

Rhonda Hayes Curtis

An Epic Journey to Healing

By Judith A. Habert

Photos by Dawn Nicoli / Nicoli Productions



It is often said that our life circumstances play a large role in shaping who we become. This statement obviously holds true for Rhonda Hayes Curtis. Rhonda is the creator and facilitator of the Pauma Valley Writer's Retreat, various writing seminars, and a teacher of writing in San Diego. What was of great interest to me was what made someone decide to embark on such a journey.

Rhonda's beginning years were what could easily be labeled as tumultuous. Rhonda was born in Florida, moved to Oregon, and then, at 6 years of age, moved to Tucson, Arizona. Arizona held many of her childhood memories, some of which were comforting, others haunted her for most of her life. An absent father, of whom she knew very little, except for one very vivid memory. Rhonda shares, "I only have one memory of my father, and it is my first memory in my life. He had a gun to my mother's head. My mother's screams woke me in the middle of the night, and it was very traumatic. He left before the police came, and I never saw him again." For most of Rhonda's life, the image continued to haunt her. Yet, Rhonda's narrative is not defined by these challenges alone but also by

her remarkable ability to transform adversity into opportunity.

Married, at the age of 16, she soon became a mom to two beautiful daughters, Charlotte and Sherry. However, following a divorce, when her daughters were 12 and 10, she relocated to San Diego. There, she found love again with Greg, who asked her to marry him and helped

two of the greatest loves of my life," Rhonda recalls. Her journey through grief was harrowing, but it was through writing that she found solace. "I wasn't initially a writer, but journaling during Greg's and Sherry's illness was what kept me going. Sherry knew how much writing helped me cope; in her farewell letter, she encouraged me to write

ney that led him unexpectedly back to Rhonda. They quickly formed a bond over their shared experiences of loss and love. "It felt like fate, and yes, Larry did get to meet Sherry before she passed," Rhonda shares. Fifteen years later, Rhonda and Larry's marriage stands as a testament to the idea that profound pain can lead to new beginnings and beautiful futures.

After her daughter passed, Rhonda started writing seriously. I wrote 10 - 12 hours a day. What I didn't realize at the time was that it was the best thing I could have done for myself. First and foremost, because it helped me through the grieving process, and it helped me bring them back to life in many ways."

At this point, Rhonda knew that she wasn't technically a writer; she had never done this before. "I didn't know how to write; I didn't know how to put a story together. I just had this burning passion within myself to do the writing. And that's what made the difference in my life. I allowed myself the time to do that. It was probably the most selfish thing that I've ever done for myself. Being a teenage mom, all I ever did was take care of everyone around me. I never had time in my life to do something just for me."

Rhonda immersed herself in the study of writing. "I worked with many different types of editors, including a book coach and a story structure specialist. I read books on writing, and I just started studying and writing. I did this for six years. The result of this process was "Love at the Last Minute": A Mother's Journey to Courage, Acceptance, and Wisdom by Rhonda Hayes Curtis, a beautiful story of



her raise her children. Life wasn't always easy, but lessons were learned along the way, especially in 2007, when Greg and Sherry were both diagnosed with terminal cancer. Amidst the overwhelming fear and uncertainty, Rhonda turned to journaling as a method to manage the complex web of medical treatments and caregiving duties. This practice of writing not only helped her to organize her thoughts during this chaotic time but also became a vital outlet for her emotions and a cornerstone for her future in writing.

"My younger daughter Sherry was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer at 33 and passed away at 35. Just nine months before, I lost my husband, Greg, to cancer as well. Within less than a year, I faced the unimaginable grief of losing

a book if it made me happy. That's exactly what I did."

Sherry also expressed a wish for her mother to seek companionship again. Despite her initial hesitance, Rhonda honored this request as one of her daughter's final wishes. "I promised Sherry I'd do anything for her. The idea of meeting someone new seemed far-fetched, especially so soon after losing Greg, but I couldn't ignore her wish," Rhonda explains. She ventured online and connected with Larry, a widower who had recently lost his wife of 32 years to a prolonged illness. "Our first conversation started online, and soon we discovered we were neighbors, living just five miles apart."

