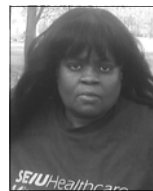


Worker Rights Workers Write

STORIES FROM SEIU HEALTHCARE ILLINOIS & INDIANA



real**conditions**

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About SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana

With more than 85,000 members, SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana is the largest and fastest growing union of healthcare and child care workers in the Midwest. SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana was founded in 2008 as a voice for quality care and quality jobs for home care, health systems, nursing home and child care workers across two states. Together, the members of SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana are fighting to raise standards across industries, to strengthen the political voice for working people and for access to quality, affordable care for all families.



About the Community Writing Project/Real Conditions

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers and publishes their reflections on everyday life in the magazine *Real Conditions*. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are particularly interested in the creative expressions and unique understandings of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them.

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realconditions

About the UIC School of Public Health

The School of Public Health provides education and training on worker health and safety issues to unions, worker centers and community organizations locally and around the country. Our training programs aid organizations in building leadership skills through a model of peer education and training. UIC has had the honor of working with SEIU on several peer education projects to advance the health of their members, including protection against blood borne pathogens and pandemic flu prevention. We are pleased to continue our collaboration with the union and the Community Writing Project, which began in the spring of 2010.



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The Writers

Mary Carter
Phyllis Clifford
Antonia Cotton
Flora Johnson
Gloria Johnson
Patricia Rowsey
Sherry Voight

Introduction

The stories you are about to read were written by members of SEIU Healthcare Illinois & Indiana who participated in a writing workshop in the fall of 2010. The workshop was sponsored by the union and facilitated by the Community Writing Project in collaboration with the UIC School of Public Health. By writing, sharing, and publishing stories based in their experiences, participants in the writing workshop have the opportunity to reflect together on their lives, recognize and celebrate the wisdom and creativity that reside within them, and make heard in the wider world the voices of people whose concerns and struggles don't receive enough attention or respect in American society.

This writing workshop was an experiment in using technology to bring members together who otherwise could not have participated in a writing group. Every week for four weeks, the group members talked with each other long distance by telephone from cities across Illinois and from St Louis, Missouri. Despite demanding jobs, family responsibilities and union commitments, the writers were willing to take on the challenges of the writing process. Each week they stayed on the line for two hours, generating writing topics through conversation, then writing stories, then sharing. As care takers by profession, they wrote movingly about caring for others and being cared for. As union activists, they wrote of obstacles and victories in their efforts to improve their working conditions and the lives of others. Throughout the month-long process of talking, writing, and sharing stories they never failed to support each other, responding with respect, compassion and mutual understanding. We invite you to enjoy the results of their hard work.

Marsha Love & Joe Zanoni,
UIC School of Public Health Facilitators for the Community Writing Project

Mary Carter



HELPING OTHERS

Growing up in Mississippi I watched my parents raise their crops, providing food for our community as well as surrounding communities. I grew up with a very large family. We all learned how to make our own clothing, and of course we learned how to use what we had. My mother helped raise some of her siblings. I also remember my mom's nieces and nephews living with us.

My mom was a home care worker. My sister and I used to go to work with my mom and watch how she would give her clients their baths, feed them and do their laundry. Watching my parents take care of others has made me appreciate the small things about life. It's not about what you do, but how you do it.

I now care for my day care children and their families with the love that my parents have shown me. I really enjoy my job. No matter how bad you think you have it, somebody has it worse; so, we must remember that we must show others that we love them and are concerned about their every day needs. Loving and giving makes us better people. Helping others is contagious.

One of my first jobs growing up was caring for an elderly white man. I was a young black girl, fourteen years old. I learned then how important family is. He didn't have one. He was all alone. I saw how much difference being there for an hour and a half with him made. You could see the sparkle in his eyes. You know, I never looked at it as a job for the money. I just wanted to be a caring person.

My children have watched me, and they understand how important it is to love and care for others. I have had a big impact on the choices they made. My boy is eleven and in the Scouts. Every week he does community service, and he really cares about the community. My daughter is twenty-four. She's a nurse. I listen to her stories all the time, and I can see

the passion in her eyes.

