are just not offered.

My husband could have gone home to die, but we couldn't get in-home care to come in. I was too worried about me being unable to do that for him. He went into the hospital around Thanksgiving, with the same type of rare cancer that Steve Jobs had. There was well-funded research because of that, so there were treatment options. All three opinions said it is not curable, but it is treatable. He would feel like crap while taking chemotherapy, only seven days out of the month, and then it would be great. That went on for the first few months. Then around Thanksgiving, his blood sugars were dropping so low, which is not good. He would pass out. One time it happened in the shower and I had to lift him out.

I've done a lot of volunteer work since with the Grief Club of Minnesota, which is offered in different districts in metro areas. We could do better [with grief counseling resources] in smaller towns. And [counseling is rarely] offered for kids.

Jennifer: I think we are culturally much more comfortable with divorce grief groups. We are not good at talking about the end of life. We shouldn't be waiting for our kids to externalize and have a behavior in order to offer obvious services that we know could help. Like somatic regulating, centering. We don't need to wait for a child to be truant, or be flipping tables over in a classroom. We know there is a level of stress in your home when someone close to you is very sick, or has died — or you've lived in a shelter with domestic violence.

Alena: Transportation was one of the things for my husband and me after he was in an accident. He broke both legs, and both had to be kept straight. We had to pay $500 to get him home from the hospital. They were discharging him, and I was frantically trying to find a place that had the right vehicle to get him home.

He is part of a construction union. Listening to all of your stories, we are fortunate to have somebody with us every step of the way. I was working part-time. After my husband got in this accident, the short-term disability the union offered was $200 a week. The doctors said he could not work for at least a year. So, we looked into Social Security disability. Denied. I tried to get the bank to pause our mortgage payments, but got no help there.

Thankfully I found another client, which increased my weekly hours. Granted, I was now working full time and making sure the kids were getting what they need. You just do it, right? The fight or flight in you — the fight takes over.

My husband also needed to be in a hospital bed in the living room. Our house was not handicapped accessible. We had to pull door frames out so he could get his wheelchair into spaces like the bathroom. It is those little things that you don't think of. And that was all out-of-pocket expenses.

With all that needed to be done, and essentially the loss of my husband's full partnership at that time — when do you have time to grieve? It was a two-year recovery period for us, including my husband's subsequent surgeries.

Jennifer: I cared for my grandmother when she was dying and there was no one available for around the clock nursing care, so my mom and my aunts and I rotated, three days on, three days off. There were very lucid moments at three in the morning when she would look at me and know who I was and talk to me about her life.

People stop eating when they get really ill, and you have to make decisions [about steps to take about nourishment]. So there are worries that you carry around. You can't ground yourself in the present moment because you're concerned about things that are outside of your control and your capacity.

[And for those caring for loved ones with disabilities], a movement began nationwide years ago to de-institutionalize people with mental illness and physical disabilities. The push at the time was, "This will be community based." So they shuttered [the institutions] in a very short time period, but the community support was not robust enough for what people needed. You can't say, "We're going to do a better job in the community," and then not have community resources in place to help people take care of their loved ones. MWP

To participate in future discussions about caregiving, sign up here:

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Caregiving Professionals Talk About Challenges and Hopes

reported by Amy Gage

Melissa Almer is a senior and caregiver advocate in southeastern Minnesota.

At a time of upheaval and hate, care for one another is essential. In a recent PBS documentary, *Caregiving*, activist Ai-Jen Poo is quoted as saying that caregivers are part of "this invisible army who are essentially holding us all up."

Caregiving is also a discipline — a practice that employs the language and lens of social work. With federal budget cuts and worker shortages, caregiving is in short supply for elderly and children, people with disabilities or mental illness, as well as newcomers and other vulnerable populations. We talked with three caregiving professionals around Minnesota to share their challenges, their hopes, and their stories.

On the Ground

"Lord, have mercy!" Melissa Almer whoops with laughter when asked to describe the scope of her responsibilities. "I roll up my sleeves and do what needs to be done," she says. "I help with paperwork a lot. Managing money. I've stood at the kitchen sink and done dishes."

For 17 years, Almer has been a senior and caregiver advocate at Semcac, a community action agency serving up to 12 counties in southeastern Minnesota. Almer's focus is Dodge and Steele counties, where most of her clients "live in poverty," she says.

She encounters addiction issues, mainly alcohol, often affecting family caregivers rather than the patients themselves. Most of her clients, of whatever age, are frail. "They struggle with getting their basic needs met, with transportation, with how to get groceries into their home," Almer explains.

Managers have called her a troublemaker for going above and beyond. Though Almer does no hands-on care — her focus is "finding resources, making referrals, connecting with the appropriate people" — she credits her roll-up-the-sleeves approach with not being a trained social worker. "They have rules and boundaries and guidelines. I don't have those guidelines," she explains. "I won't complain about how messy someone's house is if I'm not going to help them clean it."

What would make her job easier? There was no hesitation when she replied: "I wish I had money." Almer praises the support from her agency and her social worker colleagues. But money would provide at least a temporary answer to the question she hears so often: "Do I eat this week, or do I take my medications?"

"If I could do anything," she says, "I'd have a checkbook and write people checks."

More money would ease worries about loss of Medicaid funding too. Almer says the Trump administration fails to realize how many elderly people are on both Medicare and Medicaid, which is "most of the people I work with," she says. "We are causing a humanitarian crisis in so many ways."

Multigenerational Healing

For Comfort Dondo, a native of Zimbabwe and a survivor of domestic abuse, caregiving means "being a steward on behalf of community." She considers herself a bridge and a relationship builder for women in the African immigrant community navigating the white-centric Twin Cities culture.

Survivors of civil war in Monrovia, Liberia, have congregated in Brooklyn Park, just as immigrants from Mogadishu, Somalia, tend to live in Minneapolis. "Those communities have been ravaged by civil war," Dondo explains, "and their families are still recovering."

As founder of Phumulani, a nonprofit whose values include "grit" and "grace," she aims to provide healing services to African immigrants and refugees, as well as to mentor youth. "I created the organization because I saw the gap," Dondo says. "I wanted to provide what I needed."

The injuries and indignities of physical and verbal abuse from a once-trusted partner can be multigenerational and multilayered, she says. "No one is thinking about how the trauma is transferring to the children — the ones witnessing and seeing."

Elders who are "left back on the continent" are also depending on immigrants to send money — what she notes is referred to as the "Black tax."

Dondo herself received caregiving "in ways that may not look typical," and she tries to replicate that at Phumulani. An African American elder — a person "who didn't come from my community" — helped her assess whether a potential workplace was racist, navigate the child protection system, find a pro bono lawyer, and even buy a bus pass.

"I think I have subconsciously been creating programs that are ingrained in that holistic approach," Dondo says. The healing circles she organizes, "African in nature," are direct caregiving.

Like others in social service and caregiving, Dondo spends a growing amount of time finding resources to do the work. "As an African immigrant woman in the anti-violence movement that was started way before I came here, I encounter 'old boys' club' rules that go back to the default of the white supremacist system."

Growing Diversity

Bemidji is sometimes called a border town due to proximity to the Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth Nations. Although the student population of Bemidji State University (BSU) remains largely white, at 78 percent, the diversity of the region's Indigenous population is starting to influence BSU's social work program.

Ashley Charwood, an assistant professor of social work at BSU, says the university had the highest number of Indigenous graduates in 2025. Ten percent of them were in the social work program. The program offers a curriculum that includes a focus on Indigenous child welfare and what Charwood calls "disparities" around adoption or foster care placement.

A Black American, and descendant of people from Nigeria and Ghana, Charwood says the social work program has evolved in ways that the demographics of its student population may not suggest. Employing an anti-oppressive practice model is one change Charwood has seen in the profession since she graduated from college in 2007.

That means "acknowledging bias and privilege," and making time and space

COURTESY PHOTO

Ashley Charwood

for "the history and the harm, how the past informs the present." Day to day, an anti-oppressive approach means that Charwood tries to consider students' challenges and outside responsibilities when she schedules assignments. She models the practice of empathy by sharing stories of her own life struggles.

She encourages self-care while teaching through a trauma-informed lens, aimed to help students empathize with their clients' challenges.

