

Updated: March 18, 2024 / 2024 BUSINESS LEADERS OF THE YEAR

Business Leaders: Finding Our Voices volunteer Mary Lou Smith helps fellow abuse survivors speak



PHOTO / TIM GREENWAY

Mary Lou Smith helps fellow domestic-abuse survivors find their voice through **Finding Our Voices**, a grassroots nonprofit that aims to break the silence of domestic abuse.

By Renee Cordes

In August 2005, Mary Lou Smith left a 43-year abusive marriage after nearly taking her own life. Today at age 84, she's a tireless advocate for fellow survivors of domestic abuse as a volunteer with Finding Our Voices.

The grassroots nonprofit organization was founded in 2021 by Patrisha McLean, who nominated Smith as the first-ever Mainebiz Volunteer of the Year.

Mainebiz: What should people know about Finding Our Voices and its mission?

Mary Lou Smith: We are Maine women survivors of domestic abuse who have managed to cross over to the bright side of safety and freedom, shining a light for our sisters who are still trapped.

MB: What accomplishments with Finding Our Voices are you most proud of and why?

MLS: I have been privileged to be on many 'Survivor Speaks' panel discussions. They have given me the opportunity to share my story in person to give hope to those still living in abusive relationships.

A woman told me that talking with me after the Scarborough Finding Our Voices event prompted her to leave her abusive situation. I had tears in my eyes and joy in my soul. I keep my bookmarks [featuring portraits and quotes from Maine survivors] in my purse, and hand them out whenever I think it is appropriate.

MB: In the wake of so much adversity in your life, what keeps you going?

MLS: Imagine the surprise when, after I left my abuser, I was told by my therapist I was a victim of domestic abuse and suffered from PTSD. It took time and hard work to begin to unravel the charade of the 'perfect Catholic family' and 43 years of abuse.

I began by being honest with myself and the therapist about my abuse, as in years of therapy that is something I had never discussed. I had an inner strength and faith that had been buried deep inside me most of my life by abuse by my mother, my religion and a narcissistic spouse.

The day I left I was crying, depressed and confused. I pulled out of my garage and as the garage doors closed and I left my hell on earth on the other side. I knew it was my chance to leave and never look back ... and I never did. From that moment on, I was in charge of what was going to happen to me. Now, I can do whatever I want, when I want to do it, or not do it at all.

MB: How did Finding Our Voices help you find your voice?

MLS: Finding Our Voices is a safe, judgment-free and supportive group of women who listen and are not shocked when we share our stories of abuse. It is in this safe environment where so much can be accomplished. We respect and love each other just the way we are.

MB: Who is your heroine and why?

MLS: My heroine is myself. I have never flaunted what I am doing. I share my horrific story and encourage other women to be their own heroines, too. My message comes from my heart and soul. My children and I lived in fear of my abuser's power and control. Leaving a 43-year abusive marriage at the age of 65 was a difficult, and courageous, decision. I almost took my own life to escape my abuser.

When I told my abuser I wanted to kill myself, he went and got a gun and said, 'I will show you how to put a gun to your head and be successful committing suicide.' I didn't leave him until the next day. (The insanity of domestic abuse.) I was an empty shell when I left.

Today, I stand tall beside all my Sister Survivors of Finding Our Voices and accept this honor from Mainebiz for all of us. I pray that my courage and determination will give other victims hope and support. They are not alone.

Finding Our Voices

findingourvoices.net / P.O. Box 943, Camden

What it does: Grassroots nonprofit that aims to break the silence of domestic abuse through peer support to Maine women survivors of domestic abuse, and to their children.

Programs include the Get Out Stay Out Fund for short-term emergency shelter as well as car, legal, home and food costs; dignified pro bono dental care through Finding Our Smiles; online support groups; and survivor-powered educational campaigns.

Founded: 2021

Volunteers: 50