What my parents have given me, I've given to my children, and they will be able to pass on to their children.

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

Thinking back on how I became an active leader in my union, it started out when a group of providers that live and work in our village gave great care to our children in our homes. We all knew that there was a need for this business in our community, and a lot of home day care businesses started opening in Bellwood. We served a lot of people, including children of powerful people in the village who were getting the care that they needed.

The mayor and the trustees must have thought that we were making big bucks in this business. They wanted to charge us a lot of money to operate -- \$300 for a village license -- and they wanted some providers to get a sprinkler for their home which could have cost thousands of dollars. I knew that I could not afford the expense, and I was sure that other providers were in the same financial bind -- that we were all facing the same situation.

Maybe the village government thought we were too much competition for the day care centers that were already there. We wanted to advertise our business on our property by putting up a little sign in the window, but they said that we were in residential areas not zoned for business. They wanted to cap the number of home care providers by passing a city ordinance that no day care provider would be within 1,000 feet of another one. They also wanted to limit the number of children we could take care of. They said they were concerned about the safety of children in the home. Other villages also started to pass ordinances too, saying you could only take care of four or maybe six children, even though the State said we could care for eight.

We decided to organize to fight the village. We called on our SEIU family to help us fight this battle, because we could see that the mayor was determined to keep the number of day care providers down. Providers and parents marched with day care children. The union got the media out to cover it. We had to stick together like family in order to win this war. We fought hard and victory was ours. When the ordinance was passed, they grandfathered us in. Then came a time for us to take our action on the road, to the south side of Chicago, where we could take what we had experienced and share with other providers.

After my experience and winning our victory I became an active member in my union. I started going to Springfield to help the union lobby for different laws. When I go there, I always take my day care parents and children with me.

Phyllis Clifford



THEY SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE

When I met Alice they said she could not write. She could not drink out of a cup without a lid. She could barely feed herself. As we worked together, sometimes making a game of it, we learned from each other. She worked hard to learn to hold a fat pen and a cup. It took a long time to manage to hold the pen, and after a year-and-a-half I had her writing her name. Not real legible, shaky and crooked, but was readable to us.

Her husband of 37 years cried as he opened his birthday card with her signature on it. He knew how hard she worked on this. He was so happy that he just hugged her and said that was the best gift she had given him in years. And to this day he still has that card. She passed away on October 7, 2009. It feels so long ago but I remember it as if it were yesterday.

For her son's birthday we managed another feat they said could not be done. He came home from work and I said, "Your mom has a present for you out in the kitchen. Will you come with me?" He said, "Sure". Alice was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of pop in front of her. She was in her wheelchair and was trying to sing "Happy Birthday". He looked at the cup as Alice reached for it, and said, "No Mom, I will get the lid." I said, "This is your present."

She picked up the cup shakily and took a drink and set it back on the table. He said he had not seen his mom drink out of a cup without a lid for at least seven years. Alice stated that she and I could do anything, and he agreed. He was crying with joy as he gave me a hug and said that was the best present he ever got. I was surprised at the joy little things can bring others. Such as things we take for granted, like holding a pen, drinking from a cup without a lid. Obstacles that are small to some are enormous to others.

Alice and her husband had been married for 39 years when she passed and 31 years of that was in a wheelchair. Alice learned to write her name using my deceased mother's fat pen. My

mom had asked for a special pen for people with rheumatoid arthritis, and I asked Alice if she would honor me by using my mom's fat pen to learn to write again. She cried and said she would try. It took us a year-and-a-half, but she was determined to do this. We worked on this every day, and when she finally was ready to sign her husband's card with Mom's fat pen she signed her full name, including her maiden name, which was Alice Rosalie Marten Bruington, and that was more than anyone ever thought she would do. It amazed everyone. He has the card even to this day and has it in a frame.

I have my mom's fat pen, and now when I see it, I think of my mom and my best friend, equal in my eyes. I think of Alice often and always when I see a butterfly. As I see them flutter I say, "Hi Alice", sometimes to myself, but sometimes aloud.