"We're interacting with people facing abuse, domestic violence, poverty, potentially the end of Medicaid, systemic oppression. We embed that awareness into all our classes now," Charwood says.

Her social work students include veterans, parents, midlife professionals who earn their degrees largely online ("a huge trend"), and those who disclose as nonbinary or LGBTQ+. "I find hope in the students," says Charwood. "Students who are eager to learn, interested in policy and running for office. They want to learn how to dismantle and change systems." MWP

Minnesota Women's Press has a discussion series that includes the impact of Medicaid. Sign up here:

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

My "Bystander" Education in Community Organizing

written by Diane Meyer

Writer Diane Meyer at the Dakota County Fair, where members of the Coalition for Responsible Data Center Development reached out for support.

I sat down in the last open chair in Cathy and Gary Johnson's dining room in a house full of 15 Farmington neighbors for a Wednesday night meeting. As a summer intern for Minnesota Women's Press, I had previously interviewed the Johnsons and neighbor Mo Feshami about data centers and the challenges of community organizing. My subsequent story was an explainer about "What Minnesotans Should Learn About Data Centers."

Like most Minnesotans, before that assignment I had little knowledge about the technical jargon and no understanding of the power dynamics at play between the local governments, data center developers, and citizens. The story explained how the group — organized as the nonprofit Coalition for Responsible Data Center Development — was sounding a warning alarm about private developers buying up rural community land. Some of these nationwide plans, including in Farmington, have been made under cover of nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) signed by city officials, to create vast data centers that are sucking up municipal water supplies and increasing electricity rates for neighbors.

I was in Farmington again to learn how a group creates a grassroots movement. I left humbled by their passion and determination in a "David vs. Goliath" battle, as they describe it.

I came with standard reporting questions: How did you get involved with the data center issue? What are the strengths and weaknesses as a coalition? What is your biggest challenge? Why do you feel that it is important to get involved in neighborhood issues?

But as I listened to Cathy direct the conversation, starting with the first agenda item about a presence at the large Dakota County Fair, I realized that my questions were out of place in a room where the action happens — where decisions are made and where momentum is gathering. The real story that night was about how a coalition finds its power in connection to get things done. They were asking each other questions:

- Who do you know who will put up yard signs?
- Do you know if [name] would be willing to fly a banner at his shop?
- How can we share parking passes at the fair to save costs?
- As a 501(c), do we need insurance to cover our events?
- Who can supply a laptop or projector for presentations?

As I listened, and after I drove home, I thought about the distinction of being there as a journalist, one step removed from those who are members of the coalition. Even if I care about the issues they are concerned about — environmental standards, lack of transparency from elected officials, investors who build without being in the community — do my notebook and list of questions mean I am not supposed to show that I care, as a reporter, about those issues?

What Is the Role of Journalism Today?

The ethics of journalism feel murky in a world that has a proliferation of public opinions from social media influencers and TV commentators. How do you write about issues neighbors care about without understanding and writing from their perspective? Especially when their issues are intrinsically tied to the land and our relationships with it and each other.

Cathy Johnson and the coalition she chairs have been meeting since a conversation in her backyard more than a year ago. They came together in confusion and a little chaos, trying to understand why their city had signed non-disclosure agreements with Tract, a development company seeking to rezone land in their residential neighborhood. Outside investors want to build a hyperscale data center, supporting 708 megawatts of energy — which is far greater than most previous centers around the country.

The coalition talked of concerns about water conservation, light and noise pollution, setbacks from property lines, and the precedent their situation was setting for the state of Minnesota. Since that first discussion, members have attended every city council meeting and almost every planning commission meeting to raise their voices.

For these neighbors in Farmington, the issue literally abutted their backyards. When you can see the issue from your kitchen window, it becomes very real. And when it comes in the form of a private out-of-state company requiring city officials to sign nondisclosure agreements — to prevent conversation about the project with residents — it is not pretty. As with so much these days, even if the infiltration doesn't come to our backyard, it is not hard to imagine that it will, and how it affects everyone.

The coalition is building a way for others to see, hear, and join their efforts — to form unity. As coalition member Kris Akin put it: "We have to help them feel what we're feeling."

A crucial goal for the coalition now is education and outreach. They know their movement is one for all Minnesotans. And they understand that they're up against monied interests that pay to pull the curtains and separate us.

During my 50-minute drive home, I pondered: How do we build empathy and inspire dynamic cooperation? How do we create a sense of community that moves together without devolving into an "us versus them" battle? How do we build the values we want to see in solidarity with others? Isn't that also what the role of journalism is intended to capture?

Listening again to recorded notes from my first interview with Cathy, Gary, and Mo, I was reminded of moments of disbelief. I reacted to emotional memories they shared: the mayor flipping them the middle finger at a city council meeting, outrage about the NDA, feeling ignored even on the state level. I think about what motivates activism and what grounds it. How does a movement endure?

Mo and Gary shared a look during my first interview with them, when Mo said he would be "doing this for as long as I can." He looked at Gary, who nodded and affirmed that they would be fighting this fight as long as they could — together.

During the coalition meeting I attended after that first interview, there were spaces for members to express grief, and moments of affirmation and validation: "What you feel is what I'm feeling, too."

The meeting ended with a rustling of papers. There were notes for agendas, Dakota County Fair flyers, and coalition brochures. The most important first step, the neighbors decided, was to rally Farmington residents — who live on highways near the county fair — to place "No Data Center" yard signs on their properties. The coalition hoped to sell 100 yard signs at the county fair in early August.

Thinking about my role as a journalist, listening to a community come together in a cause, I realized that there is a sense of relief in being witness to movement building. The despair so many of us might feel can be buoyed by listening to these types of conversations — not simply retelling the political, but sharing the connective. It is a privilege to write about how communities at the fundamental level are bolstered by grassroots connections.

This data center issue — as with all issues — come back to neighbors talking to neighbors. Backyards and yard signs. Dining room tables and petitions. County fairs and T-shirts.

It might be ironic that the data that can inspire us and share knowledge needs to be encased in an extractive space that separates monied people — and sometimes political leaders — from their own neighbors and voting public.

The data center issue is a strong metaphor for the big picture of today. It threatens communities by hoping to find weakness in, and subsequently preying on, people and communities that might not have the strength, especially financially, to organize.

When we do find strength in each other, however — a way to look forward to the next day, and the next goal to reach — a grassroots movement grows. The question is: "Can we see our neighbors, can we hear their voices, and do we stand with each other?" MWP

What's New at womenspress.com

story development designed for stronger conversations about statewide values, solutions, and action steps

COURTESY PHOTO

Trila Malone

Building a "Future Forward" Series

An online commentary from Trila Malone explains how a co-op caregiving model she cofounded is working to change how vulnerable people in the Twin Cities are cared for. As she puts it: "When we talk about collective health, we can't ignore the caregivers. The well-being of an entire community depends on the hands that feed, clean, lift, comfort, and protect its most vulnerable. When we invest in those hands — with fair pay, respect, and real support — we invest in the health of us all."

Read Malone's commentary at womenspress.com/care

As part of 2026 planning, we are seeking story ideas and funding focused on system changers like Malone. How are movement leaders working to upend how we do things in economics, health care, housing, caregiving, and more?

This Future Forward series will be about people and concepts that invigorate the uniqely human ability to imagine, innovate, design, and build. Creation is not about extraction, dehumanization, and inequality, but about the freedom to reinvent in expansive ways. What are those innovations, and who is doing it?

Contact editor@womenspress.com with Future Forward ideas and funding.

PHOTO TIM FREELAND

People are gathering in Northfield on Wednesday mornings to write down the names of all children killed in Gaza so far; thus far there are more than 17,000 names.

Thanks to 2025 underwriters to date, who support Changemakers Alliance content development

Joan Gilles / Financial Planning Partners, Lenfest Institute for Journalism, Minneapolis Foundation, Our Lady of Peace, Press Forward Minnesota, Unidos MN, Valvoline in Northern Minnesota, as well as deep support from Kristin Siegesmund, Michelle and Bill Pohlad, and more than 250 Badass members

Food Access in Schools

A story submitted by Jodi Gruhn details the work she and three other advocates have done in collaboration after they discovered they had similar legislative goals. Genevieve Burt wanted plant-based meal options in the schools for ethical and health reasons. PaFoua Hang wanted to make changes to a lactose-heavy school lunch diet after her experiences as a child. Nicola Philpott wanted to adjust meals after she realized climate change was threatening the future of her children. Gruhn works with food service specialists on menu plans that support plant-based meals. Among other details, the story notes that children raised on plant-based diets have lower risks of heart disease, cancer, obesity, and diabetes.

