

Challenge into Change
2016 Writing Contest



The Women's Initiative
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2016 Writing Contest

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DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to Amy Lane,
Business and Marketing Manager of The Women's Initiative,
without whose tireless, year-round work this project
would not be possible, and whose veneration—and
embodiment—of the spirit of Challenge into Change
is an example to us all.

ABOUT THE WOMEN'S INITIATIVE



The Women's Initiative is a nonprofit in Charlottesville, Virginia, that provides vital mental health services to women regardless of their ability to pay. Our counseling services, social support and education enable women to transform life challenges into positive change and growth. We serve area women who struggle with a range of mental health needs and who lack access to effective care due to factors such as race, ethnicity, economic disadvantage, sexual orientation or gender identity, illness, language, age and disability. We believe every woman has an innate capacity for healing that, once uncovered and directed, results in better mental and physical health.

Visit us at www.thewomensinitiative.org



empowering women in times of challenge & change

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INTRODUCTION



*“You start out with one thing, end
up with another, and nothing’s
like it used to be, not even the future.”*

—Rita Dove, from “O”

At The Women’s Initiative, we believe in the inherent wisdom and healing capacity of storytelling. Over millennia, women have gathered and used words, written and sung, to share information, pass down lore, uplift, and remember. As the agency celebrates its ten-year anniversary, it is natural to reflect on the ways in which our nation, communities, and people have changed and what our role is in shaping a future we want to live in.

The past year in particular has been the embodiment of what Challenge into Change has come to mean to us: The capacity to look at a mountain and see not defeat but a bridge to be crossed using radical love of one another and fierce compassion. The Women’s Initiative aims to be a part of that bridge, and offers the Challenge into Change Writing Contest as a platform for women’s voices and women’s stories. We hope it can be a beacon of truth amidst confusion, a testimony to the beauty of our shared experiences, and most importantly a tool for healing.

This year’s contest drew more than double the number of participants of any other in the history of the agency. We believe this reflects the growing need for sharing, reshaping, and learning from our own narratives. If our current socio-political climate tells us anything, it is that although we live and work together, we do not truly know the stories of our neighbors, colleagues, and sometimes friends and family. Having read the stories submitted to this year’s volume, I feel assured that one response to this, and a recipe for the future we can’t

see yet, lies within these pages filled with vulnerability, strength, and resilience.

Eboni Bugg, LCSW
Program Director

ABOUT CHALLENGE INTO CHANGE



Challenge into Change is a forum for real-life stories about women overcoming personal struggles. In the fall of 2016, The Women’s Initiative invited Central Virginians to submit a poem or essay of 500 words or less about a woman (themselves or someone they knew) who had surmounted a difficult situation in her life. Eighty-six writers responded to our call. This is their book.

Challenge into Change began in 2008 as a celebration of The Women’s Initiative’s first year of providing vital mental health services to women regardless of ability to pay. Since then, it has become a venue for veteran and emerging writers alike to showcase their talents and engage in creative exploration. As The Women’s Initiative marks its tenth year in Charlottesville, we present this volume—a chorus of voices from the community—as a testament to what lies at the heart of our agency’s vision: women’s capacity for healing.

How to read this book

This volume opens with the works of our three winners, who each receive cash prizes and read their work at the 2017 Festival of the Book. How do we determine who wins? An independent panel of judges evaluates each submission blind. The panel rewards writing that has emotional resonance and clearly communicates how its subject manifested challenge out of a challenging life situation. The panel also looks for stories that effectively use language to convey meaning, and have the power to motivate and encourage others.

Happily, this is a difficult task for our judges, as these qualities can be found throughout this book. As you read, make sure to take in the comments provided by our judges and additional readers, which follow each entry. These responses reflect on the unique gift each piece offers us and continue the conversation that each writer has started. It is our hope that, for the writers and for you, these conversations are the start of something sustaining and healing.

Pretty Brown Girl

Aerial Perkins

First Place

I pressed my face to the window. My vision blurred by the waterfall of tears I cannot seem to control. The school bus comes to a screeching halt and kids get off but I refuse to let them see my face. “Oreo cookie, Oreo cookie, Oreo cookie!” was still ringing in my ears. At this very moment the embarrassment of being dark skin was pouring right through my small ten year old body. I wish I could hide but the only solace was the over-sized red hoodie I was wearing. I buried myself in it until the chanting ceased.

