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Quiet struggle

Nikki Barthelme fights through unstable upbringing as a foster child to achieve her dream and publish her first novel

By NICK MASUDA, DIRECTOR OF NEWS

March 11, 2019 5:03 AM

"Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures."

— Jessamyn West

For Nikki Barthelme, she didn't own her own truth — it was controlled by perception.

There was a stigma that stemmed from being a 12-year-old in foster care, especially when it happens on the heels of middle school, a coming-of-age time in which hormones and a lack of common sense can lead to children being humiliated and bullied.

Ms. Barthelme didn't control the situation she was handed, but she had to deal with its repercussions every day. Her mother was dying from cancer and her father flirted with the law throughout her first 12 years on Earth.

There were times she didn't know where her next meal would come from, or where they would be living the following week.

So when she entered foster care at 12 — a month before her mother would pass from cancer — she was in need of stability, love and a brighter outlook on the future.

But it didn't come in a traditional form — that's difficult when she was in and out of both group homes and families that discarded her for the most minute reasons.

Her hope came in the form of a seventh-

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Dozens filled the aisles of Chaucer's in Santa Barbara for the release of Nikki Barthelme's "A Quiet You Carry," a fiction novel about foster care.

COURTESY ROBBY BARTHELMESS

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grade teacher who offered a compliment.

"Nikki's paper was the best in the class," this teacher boasted to the entire room.

He'd pass by her desk and let her know how special her paper was, and that she had a talent that she needed to focus on.

"One compliment can change someone's life," Ms. Barthelmess said.

And it did.

Writing became an escape, albeit essays at school or in her personal journals. She was able to establish her reality, something that no one could take from her.

And it allowed her to find inner strength, utilizing her voice in the face of adversity, telling her social services worker — and anyone else that would listen — that she would not change high schools, even if she did live in six different small towns in Nevada over the course of six years.

If stability wouldn't be provided, she had to establish it herself.

She was an excellent student and an athlete, overcoming the distractions of what more than 400,000 children in foster care know all too well — an unpredictable home life that can change from one day to the next.

While living in different homes, she was also separated from her older sister and younger brother. At times they'd be paired, but often each was in a different location.

She continued to lean on her writing to get her through the feelings of being unwanted and overlooked.

In high school, one of her teachers, Barbara Burton Bushey, heard about Ms. Barthelmess' situation and started the process of trying to foster her, a seemingly maddening process held up by red tape.

But, the newly tenacious Ms. Barthelmess wrote countless messages and made what felt like hundreds of calls to the Nevada governor, with the state eventually relenting and allowing the match to happen.

She triumphed, but still felt like the situation was too good to be true. When Ms. Bushey told her that she'd like to adopt her, Ms. Barthelmess said, "No."

After graduating from Virginia City High School — she never was forced to change — and midway through her time at the University of Nevada, Reno, Ms. Barthelmess knew that she had turned a corner. She was finding her own way, she had forged her own path.

That confidence that she could — and should — be loved sent her back to Ms. Bushey with a simple question: "Do you still want to adopt me?"



Nikki Barthelmess worked for nearly five years on getting "A Quiet You Carry" published. It's her first novel.

COURTESY MATT WIER



The Quiet You Carry Fiction By Nikki Barthelmess North Star Editions, \$13.49

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And, at age 20, she officially had a new family.

Fast forward 10 years — a decade that included Ms. Barthelmess writing for major magazine and newspaper publications, including the News-Press, as a features writer — and she is now living her dream.

She's writing for a living, having published her first novel, "The Quiet You Carry," and debuting it this past Friday at Chaucer's Bookstore in Santa Barbara, where it sold out quickly.

She met her husband, Robby, while interning on the South Coast, being introduced to his family, one that is local royalty due to its involvement in many non-profit organizations, as well as founding the Alpha Resource Center — an organization focused on helping people find their mark in the world.

A perfectly poignant match for Ms. Barthelmess.

"The Quiet You Carry" is deemed fiction, but is one that delves into the life of a child in foster care — an underserved topic in the literary world.

"If I can help one foster child with this book, then it was worth every bit of my time," Ms. Barthelmess said.

And that was nearly five years, a normal cycle for a new author, but one that required plenty of patience, which Ms. Barthelmess addressed by daydreaming.

For many years, she would sit in the Rancho Room at Harry's Plaza Cafe, telling Kris Kallman, or as the family deemed him "Uncle Bubby," that she would one day launch a book by having a reception in that very room and then everyone would jaunt across the street so she could read excerpts from it at Chaucer's.

"For someone that makes a living with words, I honestly can't come up with any to express how much that meant to me," as Ms. Barthelmess fought back happy tears, expressing her undying love for the Santa Barbara community and how it has embraced her as an adopted native.

"I wouldn't have done it anywhere else in the world. This is home."

email: nmasuda@newspress.com

FYI

The Quiet You Carry

Fiction

By **Nikki Barthelmess**

North Star Editions, \$13.49



Nikki Barthelmess has made Santa Barbara an adopted home after interning and working on the South Coast, as well as meeting her husband.

COURTESY ROBBY BARTHELMESS

Nikki Barthelmess signs an autograph for a reader. Chaucer's sold out of "A Quiet You Carry" during the release party.

COURTESY DON BARTHELMESS



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