Find the full story here:

Kudos to Our Youthful Freelance Writers

Maitreya Reeder recently submitted a commentary about her experience as a high school student getting legislation passed at the Minnesota Capitol, which was republished by the national feminist online publication *The 19th*, and reached nearly 8,000 of our Instagram followers.

From college students: Diane Meyer's reporting about data centers and a legal issue led by Farmington neighbors has been shared by the *Minnesota Star Tribune*. Long-time contributor Siena Iwasaki Milbauer interviewed seven experts working to solve housing issues; the resulting story was also picked up by the *Star Tribune*.

Talking About Gender-Based Violence

An essay by domestic violence housing advocate Kara Hoel-Kleese describes the needs of people attempting to escape abusive home environments in Rochester, where housing is not affordable.

"We are the shelter for a 10-county area. That means people seeking safe shelter are uprooting from where their lives are and where they'd like to be. We are able to host about 18 families at a time in supportive housing, for up to 24 months." A shelter expansion to be completed later this year will allow capacity to increase to 75 individuals.

Hoel-Kleese says there is a creative network to help people move away from dangerous situations. "Day One out of Cornerstone offers tickets through Jefferson bus lines that are free and anonymous. Just like all other DV agencies, we take people from all over the state to get people where there is an opening. We use Lyft, if that's available. We do use staff, or sometimes law enforcement will assist with transports."

Her shelter does trainings with organizations about how to recognize the signs of an abusive home environment. "We have a support group in the local jail for female survivors. We want to get out to local health clinics that are immigrant focused, and into the neighborhoods where people are."

A large percentage of time is spent seeking funds — rather than working on prevention strategies. "Rochester has 16 public elementary schools, and we would like to have the capacity to be in all of those schools on a regular basis, helping to share information about healthy relationships — because prevention work isn't well funded." Hoel-Kleese noted that elementary school age is when modeling behavior starts.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Kara Hoel-Kleese

She notes that people are somewhat aware of the roughly 30 Minnesotans who are murdered every year by intimate partners. There is less awareness, however, about survivors struggling inside a violent home, including the isolation and financial issues faced.

Find this and other related stories at womenspress.com/gender-based-violence

Minnesota Women's Press will cohost discussions with people in Saint Cloud (September 27) and Rochester (October 22) to talk about needs in the community related to domestic violence. We are also hoping to raise funds to do a livestream forum about the nature of coercive control as well as media narratives that are misinformed.

To learn more, sign up under the "gender-based violence" option here:

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How to Get More Housing in Every Corner of the State

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

reported by Siena Iwasaki Milbauer

Anne Mavity has decades of experience in housing policy, advocacy, and practical execution. There is no doubt in her mind what the housing problem is: "We need more housing, of every type, in every corner of the state. Period."

Mavity, who serves as executive director of Minnesota Housing Partnership (MHP), noted that "we are short 100,000 homes for what we need to just keep up with population growth." In Minneapolis specifically, the vacancy rate is technically 6.6 percent (5 percent would be considered a healthy rate), but when that data is disaggregated by housing types and prices, it's not uncommon to see vacancy rates of 0 to 2 percent. "What people are experiencing — the misery in the housing market — is in fact supported by data," she says.

Mavity identified the greatest gap as affordability. "While we generally think that when there's more housing, supply and demand will shape the economy, it is unlikely to bring rents down. What it might do is limit the escalation of rents in the future," she shares, adding that "part of that is that the new housing being built is generally Class A: fancy stainless-steel, granite-countertop housing, which is not going to be affordable without generous, abundant public resources or rental assistance vouchers."

On the flip side, the affordability factor of Class C properties, such as older homes that are naturally more cost-effective when they return to the market, are often bought up instead by developers who make improvements accompanied by rising rents. "Again," says Mavity, "they put in some granite and stainless steel and now it's no longer affordable and accessible to the folks who might have lived there for generations."

Mavity notes the importance of acknowledging that "in all categories, it's the lowest-income folks — seniors living on a fixed income, folks just entering adulthood, folks forming families, first-time homebuyers, people in rural communities — who have housing costs that are out of reach."

Solution 1: Adjust Regulations

"We need to make it easy to build," she says. She cites the 12-month streamlined rebuilding process after the 35W bridge collapse as evidence that it is possible for the state to waive its labyrinth of guidelines safely and to great effect. The housing market has become "so twisted in rules and regulations" that if we were going back in time to the housing that emerged organically to create today's communities, much of that housing stock would never have been built because it would be considered illegal.

Mavity points out that half of other states are ahead of Minnesota in addressing the regulations issue.

Solution 2: Local Pushes, Public Funds

Years ago, as a city council member in Saint Louis Park, Mavity recalls encouraging developers for 10 years to build affordable housing, but zero units were built. After

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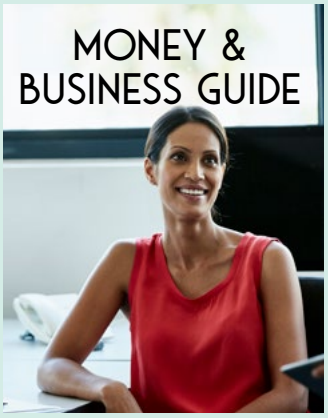


implementing inclusionary zoning — which requires a certain percentage of affordable housing in any development that needs something from city, which almost all do — cost-effective housing actually got built.

A challenge is that all of this comes with a cost, requiring the filling of gaps with public funding. The cost of building or operating housing, compared to the revenue available to cover those costs, generally does not add up. "We are also in the midst of a national crisis in property insurance," Mavity adds. Insurance rate increases among multifamily housing providers can reach 250 percent. This requires robust resources. "Our estimate, if we were to actually fund what we need, would be about $2 billion a year."

There is precedent, however, for smart and relatively painless sources of funding. For example, "The Legacy Amendment funded arts and parks on a ⅜ percent statewide sales tax. We've modeled Our Future Starts at Home after that," says Mavity, speaking of a coalition of community leaders and housing advocates who are seeking to establish a steady, dedicated revenue stream for housing in Minnesota.

Mavity estimates that a ⅜ percent sales tax used for housing would produce about $500 million a year. "We are a little ahead in Minnesota because, in 2023, we created the statewide rental assistance program that was funded by a metro sales tax. But Greater Minnesota also needs affordable housing."

Solution 3: Payment Assistance

She also advocates for rental and down payment assistance "to get people into homes and help them stay there because housing costs are a key factor in people being able to afford their lives."

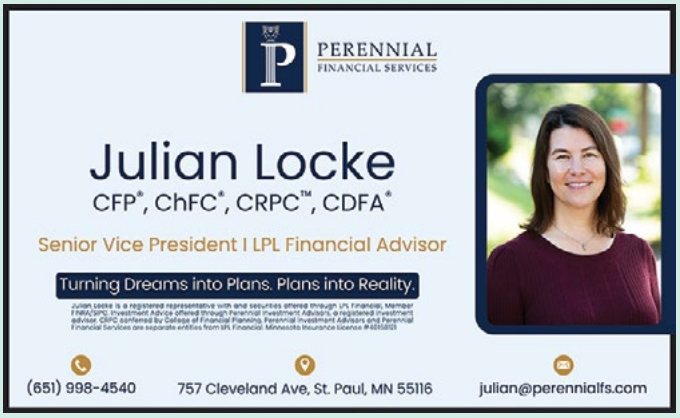
In a recent report, MHP found that more than 101,000 households, serving 178,000 people across Minnesota, currently use federal rental assistance. "This has helped bridge that gap between housing costs and what people can actually afford," Mavity says. "Still, only 1 in 4 eligible families receive this assistance because of federal budget constraints. Minnesota families and our economy are stronger when everyone can afford their homes. We need to protect access to this assistance and expand it to more families."

Another Consideration

Amidst an uncertain and occasionally hostile landscape, the good news is there is enormous room for creative solutions. Innovation will be increasingly important as significant decreases in federal funding impact the state, Mavity says. She highlights various ideas that are being implemented: the development of community land trusts, apartment conversions from office spaces, modular housing, and new funding for social housing that passed in a bill this year.

