

Students gain new outlook on writing

Author Beth Finke shares how blindness uniquely shaped her as a writer and a person

By Ken Knutson

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Author and writing coach Beth Finke began her visit at Clarendon Hills Middle School with a daunting prompt for her sixth-grade audience.

"I want you to write your life story in 12 words," instructed the Elmhurst native.

After a couple of the concise compositions were shared, Finke revised the challenge.

"Now, all of you, cut it down to six."

Six words were then shaved to three; three were distilled to one. Students spoke their minimalist memoirs.

"Family," said a few.

"Youngest," said another. "Legos." "Beast." "Love."

Impressed, Finke told them that the seniors in her memoir writing courses get the same treatment.

"That little exercise is all about editing, and I give it to the grown-ups in my classes all the time as I try to teach them to keep their essays down to 500 words," she said.

Finke, 58, had to learn that less can be more in a profound way at the age of 26. She and her husband were on their honeymoon in 1985 in Edinburgh when she started seeing spots. Back in Chicago, the devastating diagnosis was retinopathy, a consequence of the type 1 diabetes she'd battled since childhood. Finke would soon lose her vision entirely.

A student asked about the last thing she remembers seeing. A scrapbook, she replied, describing the moment her remaining "good" eye went dark.

"It was like pulling a shade down, so I knew this was happening. I was home alone," Finke related. "I got out my scrapbooks and I just I looked at every

single photo and tried to memorize what everybody looked like."

The image of Finke's now 31-year-old son, born later, wasn't among them.

"I've never seen him," she remarked.

In an era before the Americans with Disabilities Act, Finke's blindness cost her her university student services job. She wondered what opportunities existed for her and reflected on joy she found as a youth working for school newspapers as well as the sustenance she derived from oral journaling during her ordeal.

"When I was losing my sight, I was in the hospital for a long time," she said. "Every day I would talk into my tape recorder and later on, when the surgeries didn't work, I had all those tapes."

Those recordings formed the basis of her first memoir, "Long Time, No See." This past spring she published her second, "Writing Out Loud," inspired by her work assisting those in life's latter stages chronicle their journeys.

Before reading an excerpt from the book, Finke revealed her new method of performing public readings by using a earpiece to listen to her husband's recorded dictation and repeating it almost simultaneously to her audience.

"It's the first time I've ever done it. I've always wanted to do this, so thank you for indulging me," she said, proceeding with a passage from the book's preface.

"My original intention for this manuscript was to collect favorite writing prompts I've assigned over the years, write my own 500-word essays on those topics and compile them into a book to prove to my writers that it can be done," Finke recited. "And just



Clarendon Hills Middle School sixth-graders type out their extremely abbreviated life stories Friday for an editing exercise posed by visiting writer Beth Finke. Students, who had read portions of Finke's latest memoir, were riveted by their guest's honest answers to questions about adapting to a new normal after becoming blind at age 26. "It's been a lifetime of trying to figure out how to do things I used to do," she said. (Jim Slonoff photos)

like it so often goes with the writers in my memoirs classes, as I wrote, the excerpt of my story emerged."

Finke imparted some of the wisdom that blindness had furnished her, such as the way walking arm-in-arm can also tighten a relationship.

"It's so much easier to talk with somebody if you hold onto them," she said.

Never a dog person before, Finke and service dog Whitney are the closest of companions. And while she misses beholding others with her eyes, there is a blessing to the inability of assessing people at face value.

"The best thing is that

I can't see people, and so I'm really a good judge of character by what they're saying," she said.

That really resonated with student Vivian Sweeney.

"You can't judge someone based on sight, and it's kind of made her life better," Sweeney said of Finke's presentation. "She'll actually get to know people."

Classmate Kaitlyn Jin commented on Finke's spirit of resilience, letting blindness guide her into a new, thriving path forward.

"I love her character and how she lets her other senses make up for what she is missing. I think that

is really interesting to hear how she coped with it optimistically," she said. "I would have just been down and depressed, but she took it as an advantage to rise up."

Finke noted that youth are already exchanging their written stories, in a way, through social media, and exhorted them to get out of their comfort zone and keep their ears open because rich writing material can surface anywhere.

The final sentence of her "Writing Out Loud" preface captures the essence of that counsel.

"(It's) a story about what all of us can learn ... when we listen."