

Eyes Wide Open

Local author Michele Weldon looks forward to a future free from domestic violence

By Vicki Wilson

Walking into Michele Weldon's River Forest home is something like a dream. There is comfort – dozens of handmade pillows adorn every couch and chair. There are soothing tones – creamy yellows and cheery blues. There are clues that happiness exists here, whether it's in the smiling faces of her three boys, shining out from framed photos, or in the inspirational phrases she has painted in her breakfast nook. When you sit in her living room, you relax into an overall sense of safety.

But for Weldon, home was not always a safe place. Not in Dallas or South Bend or Oak Park. For 12 years, while she lovingly raised her three boys, Weldon lived in fear. She never knew when the next violent attack would come from her ex-husband.

The story of her journey from victim to vindication is told in her new book, "I Closed My Eyes: Revelations of a Battered Woman." From her children's painfully honest admissions – "Daddies make you purple," – to the chilling prayer of her ex-husband – "Please, God, let me kill her," – to her own heroic recovery – "I am grateful that on this odyssey I have earned the right to see clearly and to listen closely with the wisdom of my own heart," – the book rings eloquent and true.

It is said that genuine writers, those who are born to it, don't write because they want to, but because they have to. So it was probably inevitable that after her ordeal was over, after the healing had gotten underway, this book would come to be. This was a story that had to be told.

"It was a process. I wrote the first chapter as an essay, and I worked on it for months. I wanted to make it perfect. I thought it might be a book, but it was too scary to think about. I entered it in a Writer's Digest essay contest, and it won first place out of 12,000 entries [so they published it] ... But I still figured 'nobody reads Writer's Digest.'"

Still, a writer's drive to write has nothing to do with a reader's desire to read. Indeed, when a colleague at Northwestern University, where Weldon serves as adjunct lecturer in addition to her dual career as journalist and public speaker, kept asking to read her then unfinished manuscript, she kept putting him off.

"I thought, 'why won't he leave me alone'? Then I thought, 'why don't I want him to read it?' I finally told him it was kind of personal, and he said, 'You wrote a book! You don't think anyone's going to read it?'"

Weldon realized he was right, and she has since become more and more comfortable with the idea of people knowing the intimate details of her marriage and her recovery from those wounds.

Rejecting the complicity of silence

"I wrote about what happened to me to tell the truth, to explain it to myself, and to help the millions of women who follow me to have an easier time confronting their own truths, I want to show that a new life is possible beyond survival. Violence is not a private matter wherever it takes place. It is unjust and outrageous. It is not a crime we should be quiet about," she says.

The alarming statistics about domestic violence makes it very difficult to keep quiet. According to a 1997 UNICEF study, a woman is abused by a spouse or partner every nine seconds in the United States. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women ages 15 to 44. More women in this country are injured each year by domestic violence than rape, accidents or muggings combined, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Perhaps most alarming of all are the statistics that challenge the stereotype of a "battered wife." It is estimated that 17 percent of women earning \$25,000 to \$50,000 per year report physical abuse by a partner. More than 58 percent of domestic violence victims are employed.

Weldon's initial, steadfast refusal to accept that even someone like her --educated, successful, three darling boys, Volvo wagon – could be a "battered wife" is part of what kept her in her destructive marriage for 12 years. Once she got out, and began to learn more, she was able to redefine her views.

“There is no one type of woman who is battered,” observes Weldon. “They are women of all ages, races, socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, professions and dispositions. The battering is not about the victim; it is about the batterer. The myth that a woman deserves it or allows it to happen is dangerous. It takes the responsibility off the abuser and places it with the victim. Domestic violence, like rape, is violence. In both cases, the victim should not be blamed.”

And it wasn’t just denial that kept her in the relationship. Rather than feeling powerless, Weldon for a long time felt she had the power to change her husband from the angry, vengeful demon he could be in private to the charming, successful, happy-go-lucky guy he was in public. She wanted to believe that he was the man he seemed in his letters and anniversary cards, excerpts of which appear in the book, passages she included not only to “give him a voice,” but also to show “how tender he could be.”

“I love you immensely ... I wish you the very best for your dreams,” he wrote. “Thank you, Michele, for all your love. I love you so,” he told her in a Valentine’s Day card. He cheered at T-ball, taught Sunday school, and called his mother-in-law on Mother’s Day.

“The lie I lived with is that our family wasn’t what it appeared to be,” says Weldon, “and the thought that it wasn’t was so devastating to me. So, after a while, my marriage became a mission. I understood that [the violence stemmed] from him, from his rage, and his not feeling good about himself in some way. I felt it was my job, as his wife, as someone who did love him and saw him in the best possible light, to get him to where he could see himself in that way.

“What I didn’t know, and what counselors in three states didn’t tell me, was that it wasn’t my problem to solve. I can’t change someone else’s behavior [even though] I really believed I had the power to change this other human being,” she says.

A scream unleashed

What truly empowered her was realizing that though she might be powerless to change her husband, she could change herself and the way she was dealing with the situation. Over time, her

plan began to evolve, although she never knew when she would put it into action. On a family vacation at his parent’s summer home – people Michele had known all her life – her husband hit her for the last time. Finally, she told.

“The last time is different. After days and months and years of bandaging the violence, it suddenly failed to matter why,” Weldon writes. “It was time to get away. It was as if someone else trapped inside of me long ago demanded to be set free ... I screamed.”