ARBITRATION NIGHTMARE

On March 3rd, 2007 I was falsely accused of emotional abuse of my client Alice by her daughter, who called Alternatives for the Older Adults on me. She was very jealous of our relationship. Alice and I were very close after I had cared for her for twelve hours a day, seven days a week. She had M.S. and was bedridden. I worked on everything such as getting Alice a hospital bed, a Hoyer lift, correct medications.

When I started with Alice she had a bed sore the size of a soft ball. I wet packed this wound for six months. After that her husband had a new procedure done and it finally healed. Working together we got her up for awhile every day. I did this for seven years. Not for the pay, but because I loved Alice and she needed me to stand up for her.

Alice's husband would not fire me because he knew I would never hurt Alice in any way, and he and Alice stood beside me through the whole arbitration. He worked with his lawyer to do whatever he could to get me back and appealed through DORS, which did no good. I called my union, the union that stands by their members. I talked to several people until Jackie Rodriguez talked to me and told me she was going to send a grievance to the State. It seemed like months before the State denied the grievance. Then she went to the second stage. Again it felt like months and it was denied again. Jackie called me and said she was sending it to arbitration. So in the meantime I got a job with Addus Healthcare which gets all of their clients through, you guessed it, Alternatives for the Older Adults.

While I was going through the turmoil of this we had an Executive Board meeting where a lot of members from Illinois and Indiana joined us. Patti Rowsey and Glenda Hill and Sherry Voight took up a collection for me behind my back, as they knew not only was I about to lose my house but my power was to be shut off on that Monday. They collected enough money to pay the power bill plus a car payment, so I wouldn't lose my car.

Now one year later we finally got an arbitration judge and a date. The union got a lawyer for me. I was very glad I didn't have to be there alone. It was held in the DORS office in Galesburg where the person from the state worked. She testified that she had been notified by Alternatives for the Older Adults of the abuse I had caused to Alice and that Alternatives had

a complaint from a source -- they could not say who — because that person was protected.

Alice's husband, Alice's bath aide and Alice's doctor, all testified for me. For the State of Illinois was, of course, the DORS supervisor, the man from CMS that denied both grievances, and two other people from CMS.

The judge was a woman from Indiana. She read all the information in front of her and asked the witnesses of mine questions. She talked to Alice's doctor via phone. Under oath he testified that he knew how close Alice and I were and that her daughter was very jealous of our relationship. Then Alice's husband said the same thing, along with the bath aide. The judge said she would like to have much more information and she would take this back to her home and make her decision within two weeks. That was the longest two weeks of my life.

When Jackie called me she said we won and everything should be coming through soon. I was reinstated. Everything that was said about me was taken out of my record and I would be receiving a check from the comptroller for lost wages over the year. I could go back to work for Alice, but I never got there as her caregiver again. I only went there as a friend, as I had a problem with her daughter. Before Alice passed away, I promised her I would forgive her daughter. I have forgiven her but I can never forget what she did to me and her mom.

So I ended up with being fully reinstated by the State, all back pay until I got my Addus job, but they had to pay the difference in the pay amount. So I ended up with \$33,000 before taxes. My final check was for \$17,000. The DORS supervisor resigned her job for jumping the gun and for firing me without asking what really happened.

I know I would never have made it through this nightmare without my union, my family, SEIU Illinois & Indiana, and the people who testified for me and most of all, my butterfly, Alice.

Antonia Cotton



STARTING POINT

I was the director of *Second to Mom Daycare*. The parents I worked with started suggesting that they wished they could find a more homey environment for their small babies to get more one to one care. I asked the parents if I pursue this project would they patronize my establishment. They started a waiting list.

The daycare I ran went out of business. This left me free reins to pursue my plans for a home based daycare. It took about six months from that date. I opened Jan. 1, 1996. It was me and my husband. He helped me in daytime and worked second shift at his job. He passed away in 1997.

