

w d presents

“the library changed my life”

4 readers, four stories of hope and inspiration

produced by Ellen Breslau

Stacey DeFelice-DeSimone shares her love of the library with her daughter.

Last spring, as part of *Woman's Day's* ongoing partnership with the American Library Association, we asked readers to send us a story of how the library impacted their life. The 2,000 heartfelt, funny and touching essays we received prove that the library isn't just the place you go to check out books.

FINDING AN ANSWER

stacey defelice-desimone, 31 oakdale, new york

MY HUSBAND, ANTHONY, and I have always been avid library goers. In the frugal first years of our marriage, we didn't buy books or rent videos, we borrowed them from the library. As an English teacher, I was rarely happier than when I'd leave the library balancing a tall stack of books under my chin.

Five years after we got married, we bought our first home and, months later, I gave birth to our daughter, Charlotte. I couldn't imagine being luckier or happier.

Then, several weeks after Charlotte's birth, I developed a severe form of postpartum depression. I had unspeakable, obsessive images of atrocities being committed on my daughter. I had crippling panic attacks that left me paralyzed, housebound and sleepless. I felt as though I was looking at my life from inside a black hole. I didn't think I had PPD because I wasn't depressed, per se, so I resisted treatment and grew worse. When I finally submitted to an aggressive course of therapy and medicine, I was a mere shadow of my former self.

Anthony did not stand idly by while this was happening; he was determined to conquer my problem with me. My doctor forbade me from being home alone with Charlotte, so while my mother babysat us, Anthony went on our weekly library trips alone. He brought home new releases by my favorite authors that went unread. He brought comedy DVDs that I didn't find funny and meditation CDs that haunted me. He brought mindless Hollywood magazines, but the fit celebrity moms doting on their babies upset me. I resigned myself to a life without reading, just one more thing that PPD had stolen from me.

One day, Anthony came home with only one book. Before I could protest, he opened to the first page and jabbed his finger at it. "Please just read this

first paragraph," he pleaded. "This is you."

The book was *Sleepless Days*, by Susan Kushner Resnick, a memoir of her struggle with PPD. I read the first paragraph while still standing in the doorway and burst into tears. Then I took the book into our bedroom and read the whole thing. A tiny pinprick of light pierced my black hole. The next day I walked around the block by myself.

Over the next couple of weeks, I began sending Anthony to the library with lists. At first, I just read books about PPD. They helped me believe I wasn't alone and I would get better. Then I started asking for the celebrity magazines. The day I cracked the spine of a fiction bestseller, I couldn't stop smiling. I was reading again! I was ready for my first trip to the library.

It was late March and crocuses were pushing up through the ground everywhere. In the library, Charlotte lay snugly in her stroller while I pored slowly through the new releases. I sweated with anxiety, but I was there. Over the course of an hour, I piled one book after another into the stroller basket. I could feel my self coming back to me.

One year later, I have completely recovered from PPD. I am working again, and every Tuesday Anthony comes home a little early and the three of us go to the library. We're always there for an hour or two—me immersed in the books, my husband drowning in DVDs—and then we reconvene in the children's section. When we leave, Anthony carries Charlotte out because the stroller is laden with Baby Einstein tapes, picture books, magazines and books on CD. As a working mother, I have little time to read, but making those library trips and seeing those books stacked on the coffee table are a weekly reminder that I have healed. 📖

COMING TO AMERICA

bie han tan, 49 el sobrante, california

I WAS 10 WHEN MY FAMILY moved to New York City. We came from Indonesia, where revolution and political violence had ravaged our nation. Throughout my childhood there, our family owned only two or three books. My favorite memory is of my mother reading to us from a book of fairy tales while we gathered around her on the floor. She read wonderfully, getting up occasionally to act out a part and do the voices of the wicked stepmother or the big bad wolf.