Four years later

My hands are crying with blood and fatigue. The mirror unscathed by my rage and anger stares back at me. Phrases like: “you’re pretty...for a dark skin girl”, “if only you were two shades lighter”, “the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice” made me scream “I hate you” to the mirror. “I hate you, I hate you...I hate you!” I melted to the bathroom floor breathless and sobbing. I am barely through my freshman year of high school and the only person who has ever told me I was beautiful died months ago. My grandfather meant it too and at the time, I didn’t believe him.

Ten years later

I picked up People Magazine as I stand at the counter to pay for my groceries. Lupita Nyong’o graces the cover as “People’s Most Beautiful Person”. I squealed with excitement but was quickly reminded of where I was as I felt the stares of the people around me. I paid for my stuff including the magazine and rushed home.

“Mom look!” Barely able to contain my excitement I pushed the magazine at her. “She is dark skin like me!!” My mom acknowledges me

with a smile too busy on her Kindle to match my enthusiasm. I ran to the bathroom mirror, the same mirror that reduced me to tears ten years ago, and ran my fingers through the hair I had left. Just like Nyong’o, I cut my hair short and natural and I have never felt more beautiful.

Now

The natural light coming through the stunning wooden windows gave the studio good vibes. I place my colorful yoga mat on the floor and watch beautiful women of color fill the space. The sense of belonging overwhelmed me as we flowed through the vinyasa sequence. As I take warrior two pose I begin to reflect over the years where I felt angry, sad and weak because of what I believe to be a deformity. My brown skin was the target of relentless bullying. Now my brown skin is complimented more often. I see women like Lupita Nyong’o, Michelle Obama, my yoga teacher, and my mom and realize that the essence of my beauty is not just my smile, my brown eyes, or my hair...it is the self-confidence on the inside that generates beauty. I am a pretty brown girl.

How our judges and readers responded...

Brave and clear. ♥ Passionate, immediate writing makes the past come alive. ♥ Arresting vignettes. ♥ In the beginning, the writer speaks of her skin as dark. However, when she speaks of where she is now as it relates to her complexion, she says her skin in “brown”. To me, this clearly shows the change of mindset. Brown is more of a positive to her than dark. As her self-confidence grew, how she referred to herself and her skin changed. ♥ The succinct brilliance of this piece drives its reader from a place of despair and frustration to confidence and power. ♥ It inspires all of us to be proud of who we are, including the body with which we have been graced.

BIO:

Aerial Perkins is a twenty-four-year-old aspiring writer and photographer. She was born in Charlottesville but was raised in Buckingham County, Virginia. Aerial has two poems, one *Challenge into Change* story and a photograph published. She is a blogger who writes and advocates for Adoptee rights. She hopes in the future to publish a memoir and more photography. When she is not working, writing or taking photos you can find her smiling or randomly dancing to her favorite music.

Chronic Guest

Kaity L. Yang

Second Place

Self-compassion is foreign

To me.

Self-love is a stranger

In my house, in my

Body. Nobody mentioned

Abuse

Dressed as negative self-talk,

She occupied my mind. My chronic guest

Dirtyed my windows, clouded

What little light I possessed

Twice I failed

To extinguish

My light – first overdose, Valium – second overdose, Klonopin

Brought on by internalizing

Messages from my mother

YOU

Are a disappointment –

LEFTOVER!

Shame you bring, you unmarried!

YOU

Are a bad daughter –

Too much school, fancy paper, no man!

Shame you bring, you unmarried!

YOU

Do not love your mother –

Selfish brat, no grandchildren!
Shame you bring, you unmarried!

YOU

Are man's plaything –
To have and to hold! Did you forget your role as woman?
My chronic guest reminded me

Vision blurry, voice unsure
I evicted my chronic guest. Wiped my eyes clean and repeated –

I
Am good enough. And
I matter. I
Am worthy.

As I vacuumed away self-hatred
And cast open rusty windows, encrusted with salt. Fresh air
Poured in like concrete.
Welcome back, little light

I
Am loved. And
I have value. I
Am worthy.

I
Am my own.
To have and to hold. I
Am worthy.

I
Am proud of this house.
This body. This face. This mind. I
Am worthy.