The parents on my waiting list were my first clients. Three of them became clients before I even got my license. Then some of the others became my clients after I received my license. To this day some of my parents call to get friends and family into my day care.

I hired two young ladies, but they didn't work out. One left after four hours. People don't want to work right. They have an attitude that I don't want to have with my babies. I counted 52 children I have taken care of over the years.

Do I want to get bigger? No. That's why I started. I wanted to make it more personal and homey. When infants and toddlers are initiated in learning, they would be at ease and ready for it. That's why I got into home day care for a home like environment to learn in.

PUSH PAST OUR PAIN

Right now I'm not able to focus. I'm having problems with my asthma. My head is thumping like a drum. It's like my body is at war with itself. I can't keep a clear enough thought to make sense on paper.

My head feels like it's a balloon swelling up not quite ready to pop, but close. With a headache like pain edging down my neck into my shoulders resting there like heavy weight. This is where it's stopped, so far just waiting for it to decide what's going to happen next. I'm sorry this is all I can get tonight. Better next time. Maybe I will come up with something tomorrow.

— *Antonia Cotton*



Flora Johnson



MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION

This Sunday I didn't go to church. I said to myself the devil is really busy today. I just could not get ready on time for church so I stayed home. I didn't know that God had work for me to do and it was not at church.

My son's friend came by to work on his car. I cooked my dinner, went upstairs to get some rest. I was woken up by loud screaming: "Flo, come quickly. Alvin is real sick." I ran outside to the garage where Alvin was lying on the ground. Everyone was standing there frozen. I asked them to bring him in the house. At that time I asked him did he want to go to the E.R. He said, "No." I said to him, "You need to go to the hospital." He was getting weaker and weaker so I stood still and looked at him. I went to the phone and dialed 911. The paramedic came, put IV in his arm and rushed him to the hospital where had emergency surgery. His intestine was leaking poison fluids in his stomach.

This happened Sunday, September 26th about 1 p.m. He had surgery at 7:30 p.m. . Thank God for saving his life by me being at home. That was one of God's miracles.

TAKING CARE OF PEOPLE

I get joy out of listening to people with challenges telling their story; my son Kenneth always makes me feel uplifted. It makes me feel sad when I see people with challenges being treated so unfair. It hurts to hear how people treat the different like they are unhuman.

Kenneth is a great motivation. He will say to me “ Flo, don’t feel sad for people with disabilities. We can deal with our challenges. Feel pity for them that’s making fun of us. If by chance, they get in the same shape we are, they could not handle it.”

So be blessed, thank God, and He will take care of you.

— *Flora Johnson*

MORE ABOUT MY MOVE TO CHICAGO FROM MISSISSIPPI

In my first writing I did not include my oldest child Thelma. She was born when I was 16-years-old. My mother and father took care of her, so I could finish my education.

Thelma stayed in Shelby, Mississippi, until my parents passed away. At that time I asked her to come to Chicago to live with me and her sisters and brothers. By that time she was 17-years-old and had plans of her own. She was engaged to Roosevelt Hayward. They got married, and to this union seven children were born.

She told me it was okay, but I knew it hurt her that she was not included in my story. I want to let her know that I am asking her for forgiveness: “Baby, it was a mistake.” And also my grand children: “ I don’t want you to feel I slighted your mother. I know you just feel hurt. I know you do. From my heart, I want you to know I love you all.”

— *Flora Johnson*

Gloria Johnson



THINKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

I started working with Missouri Homecare approximately three years ago. A family member got ill, and so I had to resign from my job as an educator to be a care giver. A few months later a group of union organizers came to my home, expressing that they were in the process of forming a union here in Missouri to fight for a fair contract that protects attendants and our consumers to have a voice for quality home care. I told the union organizers, “You can count me in. I’m going to do my part to win the dignity and respect we deserve!”

I started attending meetings. We were learning about the issues, the background of forming a union and about how to network with each other, and what the organizers expected out of us. We did quite a bit of phone banking to get people to network with us.