Imagine being transported from a place where greenery abounds and children play barefoot year

PHOTOGRAPH: ERIKA LARSEN. HAIR & MAKEUP: STEPHANIA PARENT FOR FORD ARTISTS

round into the middle of crowded, bustling Manhattan. It was frightening and overwhelming, to say the least. My father was able to find work as a civil engineer, at a salary that to us seemed unimaginably generous, but was not enough to support a family of five in New York City. We ended up living on the thirteenth floor of a government-subsidized building in “the projects.”

Since I spoke little English, school was difficult. One time my teacher asked me to bring in lettuce for our class pet and the class roared with laughter when I said I didn’t know what lettuce was.


Then one day our class went on a field trip to our local public library, where every wall was stacked floor to ceiling with rows and rows of books. What I remember most clearly was the repetitive chatter in my mind: “It’s free! I can borrow any books I want and bring them back and take out some more and it’s free, it’s free, it’s free...” All my classmates gathered around the books for our age group. Knowing that I was not ready for those, I put my pride aside and sat in the section

with the easiest books. Not knowing how to select a book, I just took the first few. I ran home after school that day and told my mother all about this amazing place. She didn’t believe me, so I dragged her there, where I showed her how to get her very own library card.

As soon as I read all the books, I took home the next six on the shelf, then the next, and so on, until I worked my way up to my age group. Within a month

of my first library visit, I surprised everyone, myself most of all, by winning the school spelling bee. Sensing my potential, my teacher helped me gain acceptance into Hunter College H.S., one of the most prestigious high schools in New York, from which admission to college was virtually guaranteed. There, I learned how to use the library for much more than just recreational reading.

Throughout my life I have been blessed with good fortune. But without the library, I would not have had the educational opportunities that have led to where I am today. I now teach math at a local community college.

And my mom? She walks to the library two or three times a week. Whenever I want to know about anything, be it a health problem or some international crisis, she happily sits in the reference section and researches the topic. Within a week she sends me all the information she has found. And yes, she has also learned how to use the Internet, at the library. 



Bie Han Tan

MOM ON A MISSION

lyne cavanaugh, 62
sparta, new jersey

THERE WAS ONLY ONE reason that I went to the Sparta Library for the first time in September 1978. It was a last resort. I had my year-and-a-half-old daughter, Katie, with me and I couldn’t bear to go back to the hotel and stare at the beige walls and ’50s furniture.

We had just moved to Sparta, New Jersey, from Connecticut and I had naively believed our builder when he looked me in the eye and said, “Absolutely, you’ll be in your new house by Labor Day.”

So while my husband was happily at his new job, I was trying to make our month-long stay at the Valley View Hotel an “adventure.” My endeavor had a short lifespan. Eating at Burger King and walking back and forth to the post office got old quickly.

The one bright spot became my daily detour to the library. I headed there with Katie every morning after her sister and brother were off at school. The kind librarian took pity on me and allowed Katie to be a late registrant to her story hour. It was wonderful.

As a girl I always had a book in progress, but as a young mother my reading became random snippets—tabloids at the grocery store checkout and outdated magazine articles at the pediatrician’s office. Suddenly there was a wealth of books, and I had plenty of time.

While Katie discovered Dr. Seuss and Amelia Bedelia, I discovered *everything*. I started off practical with the Interior Decorating shelves. I quickly upgraded to Architecture and Structural Engineering.

Next I was drawn to the History section and learned everything about our new town. I moved on to Travel, Real Estate, Antiques, Furniture Restoration, Constitutional Law and Biographies.

Over the 30 years that followed, I put all that literary exposure to use: I offered decorating services and did one-day makeovers (before anyone heard of *Trading Spaces*). I hunted antiques shops for design projects and restored old cupboards and tables. I became a *(Please turn to 140)*



Lynne Cavanaugh

PHOTOGRAPHS: MICHAEL COFER (left); DIANE CONNORS

trustee of the Sparta Historical Society and a licensed real estate agent. I volunteered at the local prosecutor's office, went back to school and earned a paralegal certification. I am active on various charitable boards and know how to organize fundraisers.

