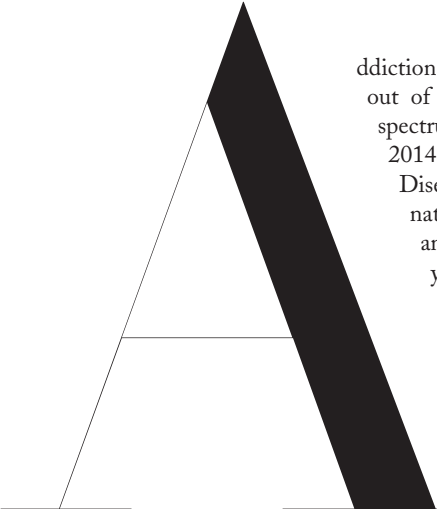


THE STORIES WE TELL

A Ruston group strives to turn the tide of addiction, abuse and grief

By Charles Paxton and illustration by Jason Raish



ddiction, substance abuse and its associated issues permeate society, often out of sight, but damaging nevertheless. It seems everyone across all spectrums knows someone struggling with addiction or in recovery. In 2014, Louisiana reported 777 overdoses according to the Centers for Disease Control. The Louisiana Department of Health identifies natural and synthetic opioids, including prescription painkillers, as an increasing source of risk. Overdoses kill nearly 44,000 Americans yearly, according to the International Overdose Awareness Day website. Abuse of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs represents a \$700 billion annual cost nationally due to associated crime, lost work productivity and health care according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Can we help ourselves and others heal by airing and sharing tales of suffering and recovery? That premise underpins a new community business project in Ruston called StoryTellers Life Changing.

StoryTellers Life Changing, established by social worker Erika McFarland, provides a multi-platform forum for the process of healing exchange. Deeply personal revelations strike chords with others, enthusing, inspiring determination and healing wounds in speakers, volunteers and audience members.

Adverse experiences drew McFarland to social work. She was exposed at 13 to drugs, alcohol, domestic violence, sexual assault and self-harming in her own home, through friends and in her community.

“Being a witness to these things helped to shape the person I am today: loving, caring, compassionate, empathetic and with a heart for helping others to be emotionally healthy,” says McFarland.



McFarland increasingly found herself taking therapeutic roles, intervening and consoling others. After she was raped at age 16, McFarland's mother put her into therapy with Tammy Smith.

"Tammy, with Jesus, worked miracles to get me back to a healthy state of mind," says McFarland. "Helping me see past my crisis and onto the other side, where I was free, renewed and the rest of my life was waiting on me. Once I was emotionally healthy again, I realized that I wanted to do the same for others."

So how does communication help?

"Communication is very important to the process of healing," says McFarland. "Communication allows a person to release all of the thoughts and emotions that they may be thinking and feeling, so that they can be free from the pain and achieve total healing."

McFarland hopes that "by hearing someone else's story a person can be encouraged and inspired to tackle the open wounds they may have so that they too can be healed. Revelations 12:11 says, 'They triumphed over him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony.'"

McFarland lists Smith, Dr. Steven Perry and Iyanla Vanzant as powerful influences in her career development. They are each therapists who use their gifts to help restore people emotionally, spiritually and mentally. Now McFarland works with clients including women, adolescents and children, some with behavioral issues, domestic violence survivors, some suffer from depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

A month after college graduation, McFarland says she discussed with a friend how so many people have stories to tell, but don't feel comfortable with or perhaps have the tools for using forms of expression such as music, dance or poetry. That conversation led to the idea of creating an outlet similar to TED Talks for people to share their life stories.

"I've witnessed people share things that their own parents never knew," says McFarland. "The courage that a person has to have in order to open up to a group of strangers and knowing that it will be posted online for thousands of people to see is remarkable. With that being said, it's also very difficult. You begin to think about all the things that have happened in your life and that isn't easy. Many times I have seen people begin their process of healing when asked to share their story. I love to see the transformation and the overcoming point."

McFarland shared her vision and how it would impact people with former fellow Grambling State University student, friend and fellow church member Kelsey Kyser, who is now the group's videographer.



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"I was honored and privileged to be a part of something so powerful," says Kyser. "The various stories I've heard really enlightened me to the backgrounds and obstacles a lot of people have to go through. I believe we should most definitely give others an outlet for their story to be heard as well."

The enthusiastic testimonies of the StoryTellers appear mostly unscripted, but follow a similar pattern. Each speaker acknowledges God's instructive use of their weakness and the divine external source of their recovery, strength and resilience from a broken state contrasting with the weakness of "self."

StoryTeller Riley McEacharn wasn't initially going to tell certain parts of her life story, but felt guided to do so the night before her talk.

"StoryTellers allowed me to step outside of myself and focus on the healing of others," McEacharn says, "Erika set that environment. I was inspired to speak at StoryTellers because of the passion Erika conveyed...I want to be a part of something bigger than myself daily."

Michael Hankins says since his talk, many people have approached him to let him know that his story influenced them. He says his story has been essential to his practical and spiritual development.

"When we shed light on the dark areas of our life in order to glorify God we receive healing in those areas," says Hankins "Through sharing my story, I have found a kind of comfort and peace in aspects of myself I thought I could never come to terms with...When we reach the edge of our character we find the limit to our own abilities. It is through this discovery that we can communicate where resilience comes in: faith. When we reach the edge of ourselves and choose to continue on we are then operating outside of what should be possible. We are allowing God to place His 'super' upon our natural. To answer the question of the communicability of resilience, I can only point to where I have failed and God has taken over. I do that through my story."

For its next phase, McFarland is developing "Erika Speaks." A series of talks centered on her own story.

"My hope is to educate the community about grief and all that comes with it," says McFarland. "I also want to get more into the churches, bringing awareness to different issues that affect so many people of different backgrounds. It's important to share your story. My belief is that our story isn't for us, but for others. What is birthed out of our trials and tribulations is ours, but our story is for someone else. For example, StoryTellers is my gift from God. It's my baby that has been birthed through all of the hurt and pain in my life, but the story of it all isn't mine. God gave me a story to tell, so that's what I'm going to do."



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