These efforts can increase racial equity in property ownership and address the loneliness crisis by enabling people to live in communal environments. Mavity poses this question: "How do we design policies that roll out new opportunities?" MWP

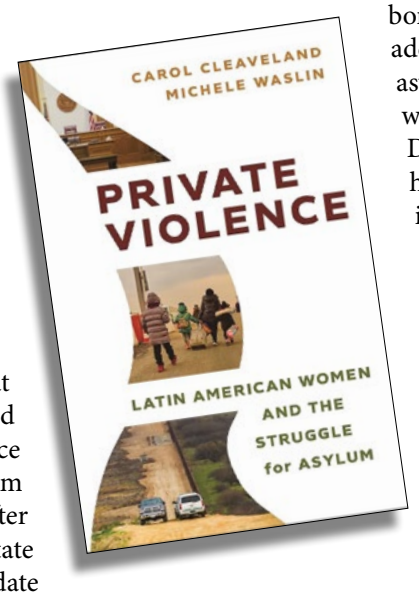
We are hosting discussions about housing. For details when available, sign up with QR code here:



Private Violence:
Latin American Women and the Struggle for Asylum

submitted by Carol Cleaveland and Michele Waslin

In *Private Violence: Latin American Women and the Struggle for Asylum*, we present the stories of dozens of women from northern Central America and Mexico that exemplify the desperate need for reform to the American asylum process. The women we profile want what we all seek: safety and the means to support ourselves. Yet women must run a legal gauntlet to save their own lives. In the U.S. asylum system, that means women fleeing — from abuse inside their homes or from gangs in their communities — must confront laws that weren't written to protect them.



In the book, we build the case that women seeking asylum in the United States due to domestic or gang violence should be protected under the asylum laws. The current laws were written after World War II to protect victims of state persecution. Despite promises to update and revise — including by the previous administration — gender-based crimes are still not consistently recognized as a reason to grant asylum. Lawyers must prove that women fleeing this treatment have been persecuted because they are women, have been ignored by their governments, and would be in danger if returned to their home nation.

Current efforts to "secure" the southern border and deter asylum seekers do not address the reasons women are seeking asylum, and only further traumatize people who are genuinely fleeing for their lives. Decades of military and government unrest have led to deep poverty and structural inequality in Latin American nations — often instigated and encouraged by American policies. In these countries, male dominance is often the norm, and is exacerbated by political and economic inequality. Police and gangs are often co-conspirators when it comes to terrorizing and subjugating women, and so when women are threatened and abused, they have no trusted authorities to turn to.

Despite popular beliefs that applying for asylum is easy, and that migrants are taking advantage of this method of gaining entry to the U.S., we show in the

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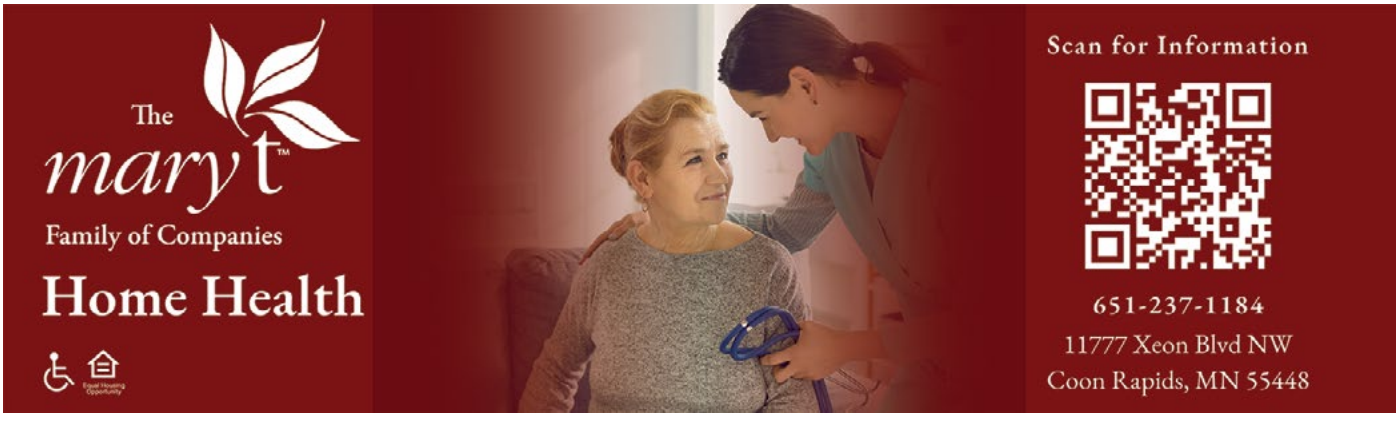


Case studies (trigger warnings):

- Teresita is a Honduran woman who was studying dentistry in her home country. Her boyfriend began beating her shortly after they moved in together in 2016, striking her in the face and abdomen with a closed fist. "He said I'm now his property and I have to obey him." She later went to the police. "They said I should go back home and fix it because it's a domestic issue." After she went to the police, she told the court that he beat her harder.
- Lula, a Salvadoran, was targeted for rape by gang members because she is a lesbian. "The only thing I want is to be calm and to know if I am going to be in a place where I can work and I can have my little meal. I do not long to have many things, because I have never had [them]. Security is what I want, peace of mind."
- A judge wanted Ines' sons to appear before him separately, but she didn't realize that. She brought them to court with her. At her next ICE check-in, which is routine for asylum seekers, an ICE officer informed her that both sons were under removal orders because they failed to appear in court. Ines explained that the judge would be able to see from court cameras that she entered with her two children. "I even signed a book, my son signed, and I signed for my younger son." Yet immigration officers came to take her boys.
- Obtaining evidence proved challenging for Constanza, a Guatemalan who needed medical records documenting a hysterectomy after a gang rape caused severe bleeding. The surgeon had died, and hospital personnel informed her that his records were no longer available. An attorney encouraged Constanza to have neighbors provide letters on her behalf, but they were too frightened to do so.

book that the opposite is true. The women we spoke with — like thousands of others — have been imprisoned and treated like criminals at the U.S. border, discouraged from applying for asylum, and required to wait years for hearings. They have paid lawyers significant fees for court preparation and paperwork filings. Through it all, asylum seekers must hold down jobs, provide for children, and cope with the trauma of physical or sexual abuse. In the end, only a small number of women are granted asylum; the verdict often depends on whether the judge believes their story.

COURTESY PHOTO

Carol Cleaveland

Core Concepts

We were able to speak with more than 40 women from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who applied for asylum. We observed dozens of closed asylum hearings, and spoke to immigration attorneys and former immigration judges. Asylum seekers exist in a tenuous space we call compounded marginalization. This term captures the fact that asylum seekers are temporarily spared deportation and may obtain a work permit while undergoing the legal right to seek asylum, but their life is defined by a protracted legal battle to win the right to remain in the U.S.

We titled the book *Private Violence* because it is the term used by some to describe gender-based brutalization at the hands of domestic partners or gangs, but we explain that this violence is never truly "private."

The immigration court system can be highly politicized. Asylum seekers can find themselves in a process that is antagonistic, adversarial, bureaucratic, lengthy, confusing, and expensive. Socially acceptable policies and practices might seem routine and reasonable, but they lead to deportation, social exclusion, tenuous legal status, and violations of rights. Some advocates have called this the "slow violence" of the immigration system.

U.S. asylum law was not designed to protect survivors of "private violence." The system must be stretched to ensure safety for victims of less commonly acknowledged forms of persecution, such as places that allow gender-based violence to flourish, where local police forces are unable or unwilling to protect women.

We also point out in the book that hearing stories of rape, assault, and death threats impacts many immigration attorneys and judges, who burn out and develop compassion fatigue. One person explained: "The pressures of the system are felt by immigration attorneys, most of whom are overworked, underpaid, under-resourced, and charged with protecting their clients from deportation, a fate that for some clients

COURTESY PHOTO

Michele Waslin

is akin to a sentence of death." One attorney told us, "I don't really do domestic violence cases anymore. I just can't."