I still visit the Sparta Public Library weekly. I know everyone there and we're comfortable old friends. To say I love our library is like saying that pecan pie is "just OK." The difference is, now I take my grandchildren!

The library did not just change my life. It directed it, enhanced it and quite possibly saved it. (Thirty years ago

feel-good support groups for displaced home buyers didn't exist. I'm sure now they meet every Tuesday somewhere.)

I had to survive alone at the library...lucky me. 📖

OUT OF THE DARK

**beth finke, 48
chicago**

THE SPOTS SHOWED UP during our honeymoon. "An eye disease," ophthalmologists back home told us. "Retinopathy." It was October 1984.

A year later, I was blind.

To say it was a tough year is an understatement. I've always been independent, but entertaining myself that year was particularly difficult. I never liked TV much when I could see well, so having to struggle to watch it seemed absurd. I used to spend hours at our upright piano playing Broadway tunes and pop songs. Now, unable to see the music, I was limited to plinking out simple pieces. Playing was unrewarding. Depressing.

My husband, Mike, helped the cause with a Christmas gift: a secondhand fiddle. It was a struggle, but after a few

have you started your own business?

If you've used the inspiration and extensive resources at the library to help you start and run a successful business, tell us how in an essay of 700 words or less. Up to four women will be featured in an upcoming issue of *Woman's Day*. Go to womansday.com/ala between February 13 and May 10 for official rules and how to enter.

MARY IVORY

lessons I was able to scratch out a tune. What a relief it was learning to do something new, something hard, when I was starting to fail at simple things like stepping over curbs. Or making the morning coffee. Or reading.

Moving my eyes to read words on a page shifted the blobs and spots marring my vision, often obscuring the very text I was trying to read. But I was determined to continue reading newspapers, spreading the paper out on the floor and hovering over it like a robot. I'd hold my head still while moving my body back and forth, scanning the pages. I checked out large-print books from the library, but found that the larger print was worse—wider words required more eye movement.

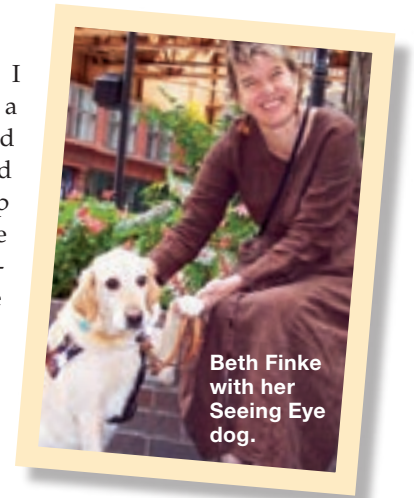
My vision worsened. I lost my job with a study abroad program (this was before the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed). I quit reading. Surgeries were attempted. One day a hospital social worker brought in a box the size and weight of a Chicago phone book. "A special tape recorder," she explained, "from the Library of Congress."

That tape recorder saved my life.

The Library of Congress provided me with free books on tape in the hospital. Listening to books was my escape from the medical tests and all the bad news. Had it not been for my books I would have given up completely.

Twenty years later, I am a freelance writer, a teacher and a published author. I get around Chicago with the help of a lovable Seeing Eye dog. Still happily married, Mike and I are the proud parents of a 19-year-old son.

But I still need an escape. And I still use an oversize tape recorder at home (free from the Library of Congress) to listen to books. I am privileged and proud to live in a country where the Library of Congress provides free braille and recorded materials to eligible blind citizens by postage-free mail. All I have to do is call an 800 number and order them. The tapes are mailed to me and when I'm finished, I flip over an address card on the special container and slip the whole thing into my mailbox to return it. The funny thing is, because I can listen to books while I clean the house, I read more books now than I did when I could see. **wd**



Beth Finke with her Seeing Eye dog.