I did door knocking with the organizers too. We told people that two hours was not enough time to care for anybody. They need four hours or more. We talked about the rate of pay -- a lot of people were getting minimum wage, no more than \$8.50 per hour.

I and a couple of the union organizers organized a community meeting at a library, to get more people involved. A lot of people came out, 50 or 75 people. They gave testimony about the issues their participants were dealing with and the working conditions of the agencies they were working for. Participants wanted to stay home, but the state wanted more people to go into nursing homes. We wanted a voice to have participants choose to stay at home or go to a nursing facility. If you stay at home, it’s one-on-one service. In a nursing home there are too many people. They’re overcrowded. There was another issue too: Some of the agencies even wanted to hire their own folks to give care to the participants.

Lawmakers -- state senators and politicians — came to the community meeting. We weren’t expecting that many to come. They were excited. They said, “We don’t get that kind of turnout

at our meetings.” We asked for their support, and they gave it, because some of their families used consumer directed care themselves.

We did great networking, not only for St. Louis, but other cities in the state too. It took about a year to get the union formed. It could have been sooner, but the state made us do a second election.

We’ve had some obstacles. After the election, the new governor wanted to put back the hours, and the state wanted additional pay cuts. I thought we had that straightened out, but we have got to fight for that again. So we have been going back to Jefferson City. It’s worth it.

We’re in a court fight too. They’re saying that they can’t make a contract. We don’t expect the governor to help. And now that the Democrats have lost seats, we’re expecting the Republicans to be disagreeable. There will be a fight there. We’ve got a lot on our plates.



Patricia Rowsey



MY CLIENT, MY FRIEND

I was asked to go to the Montebello nursing home with two other personal assistants to meet with a woman who was looking for someone to take care of her in her home when she was released. That was the only way she could go back home and be with her family. We all got interviewed. I was called and was told she wanted me. She had a lot of medical problems and was on oxygen 24/7. Besides, she was a big person with special needs. I told her I would love to do it, but I had been previously hurt and off work for quite a while and doing physical therapy myself while working as a CNA in a nursing home and that I couldn't do any heavy lifting. That's why I went into home care. I didn't know if it would work out or not, that if I got hurt it wouldn't do her any good or be able to take care of my family either. But, the more we talked, the more I decided I didn't want to let her down. I knew she wanted to be in her own home where she worked so hard for and to be with her family. So I said, "Yes" and that I would give it my best to see if I could handle it.

It worked out, and I was with her three years. She had physical therapy come to the house, and I helped the therapist work with her. Her doctor also made house calls for her. She was able to finally get an electric Hoyer lift and electric wheel chair, so we could get her out of bed for a little bit.

We came up with a routine. I would help to get her on her side so I could change the bed, bathe her, etc. She helped by rolling from side to side, using her arms and pulling herself over using the hand rails. She always did her best to keep me from getting hurt. I washed her hair, curled her hair, bathed her in bed, as well as dress her and talked her into putting on make up and cologne. She loved Avon and wore it a lot. I told her it would make her feel better, just because she was bedridden didn't mean she couldn't feel like a woman anymore, that she was a beautiful person. When her husband got home from work he noticed the difference and

acknowledged it. He was always there for her no matter what.

She was always doing things for people and her family, even with her condition. It was important to her to feel she could still do her part, even though she was bed ridden. She would make up the menu for supper while her husband was at work. I would set up the items and ingredients and take them into the bedroom while she was lying on her side with her oxygen on. I would sit on the bed with her; she would help me peel potatoes, or cut up apples and put red hot cinnamon pieces over the apples and simmer them, or help me make desserts and dishes. I would wash the laundry and dry it and put it in the clothes basket and bring it into the bedroom, and she would help me to fold it up.

She loved to sit by the window after her bath, so I could change the bed while she watched the leaves blow in the wind, listen to the birds sing, look at the pretty flowers, and feel the breeze come through the window. But, she always felt uncomfortable to go out because of her size. I told her, "It's not what you look like on the outside but it's what's in your heart." And she had a heart of gold.