Outcomes

A report by the American Immigration Council summarized American asylum law in the following way: "Immigration judges may conclude that a person is likely to be killed if deported to their home country, and that the person nevertheless does not qualify for asylum because they will be killed for the wrong reason, or by the wrong person."

That "wrong person" could be a domestic partner or a gang member; in the eyes of some judges, those people are deemed to commit "private violence," which is not protected by the law.

Women who are granted asylum are supposed to be protected from removal from the U.S., and have a path to legal permanent residency and citizenship. However, many women we met had children and family members who remained in the same area as their abusers. This is painful for women who feel guilty for leaving family members behind.

One attorney we interviewed in 2022 told us about a client who won asylum in 2017; nevertheless, her ten-year-old son was still unable to join her in the U.S.

Recommendations

We need strong regulations and guidelines to clarify how women can meet the asylum criteria in cases of domestic and gang violence. Congress needs to enshrine protections in law. For example, the Refugee Protection Act, introduced in Congress in 2022, would establish many things, including requiring judges to make credibility assessments after understanding current scientific literature on how trauma affects memories.

Reforms to the legal immigration system could allow more people to come lawfully to the U.S. with family petitions or employment opportunities. MWP

Private Violence was published in 2024 by New York University Press.

Michele Waslin (she/her) is assistant director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Carol Cleaveland (she/her) is associate professor in the Department of Social Work at George Mason University. Both have been involved in immigration research for at least 20 years.

Case studies (trigger warnings):

- Before she left the country, Adriana surreptitiously recorded her violent domestic partner as he threatened to cut out her tongue if she reported his abuse to the police. She recorded his mother as she warned that people who took a stand against the local gang would end up in body bags. The recordings became evidence in an asylum hearing that Adriana finally won.
- Lía was brutally beaten by her boyfriend, who was a gang member. After he was convicted of raping a 12-year-old girl, he had people outside threaten her if she did not visit him. The judge questioned whether it was known that they had a relationship. "He treated her like his property or a prostitute, but they never lived together," the judge said. The judge characterized his decision to grant asylum as a "close call." Had Lía not been beaten and raped in front of prison guards, she would have lost her case.
- Victoria witnessed her cousin's murder by gang members, who later threatened her and her daughter. "I had to move every three months. I changed my phone number every time I moved." According to Victoria, the gangs told her, "We're going to find you, take away your daughter and kill her for vengeance." At her asylum hearing, the immigration judge questioned whether the gang's phone calls and text messages rose to the level of persecution and whether being a crime witness qualified her for asylum. In the end, the judge found Victoria to be only partly credible, meaning that he doubted part of her testimony. He denied Victoria asylum and ordered her removed from the United States.

Kitchens of Hope

PHOTO TOM WALLACE

Deegii Lkhasuren with her children

Kitchens of Hope: Immigrants Share Stories of Resilience and Recipes From Home includes favorite recipes and personal stories of immigrants who are living in Minnesota. It includes recipes for peanut soup and rice bread from Liberian sisters Doris and Cora Parker; walnut cake from Nadya Goncharova of Latvia; marinated tilapia from Ingrid Kubisa of the Democratic Republic of Congo; pirozhki from Margaret McLean of Ukraine; chicken and tomatillo stew from Nadia Najarro Smith of Guatemala; and much more.

One of the editors, Lee Svitak Dean, read an excerpt at the book launch in June: "They packed little but memories as they headed to the United States. For immigrants trying to fit a lifetime into a suitcase, there wasn't much room. They carried with them thoughts of home. Of family and friends. Of the aroma of cardamom, the tang of fish sauce, the heat of chili peppers, the bite of mustard greens. As they rebuilt their lives in the United States, many in Minnesota, they turned to the familiar comfort foods and traditions that lingered in their hearts, minds, and palates."

The introduction notes that the book started as an effort to collect the recipes of those who had left their home countries for life in the United States. "As we began to collect the recipes, we realized that the stories behind the cooks were as compelling as the brimming bowls and the overflowing platters of their culinary treasures. These stories offered more than the stark numbers that often define the migration of people from one place to another: the visas and green cards, the countries and populations. That familiar bare-bones approach overlooks the lives of those on the move."

Proceeds for the book benefit Advocates for Human Rights, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that provides free help to those seeking asylum, those in immigration

Minnesota Women's Press is launching a new "This Is US" series that is focused on immigrant storytelling. To share your story, contact editor@womenspress.com.

detention, unaccompanied children, and others facing human rights issues.

Following is a glimpse at the many stories featured in the book. We are sharing recipes and stories in the Minnesota Women's Press *Creativity & Connections* monthly newsletter, which focuses on books, arts, and events (womenspress.com/subscribe).

Deegii Lkhasuren, Mongolia

Growing up in Mongolia, close to the Russian border, Lkhasuren learned English at a young age. Eventually she earned a Fulbright scholarship that sent her to the University of Minnesota for a degree in public policy. She returned to Mongolia with her husband and two young children, where she worked for Save the Children.

After moving back to Minnesota as a single mom, she earned a master's degree in human rights, focused on civilian protection in conflict-affected areas. Coming from a nomadic people who face harsh winter conditions, her recipe in the book was buuz (pronounced booze), which are steamed dumplings filled with meat, vegetables, and spices.

Loan Huyhn, Vietnam

As a young child in 1975, on the night Saigon fell to communist forces and led to the end of the Vietnam War, Loan Huyhn's family was fleeing in a Jeep, chased by exploding shells. Eventually they arrived at a U.S. refugee camp in Arkansas, when she was five years old. As an elementary school student, she was excited to hold a scroll of the Declaration of Independence handed out during a Bicentennial celebration — but she was also attacked by schoolmates with anti-immigrant and racist words. Her parents worked 12-hour days. Eventually Loan earned her law degree and moved to Minnesota to work at Advocates for Human Rights.

Loan Huyhn shared a recipe for beef pho. More of her story was featured in the book's introduction (at right). MWP

Published by the University of Minnesota Press, 2025, edited by Linda S. Svitak, Christin Jaye Eaton, and Lee Svitak Dean

Excerpt from *Kitchens of Hope*, by Loan Huyhn

I believe in the power of one: each of us individually has the potential to make an indelible difference in the lives of those around us and for many generations. One man, a captain of a ship, made the decision to pick up my family along the beaches of Saigon on April 30,1975, when the city fell to the North Vietnamese troops.

I was five years old. My three siblings; my Ba (father); my Me (mother), who was nine months pregnant with my brother; and I, along with other family members and some of my father's military troop who loyally stayed with him, had driven along the beaches of Saigon to find a way to escape Vietnam. All the ships were out in the harbor or at sea.

My Ba waved his white T-shirt and begged for one of the nearby ships to come back to get his children, even if they could not take him and my Me. The captain saw us, my parents and their four little children, ages six years old and younger, and he sent a boat to pick us up to transport us to the ship, which was already fully loaded with passengers. This captain's single decision saved our lives, as my Ba was in counterintelligence for South Vietnam, and there was no doubt he would have been killed if he was unable to escape.

Today, one of my sisters is a James Beard Award–winning journalist, one of my brothers owns a restaurant and bar that employs dozens of people, another sister became a child therapist and helps immigrants, and the baby brother born in the refugee camp of Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, is an alumnus of Harvard University and an award-winning political consultant. For me, I lived my dream of becoming a human rights and immigration lawyer, along with being the mother of two beautiful girls who are first-generation Americans.

I hope our captain knows the ripple effect he initiated — his own power of one.