Larry was traveling across the country to process his grief, a jour-

life, love, loss, and the renewal of happiness.

The creation of her beautifully written memoir was a great source of pride, but what came out of this process was a deep desire to help other people get their stories out of them so they could get the help that she got. "The message that I want to get across is that if I can do this, anyone can do it. I don't have a degree in journalism or English; I'm not formally educated. I'm self-educated. I did the work. But that's the thing. You don't have to be a New York Times bestseller. First and foremost, just do it for yourself."

Rhonda went on to teach her 'Write Your Story' class at Escondido Adult School, and when COVID-19 hit, she had to find ways to continue to spread her message. When things began to get back to 'normal,' Rhonda invited her students to do a one-day writer's retreat in her home in the beautiful Pauma Valley Country Club. "Students showed up, I made food for them, we shared our stories, and I helped them find the path to getting these stories out of their heads and onto paper. When the day ended, no one wanted to leave."

These seminars were the impetus for the Pauma Valley three-day Writer's Retreat (<https://www.pvwritingretreat.com/>). "Last October was our first retreat, and it was met with such enthusiasm that we vowed to make it a yearly event. Our next one is October 10th -12th, 2024." The setting for this retreat was ideal. Pauma Valley Country Club is a beautiful setting nestled in the tranquil and picturesque Pauma Valley. This historic country club provides all its amenities to attendees of the writing retreat. Purposely held during the overseeding of the golf course, attendees have the full attention of their excellent staff as well as full access to the other amenities the Club has to offer—state of the art gym, heated swimming pool, bicycles, bocce ball, tennis, pickle ball, and quiet roads for walking.

An ideal spot to get your writing juices flowing.

There was one word that resonated throughout the days of the seminar by everyone in attendance. This word was EPIC. As one of the instructors at this inaugural event, I can honestly say that it was the best writer's workshop that I have ever attended, and the instructors commented on the enthusiasm of all the participants. There was a range of first-time writers as well as seasoned professionals, but we all came to the same conclusion. Telling your story is empowering, and everyone who has gone through a life-changing event or simply has a story to share needs to put their thoughts to paper.

With the success of her Three-Day Writer's Retreat, Rhonda felt the need to stay connected with those who had attended, so she decided to add some one-day writing retreats to provide support to these burgeoning writers. Her next one-day retreat is just around the corner on June 21st from 9:30-2:30. It is entitled Gather, Share, and Elevate. For more information, go to (<https://www.pvwritingretreat.com/workshops>)

Out of pain and sorrow came the heart of this woman who has experienced some of the most devastating life circumstances, but while talking to her, you would never know the road she has traveled. She is committed to sharing her knowledge and experience in writing a beautiful story that can change the lives of her readers.

Currently, Rhonda is revisiting her earliest and most unsettling memories in her second book, with the working title 'The Truth about My Father.' Triggered by a deep dive into genealogy undertaken by her oldest sister, Rhonda confronted dozens of newspaper articles that cast her father in an unflattering light, far from the redemption she might have hoped for. However, it was through this process of uncovering her father's troubled past and documenting it that Rhonda found



Photo Courtesy of Rhonda Hayes Curtis



a way to reconcile with the image that haunted her for six decades.

"This deeper investigation into his life, paired with the act of writing about it, has brought me peace and resolution," Rhonda explains. Her ability to transform pain into narrative, to find healing through the alchemy of words, is a powerful testament to her skill as a writer and her resilience as a person.

Rhonda Hayes Curtis is not just a remarkable writer and teacher; she is also a profound friend and guide to many. With her upcoming book, she continues to share the lessons gleaned from her life's challenges. Her work, from her personal stories to the writing retreats she hosts, is designed not just to teach but to transform, offering an EPIC experience that promises to change lives.