This is my letter of love. A peek
Into my house. That darkness, that chronic guest.
Dearly departed, replaced with
Light.

May she be a beacon for you, too.

How our judges and readers responded...

You describe the departure of depression so movingly. It is wonderful that Light has replaced Darkness for you. ♥ Powerful, courageous, compelling. Brave and honest—and anguished—engages the reader throughout. ♥ Excellently written piece. You can feel her go from a woman of low self-esteem to a woman who finds her inner strength and self-confidence. ♥ In this poem, the author uses cadence and repetition to portray a transformation from weakness to strength. ♥ Each of us must look inside to the doubts within and find a mantra that gives us sustenance and inspiration. Here, in this piece, the author lets us see how such a mantra is created and gives us our own way forward.

BIO:

Kaity L. Yang is a 28-year-old Gates Millennium Scholar and double University of Virginia alumna who practices resilience every day. A survivor of multiple traumas and abuse which led to mental illness, Yang persevered to the bewilderment of many. She lost her father unexpectedly to cancer at age 6, cares for her emotionally toxic, illiterate, refugee mother, cheated death in a car wreck at age 22, and survived rape. Yang wishes to serve as a beacon of hope.

Alive

Becca Pizmoht

Third Place

I almost skipped my annual mammogram. I had several years of uneventful images and June was extremely busy. Had I found the phone number, I would have canceled or postponed my annual exam. But I didn't. On June 24th, exactly 365 days from my last mammogram, I went for the annual screening. Three days later, driving home from a court hearing in Richmond that I was covering for the local paper, I received a call from the hospital telling me to come back for a re-check...something was slightly abnormal.

It wasn't until the surgeon called with the results of my biopsy that the reality hit. He called it invasive ductile carcinoma. I wasn't ready to be a cancer patient, was I? After all I ate well, kept fit and healthy; my primary means of making a living was riding and training horses, I ran 5K and 10K races almost every weekend, I didn't feel bad, how could I have cancer?

But I did.

And then in August, I had a lumpectomy and the cancer and affected lymph nodes were removed. And my life went on. Only my family and closest friends knew what was happening. I was determined not to let my illness define my life. It didn't. I was back at work and riding as soon as my stitches were removed. Two weeks after surgery, I ran in a 5K.

About a month after surgery I started chemotherapy. I was still determined that cancer and treatment were not going to define my life. I was going to live and work like everything was normal. And pretty much it was. There were days that I felt like I had drunk a liter of tequila the night before but I got up and pretended that everything

was fine. No matter how nauseous or tired I tried to smile and just go on.

My hair fell out. I thought I'd be ready for it but it was a shock for it to come out in clumps. My co-workers shaved my head and I covered it up with a scarf. The lack of hair made for a few awkward moments. Twice people stopped to tell me how nice it was that I had shaved my head in support of someone going through cancer treatment. The first time I smiled, the second time I told them that I had breast cancer.

I kept running. Slowly. Gone are my 7:30 miles, for now I'm content with 9 minute miles and it's ok. Just hearing my feet hit the pavement reassures me that I'm alive.

I pushed to start radiation, the next phase of treatment so that I can have as much billed to my insurance this year. The drive is maddening and takes a big block of the day. I still strive to have a normal day, to get up and feed the animals and go to work. The shadow that is cancer is there but it won't darken my day.

I am alive.

How our judges and readers responded...

People talk of battles with cancer, and you describe so exactly your own struggle.

Your writing can be a source of courage for others. ♥ This is powerful in its restraint, in fact it is powerful because of its restraint which bespeaks courage and strength. ♥ There is absolutely no sense of "why me," or victimhood. Very persuasive. Emotional impact from a straightforward account. ♥ I admire this writer's restraint. How do you press forward in times of great strife and pain?

♥ In this piece, the author presents clearly the choices before us when we encounter illness and tragedy in our lives. In tightly-composed prose, the protagonist's journey inspires us to give everything we have even when the circumstances appear most challenging.

BIO:

Becca Pizmoht lives in Rapidan, VA with her husband Roman and 2 dogs, 1 cat and 1 horse. She works as a horse trainer and writer for the Madison Eagle and is currently undergoing cancer treatment at Martha Jefferson Hospital and trying to pursue as normal a life as possible.