That scream unleashed the dark secrets of her life and started her on the path toward recovery. Initially, she asked her husband to move out, to get serious help – counseling for abusers – the abuser she was finally willing to admit he was. She obtained an emergency order of protection so that he would have to stay away from her and the boys while seeking treatment. She didn’t want their life together to be over. “I wanted the monster gone, but I wanted the man he pretended to be to return,” she writes.

And even with all the courage she had mustered to speak out about the violence, shades of the victim remained. She packed his clothes, his gym bag, his dental floss for him, and she slipped a note inside that said: “I had to do this. The boys need, you. Love, Michele.”

She needn’t have bothered, Her husband filed for divorce a few weeks later, and Weldon feels it’s clear he never had any intention of coming back to the family.

Like most divorces, it was anything but pleasant. It was painful, angry, bitter and messy. A chapter in Weldon’s book is titled, “65 Tears Per Hour,” a reference to the crying jags that struck her while she drove, alone in the front seat, where her children could not see.

Divorce without abuse is difficult enough, but when children are involved – and must stay involved with someone their mother knows to be violent – it can be terrifying as well.

“I still cry when the boys leave to be with their dad,” she says. “For years it felt like I was sending the sheep out to the big bad wolf. I have to separate who he was to me from who he is with them. To get around [my fears], I am just relentless about what has to happen with my boys – I’m never going to allow anything to happen to them, and he knows it. [But] I have to

allow them the space to love him because he is their father.”

The truth, we’re told, will set us free. The truth can also make us strong. And although Weldon is well aware of the statistic that men whose fathers batter are hundreds of times more likely to be batterers, she feels that because her boys have been given time and space to talk about what they’ve seen or know, they can make peace with it.

Finding a safe haven

And even though some may be critical of a parent going public with this story, she refuses to see anything wrong with it.

“I’ve given immense thought and consideration to the effect of the book on my boys. But I’m not exposing them to something they don’t know. My children lived

through it. They don’t know all the terrible details [which she purposely left out] because they could only be deeply harmful. My resolution is I am keeping the book separate from their lives. It is not a book for children.”

Only her eldest has asked to read it so far. “I told him it was R-rated, and he could read it when he’s 21,” she says.

As for any other criticism, Weldon says, “The crime is not in the telling; the crime is the violence. There is nothing for me to be ashamed of because I’m talking about it. I wrote this book to tell what it is like. This is the path that happened to me; if it can help you move quicker down your path, then [I’ve achieved my goal].”

Having a place to tell her story and be heard with compassion and without judgment is one more thing that Weldon feels saved her life and the lives of her sons. For them, that safe haven was Sarah’s Inn, a domestic violence services agency in Oak Park. Weldon is now on the board of directors.

“Sarah’s Inn is such a wonderful place. They were so good to the boys. [My husband] left on Friday. By Monday we were in therapy at Sarah’s Inn. There wasn’t any time to build up all of this shame – right away, they could talk about it. People there understood abuse; they said it out loud. My boys could see there were other children like them,” she says.

Weldon has little patience for people who can’t appreciate the courage of the clients at Sarah’s

Inn. “Being a client there means you’re getting help for a problem you have; you ought to be celebrated for that,” she says.

And she is grateful to her family, friends, even “the system.” She says that when she was finally “ready to tell her story – to judges, police, and other officials – they believed her. Her friends and family were ready to help her, whether it was to watch her kids while she had another meeting with her attorney, or helping her buy her new home when her son asked to live somewhere “daddy’s never been.”

Weldon stresses the importance of responding to any friend we suspect may be trapped in a violent relationship.

“The first thing is to believe her ... offer her unconditional support, say you will help to make her safe any way, any place, any time. Volunteer to take her children, give her a key to your home . . . loan her money. Listen to her. Give her the love and space to break free,” And, a caution: “Do not tell the abuser anything. Do not try to intervene and change him yourself. You may cause him to hurt her.”

The importance of telling the truth

Weldon is equally emphatic about the value of the family’s role in keeping the sanctity of truth alive. She says that even though all her boys could talk about during the first year after the break up was “how daddy hit mommy,” her family never “told them to be quiet or pretended it didn’t happen.” Weldon believes, as a psychotherapist friend told her that the real problems begin when you pretend something isn’t there.

Weldon’s dedication and gratitude for the help she received at Sarah’s Inn is reflected in her book and the promotion of it. Her multi-city book tour includes three benefit book signings and readings for the agency. On Sunday, Sept. 12, from 3 to 5 p.m., there will be a book signing and benefit at the Dominican Conference Center at the Priors, 7200 W. Division St. in River Forest. On Thursday, Oct. 7, Weldon will participate in a candlelight vigil for victims of domestic violence in Scoville Park from 6 to 7 p.m. And on Oct. 5, Barnes & Noble at 1441 W. Webster Place in Chicago will host a signing to benefit Sarah’s Inn.

So much of living with domestic violence is

rooted in lies and cover-ups, deceptions, half-truths and personal mythologies. Talking with Michele Weldon and reading her story is like taking an antidote, like bathing in authenticity. “What do [I] know to, be true?” Weldon writes. “I was a battered wife. I am not anymore. I will never be again. I have found that when you allow truth into your life, it leaves space for strength to

emerge and grow, replacing shame and making it unnecessary to hide. The strength was always there, and the telling empowers you to employ it. I am proud to tell this story. I know it to be true.”