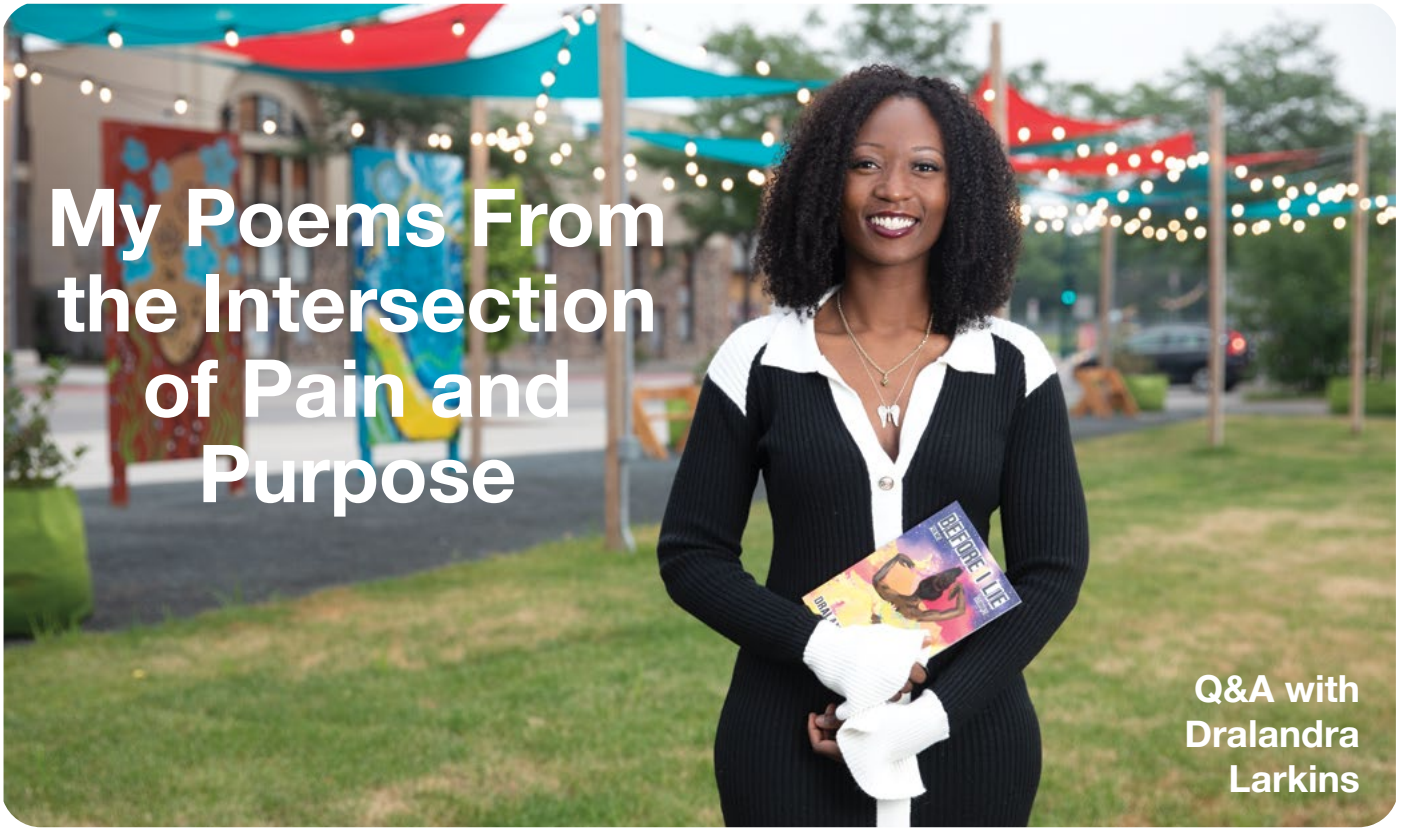


PHOTO SARAH WHITING

My Poems From the Intersection of Pain and Purpose

Q&A with Dralandra Larkins

Dralandra Larkins is a three-time slam poetry champion, accomplished author, and teacher. She recently published her debut poetry collection, *Before I Lie*, through Book Baby. We connected with her about poetry as a sanctuary, why Lake Street is one of her enduring muses, and the process of telling stories that are meant to be read, spoken, heard, and felt.

Tell us about the collection.

I grew up navigating insecurity, self-doubt, and the secondhand smoke of generational trauma. I was a witness to violence before I had language for it. Poetry became my sanctuary — the place where I could tell the truth before I was brave enough to speak it out loud.

This collection is a mosaic of poems, affirmations, art illustrations, and short stories that bear witness to the scars we inherit and the healing we dare to choose. From Black girlhood in South Minneapolis to the frontlines of self-worth, spirituality, and resistance, it is about what it means to rise from silence and claim your voice.

Before I Lie is a lyrical testimony shaped by personal survival, memory, and truth-telling. I wrote this book from a place of urgency. I was tired of shrinking, code-switching, and carrying silence for others' comfort.

What are some of the biggest topics in the collection?

Some of the biggest themes include body image, family wounds, survival, faith, womanhood, and Black identity. These aren't just topics, but pages of unfiltered truth.

I grew up in South Minneapolis. As a kid, I used to get so excited to walk with my mother to Robert Shoes (which no longer exists). I'd yell "Laaaake Street!" like it was a parade. That stretch of South Minneapolis was our stomping ground. Lake Street is vibrant and rich with multi-cultures. But it also was where I first noticed the cracks: boarded-up stores, overpolicing, gentrification. Lake Street holds my joy and my rage.

One of my poems in the collection, "Ode to the Hood — Where I'm From," won first place at the Poets Against Humanity Slam hosted by Mirror Theatre in Sauk Rapids. That piece is a lyrical clapback to systemic oppression and neighborhood neglect. It honors the beauty and burden of home, with lines rooted in places that raised me.

During the George Floyd uprising, Lake Street became the center of nationwide protest. But for me, it has always been sacred ground and home.

What do you want readers to take away from the collection?

I wrote many of these poems from the intersection

of pain and purpose. I want readers to feel both seen and stirred; to know that even the softest voice carries power and even broken stories have breath and deserve to be heard. Readers are invited into my raw moments of heartbreak and hope, guided by a spiritual undercurrent and poetic rhythm that speaks to my dual life as a writer and performer.

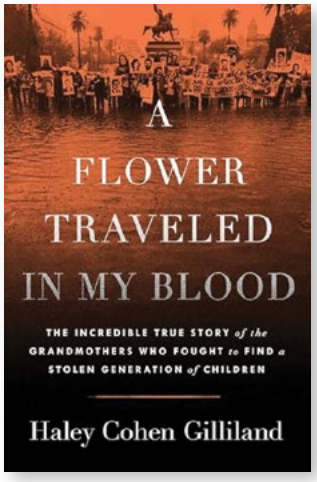
I speak my poems as much as I write them, and that is why I recorded an audiobook as well. Hearing the audiobook captures a different kind of intimacy. These pieces weren't meant to just sit on the page. They were born to echo and testify out loud.

At its core, *Before I Lie* is a reckoning, a love letter, and a resurrection. It reminds us that survival is sacred, that storytelling is resistance, and that healing — no matter how messy — is absolutely necessary. MWP

Visit womenspress.com to hear an exclusive audio clip of Dralandra Larkins performing "Ode to the Hood — Where I'm From."

Stories of Boundary-Breaking Women

We asked some of our team to offer synopses of recently published books about interesting women that they read this summer. Here are a few:



***A Flower Traveled in My Blood*, by Haley Cohen Gilliland**

On a rainy Friday afternoon, José Manuel Pérez Rojo and his partner Patricia Roisinblit — who was heavily pregnant — were seized by masked, armed policemen and shoved into an unmarked vehicle. The year was 1978, and José and Patricia had just become two of tens of thousands of "desaparecidos" who would be kidnapped, tortured, and murdered without a trace by the Argentinian military dictatorship between 1974 and 1983.

So opens Haley Cohen Gilliand's gripping history. It follows Rosa Roisinblit, Patricia's mother, as she becomes an integral part of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. This extraordinary group of mothers and grandmothers of kidnapping victims were tireless advocates, leading to the identification of more than 130 grandchildren who had been kidnapped alongside their parents or were born into captivity. Facing stark danger (three of the Abuelas' founding members were murdered by the dictatorship) and constant public backlash for their "unpatriotic" truth-telling, the Abuelas persisted then and now. Surviving members continue to protest Argentina's current slide into historical revisionism.

Gilliland captures a period in which authoritarian violence was rising around the world, creating a global web of terror as well as a worldwide network of anti-fascists. The Abuelas collaborated with journalists, human rights advocates, and renowned scientist Mary Claire King to create groundbreaking genetic testing to identify grandchildren.

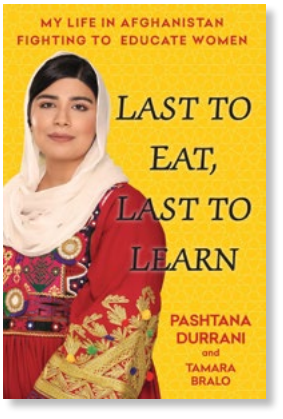
The Abuelas' story reminds us that however devastating the situation, the pendulum does swing toward justice — if people work together to make it so.