She had been active all her life until her illness. She loved cooking, making crafts, and she also was a seamstress. She made her daughter's wedding dress. She was in the hospital the day her daughter was to be married, and she didn't want to miss it. After persuading the doctor, he let her go to the wedding in a wheel chair, IV and all. But after the wedding she had to go back to the hospital.

We worked on crafts together, and we decorated the house for the holidays. She would tell me what to do, and as I decorated, she would watch. At Christmastime we would sing Christmas songs together. She loved to sing. She knew I played music and sang in a band, that I played the keyboard and fiddle, that my husband played the drums and that my brother played the guitar. Whenever we practiced in the garage and taped it, she wanted me to bring the tape over. She would listen to it and we would sing the songs together if she knew them. She loved to sing church songs also.

You know, it was a job, but it wasn't to me. I felt she was there for me no matter what, just as I was for her. Our families were involved with each other in ways I didn't even know about at first, until we got to talking. It turned out she knew my grand-daughter when she was a baby, and her husband used to play ball with my grand daughter's daddy when they were kids. She got to know my children and loved them, and they thought a lot of her. I have a severe diabetic son, and so was she. He was in and out of the hospital and intensive care a lot at that time. She always knew what to say when times were rough.

As her condition got worse she ended up with a couple kinds of staph infections. The odor became more noticeable and the liquid was seeping through her skin making it more difficult to keep her clean and dry. She knew she was getting worse but didn't really want to go to the hospital. It was so hard to see her go through this, and I told her I had to notify the doctor and let him know. I had no choice. I gathered up all the things from the bed and double bagged them to take to the doctor's office. I called the doctor on my cell phone and told him what was going on. He said, "Get her to the hospital." I told him she really didn't want to go, but he said she had to right away. I broke the news to her, then called her husband Danny and daughter Kim to let them know what was going on. As she was getting ready to go to the hospital she

looked at me and said, “You know I won’t be coming back.” That hit me hard. I said, “I don’t really want to hear that”. What she wanted was to be home with family and friends who cared and loved her.

Since I wasn’t working while she was in the hospital, I would drop in and see her and try and get her to eat and try and cheer her up. She was giving up, because she knew she wasn’t getting any better. It was hard to see her do it. She was eventually put in intensive care and ended up on a breathing machine to keep her alive. Needless to say, she couldn’t talk. I would wash her face, hold her hand. I told her I missed the laughs and talks we had, and that I knew she could hear me and that I was going to run my mouth. I wanted her to know we could still communicate; I told her I wanted for her to blink once for yes and twice for no if she heard me. And she did. I know it had to make her feel good; it was the bond we had together. The nurse told me she hadn’t communicated with anyone when they took care of her. I told them that you have to know how to communicate, even when someone can’t talk.

The doctor called the family for a conference at the hospital. Her daughter called me at home and said she and her dad would like it if I would come to the hospital and be there with them. I told her “Honey, this is for family, and I’m not really family.” They told me I probably knew her better than both of them and that they wanted me there. It made me feel so good to know I made an impact on all their lives for them to consider me as family.

Some of her church friends and minister had come for her last rights. The decision was made to take her off of life support and let her go in peace. She was on medication, so she wasn’t in any pain. We all gathered around her bed side and held hands as the minister talked. She loved the church song “Amazing Grace”. We all stood there in a circle and sang “Amazing Grace” to her as we held hands, and then one by one we all said our good byes as she was taking her last breaths. She went in peace.

I have a wreath she had given me for Christmas one year. When I was leaving one evening from work, she told me I forgot something. I told her, “ No, I have everything.” She asked me to go get that wreath, that they wanted me to have it. I said I wasn’t really supposed to take it, but she said it was something that they really wanted to do and it would mean a lot to them if I did. So I did. She had three angels put on it with burgundy ribbon. It says, “Love, Peace and Joy”. To this day it is still hanging on my door on the inside all year around, because it carries on what she had in her heart for other people.

I wrote a special poem after I had came home from the hospital and read it at her funeral. She had made an impression on my heart, and I wanted others to know the special person she was and of the legacy she had left behind for others.

