



EMPATHY

BASED ON AN INTERVIEW BY ERICA WALSH

JENNIE BROWN SAT IN HER MODEST OFFICE. ON THE DESK WAS A PRESS RELEASE FOR BROWN'S LATEST TRIUMPH, HER SOON TO BE PUBLISHED BOOK, *BLUE MOON RISING: KENTUCKY WOMEN IN TRANSITION*. THE PRESS RELEASE FOR *BLUE MOON RISING* ADVERTISES THE BOOK AS THE INSPIRING STORIES OF 21 WOMEN. FOR BROWN, IT WAS THE CULMINATION OF A YEAR'S WORK. "I WAS TRULY AWED BY THEIR COURAGE AND PERSEVERANCE" SHE SAID.

Brown said the inspiration for her book came from a student in a literature class Brown taught at the Community College. Brown said, "She asked me if I would read her story because it was the reason she was in college at her age (45). She said she was pursuing a degree in criminal justice because her grandson had been murdered by her daughter's new husband, just six months after the wedding." During the same semester, another student shared her story with Brown. "She was faced with many challenges," Brown said, "including being the adopted child of illiterate parents, an early marriage, two children, and periods of poverty."

One morning, while talking with the two women, Brown conceived the idea of collecting other stories that would inspire women to seek an education. Her objective was to generate a book detailing the experiences of women in Kentucky who had overcome tragedy, misfortune, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to not only survive but to make positive transitions in their lives. Brown applied for a sabbatical leave and it was granted for the 1999/2000 school year. She said, "I am grateful to Western for granting me a sabbatical leave. The nature of the project required me to not only find the subjects I interviewed but to give them time to know and trust me. That required spending several days in various locations. The process was too time consuming, and required too much travel to accomplish it during a normal teaching year. I interviewed over thirty women, and wrote their stories before choosing the 21 that are included in the book.

"Additionally," Brown said, "I was fortunate to be able to partially cover my costs through assistance I received from the Faculty Scholarship Council."

In June of 1999, Brown began traveling around Ken-

tucky, searching for women with stories to tell. She didn't have any trouble finding them. The women Brown talked with were eager to share their experiences. Nearly all of them indicated that not only did they want to be heard, but they wanted their story to inspire other women. The most common response was, 'If I can just help one other woman who reads my story and knows she isn't alone, knows she can change her life, then it will be worth it.'

Brown met with each of the subjects and audiotaped



their stories. In some cases, she collected and edited the narratives of women who chose to write their own accounts. After the stories were written, edited, and in final form, the women were contacted again so they could give final approval. Brown says, "It was important that the women told their stories in their own words, that it was their voice that came through. These are messages from courageous and caring women. These are not stories of what happened to these women as much as they are stories of what these women made happen in their own lives. They made positive changes to create a better future for themselves and their families. That, and the fact that the common denominator was education, is where the emphasis should be placed."

She profiles women who have survived abusive relationships, women who have lived in abandoned buses, women who have overcome illness and injury. Some fought sexual or racial harassment; others struggled as single mothers without the support of family or friends. One woman went into the ministry in mid-life; another woman left the ministry in mid-life. Several decided to fulfill their dream of a college education after a lifetime of hard work and dedication to raising a family. None of them had it easy.

Brown said, "I've gone through a lot of difficult times but nothing compares to what they've been through. I've never been hit, never been homeless, never encountered the prejudice or violence that they have. It takes raw courage to speak out like they did."

Brown was born in South Dakota but grew up in Wyoming. She spent her early years on a sheep ranch, and lived briefly on a cattle ranch before her family settled in Casper, Wyoming, where she attended school. "Growing up in Wyoming, the first virtue you're taught is self-reliance," she said. "You grow up a different person there." Brown learned the advantages of growing up around strong women like her mother and others in the community. "I never labeled myself as a feminist, or as liberated,

because I never knew any women who weren't" she said. "The women I knew were equal partners with their husbands and respected as individuals. It took me a while to grasp that in other areas and in other cultures many women are expected to serve and submit, but otherwise keep their mouths shut."

Prior to entering college, she worked at various jobs, usually bookkeeping or secretarial in nature. For two years, she was employed with the U.S. Geological Survey, first in Oil and Gas Leasing, then in the Mineral Classification Branch. Her favorite experience was the two and a

half years she worked with the police department in Casper, Wyoming, where she served as Clerk of Municipal Court, frequently acting as bailiff.