— Siena Iwasaki Milbauer

***Secret Servants of the Crown: The Forgotten Women of British Intelligence*, by Claire Hubbard-Hall**

In British intelligence, many women served as secretaries, typists, and personal assistants — inconspicuous job titles that masked their true occupations in secret intelligence service. As a female army that served as a cornerstone for British intelligence, the women who made up this section of MI6 governed secrets and classified information, spearheaded by Kathleen Pettigrew, the real-life inspiration behind James Bond's Miss Moneypenny. Within the pages of this fascinating look at forgotten women agents, Hubbard-Hall utilizes extensive research, declassified documents, and family archives.

— Olivia Worcester



***Last to Eat, Last to Learn: My Life in Afghanistan Fighting to Educate Women*, by Pashtana Durrani and Tamara Bralo**

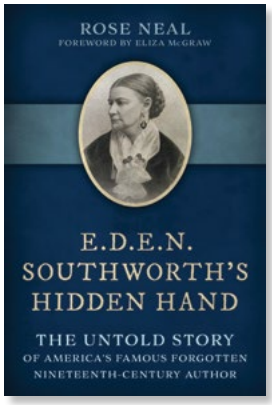
"Oxford wasn't just a school; it was a mythical place that turned women of South Asia into heroines. I was going to be one of them. Until I wasn't."

Fueled by her father's insistence on giving her an education, Pashtana Durrani recognized early on in life that her mission would be to educate other girls and young women in Afghanistan. The power of learning granted Durrani the opportunity to leave the refugee camp she was raised in and obtain an acceptance to a preparatory program at Oxford — but this was decidedly not her path. Instead, she founded the nonprofit LEARN, which is dedicated to providing quality education and health care to communities in conflict zones. This memoir details Durrani's courage and commitment to educating young Afghan women as a self-described "accidental activist" who

started out merely standing up for herself. "I was born loud," Durrani writes, "and whatever the consequences of speaking up might have been, suffering in silence seemed so much worse."

A portion of proceeds from Durrani's memoir are donated to LEARN (LearnAfghan.org).

— Olivia Worcester



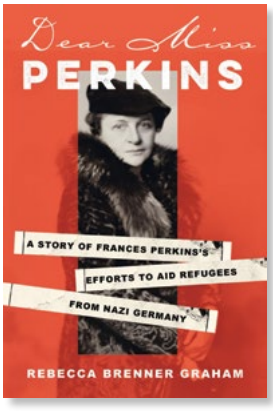
***E.D.E.N. Southworth's Hidden Hand: The Untold Story of America's Famous Forgotten Nineteenth-Century Author*, by Rose Neal**

With more novels to her name than Nathanial Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain combined, Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte (E.D.E.N.) Southworth was one of the 19th century's most prolific, successful authors. Despite having written over 50 books and reaching a wide audience during her lifetime, Southworth flew under the radar until Neal uplifted her in this biography.

Southworth's stories touched on taboo topics for the time — including alcoholism, poverty, and domestic violence — all under the guise of "domestic fiction." Her signature style included "feisty heroines who rode horses, shot pistols, captured notorious villains, became sea captains, and had other such grand adventures."

Her best-selling novel *The Hidden Hand* was published in 1859; its heroine, Capitola Black, was so widely popular that many readers named their daughters after her. Neal draws on archival research to document Southworth's boundary-pushing literary career and personal life.

— Olivia Worcester



***Dear Miss Perkins: A Story of Frances Perkins's Efforts to Aid Refugees from Nazi Germany*, by Rebecca Brenner Graham**

"Perkins habitually felt others' pain as her own, and refugees were no exception." Flanked by an all-male staff, Frances Perkins' handbag and heels starkly stood out under the presidential cabinet's meeting table. As the first female cabinet secretary in U.S. history, some of Perkins' accomplishments have been well-documented, including her work as an architect of the New Deal, and her time as the longest-serving labor secretary. Less known are her life-saving efforts aiding Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. With the Third Reich coming to power in the 1930s, many German Jewish citizens wanted to leave. One way to do that was reaching out to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which was under the Department of Labor. Letters began pouring in to "Dear Miss Perkins …" Drawing on thousands of letters housed in the National Archives, Brenner Graham's biography is an insightful, compelling read.

— Olivia Worcester

***My Seven Mothers: Making a Family in the Danish Women's Movement*, by Pernille Ipsen**

At its surface, Pernille Ibsen's memoir retells an experiment in female-centric community and parenthood. A child of seven mothers who chose to raise her in a women's commune in Copenhagen, Ibsen — now a professor of women's and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin — shines a light on social activism and female relationships.

Ibsen found herself in the center of the action as her mothers experienced and even effected a cataclysmic era of political and social change in the early seventies in Denmark. Sharing stories from the founding of the first Women's House in Copenhagen, the surmounting stamina of the Danish Women's Movement, and her mothers' unexpected choice to raise a child together, Ibsen recounts the daring and ambitious attempts to organize and cooperatively power a society completely by and for women. Even as this movement unravels — due to organizational conflict between heterosexual and lesbian women — Ibsen's analysis of the balance of power and identity between her mothers is a sensitive and thoughtful reflection. She explores enduring challenges as well as possibilities, examining what it means to be a woman and to create women's spaces.

Rich with interviews that span years of chronicling her mothers' memories, as well as contextual additions from relevant historical academia and media, Ibsen explores the rise and fall of a movement; its complicated legacy; and persisting questions about liberation that still grip social activism today.

Ibsen expertly analyzes her own telling of the story, grappling with how to record the history of the movement, as ostensibly she is a lasting tangible triumph of its efforts. She asks: "How do you measure the amount of happiness in a story about a social movement?"

— Diane Meyer MWP

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A Memoir About Love and Dementia

written by Anne-Marie Erickson

These excerpts are from *In the Evening, We'll Dance: A Memoir in Essays on Love & Dementia,* by Anne-Marie Erickson, published by Holy Cow! Press.

Dementia, that thief, moved into our lives in 1998. It picked the pockets of my husband's mind: first, the front pockets that held his recent memories, then the back pockets, with the older memories. It stole the names of friends, then the names of his children, Jenny, Anna, and Joe. And, sometimes, my name: Who are you? Susan? Kate?

We wrestled with the confusion, fear, and anger that arose with each new loss. At times, we fought against one another. I documented it all — the lapses, the losses, the battles. I chronicled his medical appointments, late-night trips to the emergency room, the many hospitalizations. I made note

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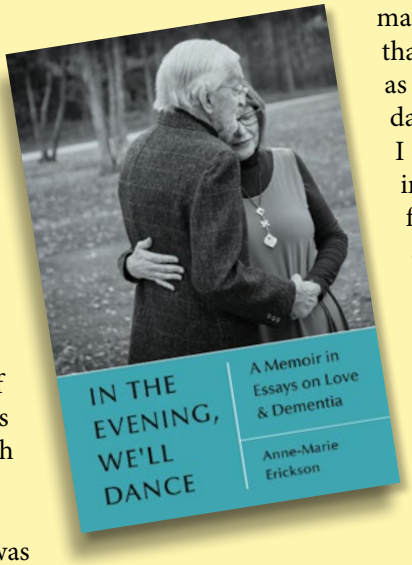
of the drugs that failed, the few drugs that helped. I stowed it all: his agenda books, my letters and e-mail messages to family and friends, my jottings on scraps of paper and in commonplace books.

The essayist Maria Popova discusses ideas presented in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* by Jerome Bruner, a psychologist. She concludes that scientific pursuit is concerned with how to know truth, while the storyteller is concerned with the question of how to endow experience with meaning. Bruner explains that both are "ways of knowing." Scientific analysis results in information, whereas stories produce meaning.



I needed both ways of knowing. I turned to science for information, hoping it would reveal truths about the cause of Dick's dementia. And I turned to stories as a way of endowing our experience with meaning.

When Dick was seventy-four, he was evaluated at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. The discharge summary described him as "pleasantly confused." His thought process was "vague," and the doctors discerned "limited judgment and insight." His diagnosis: dementia, probable Alzheimer's type.