Eva

I had a special friend
Who was very close to me
Her words of comfort that she gave
She put a smile upon your face

Though rough times she did have
She put them all aside
For all the little things she done
And thru the battles she had won

Her faith in God did guide her
And helped her thru each day
Her love she showed to other's
All along life's troubled way

The wisdom that she left behind
In her one could confide
Her strength she gave to others
As she took things in stride

The teachings that she left behind
Many crafts she made and gave
She lived her fullest day by day
In her very special ways

Thru lives she touched all thru the years
Here on earth her work is done
An angel now she has become
As her memories continue on

— *Patricia Rowsey*

PASSING ON

It's so hard to see a loved one or friend pass on. I was with my mother and also her dad when he passed on. I was always close to my family growing up. We always went to each other's house to visit and have family gatherings. Both of my grandfathers were easygoing and I never heard them have a harsh word for anyone that I knew of. I remember my grandma fixing my hair, working in the garden and snapping and fixing green beans from the garden or working with flowers. I remember the out houses, the pot belly wood stoves in their home. It wasn't always easy for them but they always stood by each other and even shared homes at times. My mother took care of her two sisters who died of cancer. One was a registered nurse.

My Grandpa Miller, my mother's dad, had a chair by a window with a big tall wooden radio by it. I would sit on his lap and look outside at his truck and listen to the radio with him. Sometimes I would sneak out and get in his truck and listen to his radio. He would say, "Come back in the house and sit with me and listen to the radio, so you don't run Grandpa's battery down."

Grandpa had to go to the doctor one day and my mother, myself, and my grandma was with him. I was three years old, when he passed away in 1953. We were sitting in a large room. There was an old pump up dentist chair in the middle of the room with glass cabinets across the walls and cabinets underneath and a towel rack on the wall to the side. Not a whole lot in it. I don't remember exactly how long we had been there, but Grandpa looked at me and asked me if I would like a piece of gum. I said, "Yes." So he gave me one but told me to not to swallow it. And I said I wouldn't. He said after that that if the doctor doesn't hurry up that he

was going to go home. My grandpa bowed his head and didn't respond to anyone. I remember my family running to get wet towels and put on him and getting the doctor but it was too late -- he had already passed away. I remember being at his grave site and talking to him. My mom saw that I didn't want to leave and let me sit there at the grave until I felt comfortable leaving.

I was there before my mom passed too. I saw her reaching to heaven in her sleep at the hospital when I was taking my turn sitting with her after work. Then she would slowly put her arms and hands back down by her side on the bed. She did this a few times, then started making some sounds. As I was watching her I jumped up and rubbed her chest and asked her if she was having chest pains, because she had congestive heart failure among many other things and suffered a lot. When I said, "Mama" and looked at her, she heard me and opened up her eyes and stared at me. I said, "Mama are you ok?" I knew she had previously been reaching to heaven to her loved ones and was communicating with them. I believe that. But she couldn't respond, and I knew we were losing her. As she stared at me I said crying, "Don't go, Mama. We love you. I am getting the nurse." I saw her pretty blue eyes, but there was a white haze on them. I knew as she was looking at me she was in transformation of leaving this earth and on her way to a better place with no suffering. But with tears in my eyes the nurse asked me if I wanted them to revive her. I said, "Yes, I do, but that's not what she wanted. So, no." And she was gone. She had no pulse or blood pressure.

It was so hard to call and tell my sister and brother about our mom. They had been with her earlier. They wanted to be with her and see her again before it happened but there was no time. But they got to the hospital before the funeral home came and they said their good byes. I was the last one my mom saw before the good Lord took her home. The owner of the funeral home told me my mama took me with her when she looked at me as I called her name, then closed her eyes. God chose me to be with my mom and her dad when they passed on, and it's something I will never forget.

No one knows what life is going to throw at us, but we have to have the strength to carry on their legacies they leave behind and cherish the memories we have shared throughout our years with our family and grandchildren. But they are never forgotten or far away. They taught us to believe, work hard and fight for what is right. They enjoyed life.