Brown attended the University of Colorado and received a bachelor's degree in English and the Broad Field of Social Studies, then a master's degree in English Education with an emphasis on Reading Instruction and Bicultural Education. Since coming to Western, she has acquired fifteen additional hours in English.

Brown began her teaching career in Denver, Colorado. Next, she taught English composition part time at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1982, she moved to the

west coast, where she taught in community colleges in Santa Barbara, California, and Seattle, Washington, before coming to the Hill in 1991.

She was originally hired to teach English and coordinate a Reading and Study Skills program for the Community College at Western. Currently, she is an assistant professor of English and teaches creative writing. In 1997, she was the first member of the Bowling Green Community College faculty to receive a teaching award from the university.

Jean Nehm, one of Brown's colleagues, said she wasn't surprised by Brown's achievement.

"It's easy to see why she won," Nehm said. "She loves

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PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH



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to walk in the classroom, but more than just that, she cares about her students and their accomplishments.”

After completing her sabbatical, and the book, Brown came back to the Hill ready to do more. She is establishing the WIT (Women in Transition) center at the Community College. “It has been a very successful and supportive organization on the main campus for a long time,” she said, “but now it is needed at the South Campus as well. Many women entering school are coping with working, going to school, and raising a family. WIT eases the way.” Brown said the program is a great asset, especially to nontraditional students.

Brown believes a key part of the support is having a place where the members can share their concerns with their peers. Additionally, something as small as a refrigerator or coffee maker can make a big impact in making women feel comfortable. “Nontraditional women students are often pressed for time. Having information available on campus services, a telephone with an answering machine where they can receive or leave messages, and a quiet place to maximize their limited study time can make a significant difference.”

The women are the ones that really make the program work, Brown indicated, and she is impressed with each of the women she meets.

“They’re so motivated,” she said.

“I can tell she has a special empathy for women in transition,” Nehm said of her friend. “She’s very passionate about getting their voices heard.”

Now that Brown is back at Western, she’s concentrat-

ing on her teaching. “She’s really focused,” Nehm said.

For three years, Brown not only taught but held the position of Interim Head of Academic Support. Next, she served as Head of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the Community College, but she chose to return to full time teaching. “In administrative work, you spend so much time on clerical work,” she said, “it leaves little time for the students.”

Nehm said Brown was involved in her teaching because of the students she gets to meet and teach. “She’s willing to share any amount of time,” she said. “She is very concerned about the student as a person, not just their work.”

Brown shares many of her own experiences with her students, hoping that they will learn from them. She has traveled extensively and endeavors to provide her students with a global vision as well as a greater understanding of their own potential and options. She said that many of her students show a lot of promise.

“Many of them are better writers than I am,” she said, grinning.

Spending so much time with her students doesn’t allow Brown much time to work on her own writing. “I don’t get much writing done during the teaching year,” she said.

Still, Brown has managed to complete two other non-fiction books. One, set in Montana in 1899, recounts a murder, a patricide, a double execution, and frontier justice. Brown says she is still revising it.

Before beginning her sabbatical, she finished another manuscript that she is hoping to place with a publishing house soon. Titled *A Chance of Today*, it is a limited biography of her parent’s life during a fifteen-year period. Set primarily on a sheep ranch near Aladdin, Wyoming, and an army ordnance depot in South Dakota (near the Pineridge Indian Reservation), the book recounts their struggle for survival during a period when they took in two feral children and had two children of their own. The story chronicles not only their daily life and their son’s tragic illness, but, on a larger scale, the climate of the Great Depression and the constraints and sorrows of World War II. Their life during that fifteen years was one of adventure, tragedy, comedy, and great love, although at time that love was strained to the breaking point.

Brown is a member of IWWG (International Women’s Writing Guild) and will speak in April 2001 at a “Meet the Authors” weekend in New York City. She credits her involvement with the guild to a former professor at Western, Dr. Pat Carr, who is active in the IWWG. Brown says that Carr has been both a friend and a writing mentor. “Her encouragement has been very valuable.”

She also said she is planning her next literary project. “I’m very interested in the big novel,” she said laughing. “It’s there and I’m eager to start writing it.”