

At Stonington storytelling event, women speak to their past selves for posterity

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By Ray Routhier

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When Anne West first moved to Deer Isle about 15 years ago, she felt lost.

She was a new mother living in a new town, and her father, who was just 58, had recently died of a heart attack.

IF YOU GO

WHEN: 7 p.m. on Jan. 28

WHERE: Stonington Opera House, School and Main streets, Stonington.

HOW MUCH: \$20

INFO: operahousearts.org

WHAT ELSE: The event will also be livestreamed and the link is available at operahousearts.org.

“I had no idea I was going to get through that time, living in a new place where nobody knew him or me,” said West, 45, who runs the Island Health and Wellness Foundation on Deer Isle. “I want to tell the people of the island now, ‘You guys have no idea what a damaged human being existed in your midst. But whatever you did, you healed me.’ ”

West will get to share that thought, and more, live on Jan. 28 during an annual event called Island Women Speak at the Stonington Opera House on Deer Isle. She’ll be one of six island women from different age groups – one in each decade of life, from their 20s into their 70s – who will tell a story of their personal journey.

In a format similar to The Moth, a storytelling organization that puts on events around the country, each woman will have about five minutes to tell her tale. All of the stories, which the women are allowed to write out and read from, are connected through the theme “advice to my younger self.”

The event will also be livestreamed through the website of Opera House Arts, the presenter, and will be available to anyone on or off Deer Isle. To see the show in person, audience members must show proof they’re fully vaccinated and are required to wear masks, according to the [Opera House Arts website](#). Tickets are \$20.



The Stonington Opera House, center, will host Island Women Speak on Jan. 28. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

Island Women Speak was created in 2018 by Debbie Weil, a former journalist who covered politics in Washington, D.C., and is now a writing coach, editor and podcaster. She came up with the idea while living temporarily in Brooklyn, New York, a few years ago. She had been taking a public speaking class and then heard about an event called Generation Women, which uses the same basic idea Weil would later adapt for Island Women Speak.

She began her segment on stage with the line “I’m 65, and I still have sex.”

“The audience went wild. It was mostly younger people, and I guess that was news to them,” said Weil, 70. “I was captivated by the idea of hearing all these women’s stories. They had so much in common, but they were so different because they were at very different stages of life.”

But finding six or eight women to speak at an event in New York City is probably a lot easier than finding that number in a place like Deer Isle, about 30 miles southwest of Ellsworth. The two towns on the island – Stonington and Deer Isle – have a combined year-round population of about 3,000.

“Some people I ask are scared to get on stage and think they could never do this,” said Weil, who helps the women edit and craft their writing. “But once you get the story and rehearse it, it’s not that hard.”

This year’s event will be the fifth. It was canceled in 2021 because of COVID-19.



Director Debbie Weil, right, reads over the story that Cathy Boyce, left, will read for the performance of Island Women Speak. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

One of this year's participants, Kira Jones, 28, said the idea for the story came easily to her. It began about six years ago when she was working at Deer Isle coffee shop, 44 North Coffee. She had been invited to a gathering on the island where a woman in her 60s began talking to Jones about her plan for the future. Jones, who had recently graduated from the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, didn't really have one.

"She told me I was wasting my life and would never do amazing things without a plan," said Jones, who has an 18-month-old son and works as membership coordinator for the Blue Hill Peninsula Chamber of Commerce. "It made me pause, I don't even remember responding I was so taken aback."

But soon Jones realized she was doing what was right for her, not making a formal plan for her life but instead trusting her instincts and exploring the paths and opportunities she could find by being open-minded. In those six years, she's traveled with her husband, tried several jobs and began raising a child.

So what she wants to tell her younger self – about six years younger – is to trust herself to try different things and find what she needs and loves without following some written-in-stone plan. She says she's not "a huge public speaker" so is not sure how she'll do reading her story to an audience. But she's hoping it might be enlightening or relatable to other people.

Buzz Masters, 64, is a painter who also works as an EMT and runs a free service on the island that helps people with medical needs. She's decided to take a slightly different approach to her talk at Island Women Speak. She says she really doesn't have much to tell her younger self, because she really wouldn't want to change anything about the way her life has gone.

So her talk will be more about the power of hope than any one specific piece of advice to herself, she said, except for this: Always eat the free pie.

Masters said her talk stems from time she spent in Iowa, where she went to college and used to live. While living there and seeing tornadoes firsthand, she developed a terrible fear of the natural disasters. But on one visit to a friend in Iowa, she was inspired by a trip to a local restaurant. She and her friend took the friend's mother, who was in her 90s, to the Village Inn in Cedar Falls to partake of their free pie Wednesday.

"I saw all these farmers. Farming is like fishing, it's tough and you don't know what's going to happen. But they stick with it, and they go out there with this hope that it's going to be a good day. And every Wednesday, there's free pie," said Masters. "So I guess my advice is always eat the free pie."



Deer Isle women will share their stories with the community at Island Women Speak on Jan. 28. From left are Kira Jones, 28, Buzz Masters, 64, Cathy Boyce, 71, and director Debbie Weil, 70. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

West, the speaker in her 40s, said part of the reason she wanted to participate in Island Women Speak is that she thinks storytelling is an important part of a community. She worries that as the island's population gets older, their stories won't be passed down. So by having an annual storytelling event, the stories can be heard and shared by others.

The nonprofit that West runs owns the building that houses a medical and dental practice for islanders and provides grants that support health services and health care on the island. In her job, she says, it's important to understand people need their "authentic voice" to be heard. That's another reason she thinks the idea of storytelling and finding one's voice is so important.

West, a native of Searsport, said her talk at Island Women Speak will be a love letter to the island. She started to feel more at home there when she realized that the fishermen she met had a lot in common with woodcutters and people who make their living off the woods, like her father did. And that one of the things she loved about growing up in Searsport – that everyone knew her and her family wherever she went – was becoming true on Deer Isle, too.

“The physical appearance of woodcutters and fishermen are similar, with their strong hands, and soon I saw my dad’s hands everywhere,” said West. “To me, the biggest gift I’ve ever known is to live someplace where everybody knew me. It got to be that way on the island too, and I loved that. I love that if I needed some milk at the store it would take 45 minutes, because I’d run into so many people to talk to.”

So her message to her younger self would be to not worry about being away from your home during a time of upheaval, because you’re going to find a new one.

“It’s going to be OK, you’re going to find a community of people who are going to understand your grief, and you’re going to end up feeling more at home here than you ever did in Searsport,” West said.

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