I asked his physician if that meant he would wander about, a lost soul, like a few of the patients I'd seen. It was likely, yes. I asked if that meant someday he would no longer know my name, know who I am. Again, that was probable. I said I'd rather one of us would die before it would come to that. How could I become a stranger to the man I'd loved for decades?

So every night at bedtime, we'd kiss and then I'd say, "I love you, Dick Cain." He'd smile and reply, "I love you, Anne-Marie Erickson."

Even as he neared the end of his life, my name and voice would call him up from deep slumbers when aides were unable to. He'd lie motionless, eyelids closed tightly against any efforts to rouse him. I'd call his name; his lids would flutter, and he'd warily peek through his lashes. "Annie?"

I'd answer, "Yes, it's me, Annie." Then Dick would open his eyes and re-enter the world. At the end of the visit, I'd kiss him and say, "I love you, Dick Cain."

Often, there was a pause. Then, "And I love you, Anne-Marie Erickson."

How does it feel to have your name lost to a parent who named and nurtured you? Several years ago, when Jenny, Anna, and Joe were all in their early fifties, I asked them to choose a few adjectives to describe their dad prior to his dementia. He was, they said, witty, funny, smart, strong, able, handsome, caring, loving, understanding, and "passionate about life and the things that he believed in." Just as I'd seen him.

As Dick lived through the late stages of dementia, he — and they — lost much of what made him the father he had been. Where was that able, strong man? They still loved him, but, as one of them said, "He does not feel like my dad." A friend found that statement shocking. I didn't. They felt a mixture of sadness, anger, impatience, and guilt. So did I. He was still funny at times, but they also described him as repetitive, tedious, scared — and scary. Sometimes, they said, they feared him, because he could be angry or unpredictable. He seemed distant. He was "not himself." The picture they had of their father — and he of them — had grown distorted.

The swamp-margin lies at the edge of the cemetery in George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*. It's the furthest margin in a marginal place called the bardo, where spirits linger between death and rebirth. The face of one denizen, Mr. Papers, has faded into an unrecognizable smudge. Mr. Papers calls out to passersby, "Cannery anyhelpmate? Come. To. Heap me? Cannery help? . . Place hepMay."

I've heard such calls: my mother's nursing home roommate, quietly pleading, "Help meee, help meee, help meee," as she sank into forgetfulness. A man's cries careening down the halls of the geriatric psychiatric ward, "Helpme!Helpme!Helpme!" They ripped through the quiet of my husband's room, unsettling us.

I felt like I was crossing into the swamp-margin when I visited my husband in a memory care facility. I'd entered an "anteroom to another realm," as the author Rebecca Mead puts it. The residents often were inarticulate and adrift, like Mr. Papers. They were not fully there, but not yet elsewhere. They lingered in the anteroom.

In July of 2015, four months before he died of complications related to dementia, my husband said to me, "The two of us have been asked to say something wonderful." It seemed important, so I wrote it down. MWP

The longer version of these book excerpts can be found at womenspress.com/care.

Find a discussion guide for Erickson's book, as well as resources, at anne-marie-erickson-books.com/resources.

Creating My Culture in Worthington

PHOTO CATHRYN NAKHORNSAK

written by Cathryn Nakhornsak

I keep referring to this time in my life as coming full circle. It's the best way I can describe this moment of deep reflection — of feeling grounded in who I am and where I come from.

My family came to Worthington in the early 1990s. I was the youngest of four, spending my formative years with dial-up internet, Saturday morning cartoons, LimeWire downloads, and MySpace profiles — the unofficial starter pack of millennial adolescents. Like many teenagers in small towns, what I wanted to do was to leave. There wasn't much to do, other than walking around Walmart or driving in loops around the lake.

I didn't have the language then, but looking back, I didn't see many versions of what my life could look like. I didn't know how to name my Lao identity. I wasn't sure of myself and what it meant to feel proud of my heritage. In seventh grade, I told classmates I was half Thai, just because people generally loved pad thai. They didn't know Lao food.

Lao food is funky, herby, and spicy, just like its people. I didn't know how to talk about myself in a way that felt good; I felt too different. I was navigating mainstream systems as well as the complexity of growing up in an immigrant household. I had personal ideals and goals, while trying to make sense of who I was and figuring out how to live the communal values and expectations of a dutiful daughter.

Many years have passed. I am far from the days of MySpace. After high school, I earned a degree in social work from Saint Cloud State and later moved to the Twin Cities, where I began working in afterschool programs. I was supporting middle and high school youth as they explored questions around culture,

Minnesota Women's Press is launching a new "This Is US" series focused on the stories of immigrant families. To share yours, contact editor@womenspress.com.

identity, leadership, and social justice. As students shared stories about feeling out of place or unseen, I connected the dots for myself to experiences in my adolescence.

This work alongside youth helped me name things I didn't know how to express. It taught me to understand the importance of holding space for myself, not just as a mentor but as a Lao woman continuing to grow into herself.

It was summer 2009 when I went on a camping trip with friends before leaving for college, eager to say goodbye to our hometown. Now, in summer 2025, I am back home to launch an intergenerational Lao cultural dance series, the first of its kind in Worthington.

Funded by Minnesota's Coalition of Asian American Leaders' Ignite grant, the program brings together Lao youth and elders to learn traditional Lao dance, called Lamvong. We practice on the grounds of the local Lao temple, bugs and all. Even though it is hot and humid, people still show up. We have 20 youth and adult participants, gathering three times a week throughout the summer.

The youth and I are still getting to know each other, and the elders still treat me like I'm a kid, but the response from the community has been more than I imagined. Elders, youth, and community members are genuinely excited. You can feel it in the way people share meals and make time for one another.

Lamvong is a simple dance in structure. Doing it together — youth and elders side by side, moving in sync, across generations — we begin to feel what connection looks like in motion.

It's a way to explore culture through our bodies, to build confidence, to feel rooted in something bigger than ourselves. Dancing is both memory and presence — the way that tradition moves with us and through us.

This work is connected to everything I've done in the past decade in youth work, nonprofit spaces, and community organizing. Coming back home to Worthington now feels different. I'm showing up deeply grounded in my whole self with what I've learned while offering something I wish had existed when I was younger.

Sometimes being home feels like stepping into a time capsule, but I'm allowing myself to belong here. In the current state of the world — so heavy, so confusing — it feels healing to do something collective — rooted in culture, in people, and in movement. It doesn't make the hard things go away, but it helps carry them.

This program is more than dance. It is about making space for ourselves, our culture, and each other. It is for the Lao community in Worthington to be visible and to connect across generations. It is about feeling joy. MWP

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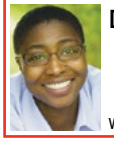
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Going Solo

ALL PHOTOS KAREN BABINE

written by Amelia Busse

"I don't know that my grandparents had any idea what to do with a grandchild with advanced degrees and a well-used passport instead of — and not in addition to — a husband and kids. I suspect it confused them greatly."

— Karen Babine, *The Allure of Elsewhere*

In her memoir *The Allure of Elsewhere*, Karen Babine explores a life-altering journey in which she sets out to track the landmarks of her French-Acadian ancestors as they settled in North America. From Minnesota to Nova Scotia, she ties her family's stories to real places. This is a noble endeavor on its own, but something somewhat unintended stood out to me.

As a teenager coming of age in the 21st century, I am aware of how independent women — even in 2025 — are feared if they prioritize their wants and needs.

At a bookstore reading, Karen Babine shared the process of how she has grown into a solo camper and writer, starting from the same place many women with big dreams do: unrest. As a young woman in the suburbs of Northern Minnesota, she realized that she was waiting for a "go ahead" — permission to live the life she wanted, solo. Babine turned to "scamping" — solo camping — to "find a freedom in everyday life."

In a moderated conversation at a Minneapolis bookstore, Babine highlighted the positive feedback she receives from other women scampers. Babine is clear in sharing that she did not take up scamping to "heal a broken heart" or "escape a breakup." Karen Babine scamps, as she writes in her book, because she wants to. "I realize that most people will never understand why I camp alone. It's not a freedom from — it's a freedom to, a freedom forward. To do everything because I want to."

She encouraged me, and anyone, to camp solo, "There are ways to scamp that make you feel very safe. It breaks you out of your sphere. You'll see things in entirely new ways."

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