Sherry Voight



MY LIFE

My name is Sherry Voight (Hoffman). I was born in Joliet, Illinois. I have six siblings and including my half sister, there would be seven with myself. I've come from a broken family where us siblings were divided up between my parents so we really never got to know one another. Although I've tried very hard to keep in touch with my siblings, they've just drifted.

With saying all of that, I grew up fast, married young, had two children, and sad to say my marriage failed after twelve years. My husband quoted we were in the way of his career. We had two beautiful children and I promised myself my children weren't going through what we did as children.

A few years later, I had met another gentleman, had another daughter, and I didn't want to make the same mistake again, so with given the time of eight years, I did remarry. It was so meant to be.

So with having this daughter, we were blessed with a miracle. She was born with congenital glaucoma and hydrocephalus. We had a lot to deal with and we made it through and are still going strong.

My husband had two daughters, and I had one daughter and a son, then we had one daughter together so we had five kids, and they all got along pretty well. We spent the first twelve years of our daughter's life at Children's Memorial hauling the other four right along.

In the meantime, I was reconnecting with my father through the past years because I was one of the three siblings that resided with my mother. The other three had resided with my father. My stepmother made it very hard for me to do so, but I continued, I wasn't giving up.

My father really liked my husband and was pretty proud of us.

Then my father's health was failing him, he was getting worse. He had numerous heart attacks and heart surgeries throughout the years. I had made sure I spoke with him by phone every day even though I couldn't see him as often as I wanted to. My father helped me a lot, just keeping me strong whenever I needed to be. I became a stronger person, thanks to my stepfather and father.

After my father's last surgery, he was getting frail and weak, he had lost a lot of weight. He began falling a lot, then the memory started failing him. His last stay in the hospital was a little over a week. I was there every day.

My stepmother wasn't keeping me from going up there to see him. She'd talk about him as if he wasn't there and about placing him in a nursing home. She'd remind me, he's not the same. He's not the father you knew.

I just reminded her, he'll always be my father. I wanted so much to help her at home with him, but she denied me that. He was released, sent home, and he wasn't even home a week, when he passed.

After he had passed, my stepmother called, asked me to be there after his passing. I didn't go. I was never welcomed there any other time. I wanted to remember him as the last time I was with him and how I knew him.

We went to the wake and his funeral, and looking at the photos, there was not one photo of his own children, and grandchildren. There were only pictures of her side of the family.

I was so darn mad, I thought I was going to blow up at his funeral. Very upset, I kept it under control, took out a poem I had written, and the pastor read it. She didn't approve, but I needed everyone to know how I felt. I was there to celebrate his life and I treasured my time spent with him.

All these years, we were never welcome, especially after our last child was born. She treated her like she had a sickness. My father and I had made amends between us, I felt so much better.

I've learned if you have loved ones and you want them to know how you feel, don't ever let anyone stand in your path. Let them know how you feel, no matter what.

MY FATHER IN HEAVEN

My father will spend Christmas in heaven this year
He will be looking down upon us, watching
Watching from above, the snow so white and pure
My father along side of me just walking

I knew my father as one of the best
He had a glow about him, and a heart of gold
My father will be truly missed by us
He was always the way I want to be when I grow old

He never ever doubted you, in anything you did
He had faith, love and encouragement
From the beginning to the very end
Without him, the holidays will never have the same excitement

My father truly cared about everyone around him
I know everyone who knew him, would say that is true
My father had to express two loves, them and his children
He'll be looking down at all of us through the sky so blue

I'll truly miss my father, now that he's at peace
My father's free now, and most of all free of pain
He doesn't have to worry no more, making peace
For my father loved everyone, as I've always loved him

On the holidays, he'll always be in my heart
Everyday I'll be thinking of him often
As the days go by, and wintry Christmas will be especially hard
He passed a week before Christmas, and the day his mom was born
on

He will be spending Christmas in heaven
Celebrating with his kin, and his mother
Looking down upon their loved ones
From this day on, I am truly going to miss my father

— *Sherry Voight*

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