

**SUNSHINE**  
**A story by Margy Mayk, Co-Director**  
**Step by Step of Rochester,<sup>1</sup> Inc.**

Sunshine is my friend. We first met when Sunshine attended a Life History Workshop for incarcerated women that Step by Step of Rochester was offering at Albion Correctional Facility.

When Sunshine came to her first session, she was over 55, frightfully timid and withdrawn, huddled down in her seat, seemingly afraid of her own voice, and not making eye contact. As I look back, however, we had missed a lot, things that later would please and, indeed, astonish us. For, from the beginning, Sunshine's determination was evident. She kept returning to class and always did her work. These were good signs.

Group readings and individual written assignments are key activities in Step by Step's Life History Workshops.<sup>2</sup> Early on, Sunshine passed when it was her turn to read. In these groups, women know they must share, but only to the degree they are comfortable in doing so. Therefore, whenever it was Sunshine's turn to read, we merely asked her to say, "I pass." No questions asked. This gave Sunshine an opportunity to be heard, but only when she was ready. In addition, Sunshine was apparently insecure, at the very least, about writing, for she had another woman in her unit help her to compose her homework assignments.

My co-facilitator and I had begun to think that Sunshine was could not read or write. However this was soon to change. At the completion of the first eight-week series of workshops and the start of the second, it was time for the reading assignment. When the woman to Sunshine's left had finished her selection, the woman to Sunshine's right, assuming Sunshine would pass, immediately began.

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<sup>1</sup> See Step by Step of Rochester, Inc. on [www.smartny.org](http://www.smartny.org) at "For Women" on the "Reentry Services and Resources" page and on the "Members and Partners" page.

<sup>2</sup> During Sunshine's time, there were seven distinct sets of Life History workshops that, while not strictly sequential address different skill sets and needs. Now there are (2007) eight: Live Your Dreams, Let Your Light Shine, Claiming the Power of Our Voices, Women Brave, The Tree, Taming the Lion, Gift Giving, and Parenting.

This time, however, Sunshine uttered , "I . . . I . . . I . . . ," in a halting and timid voice.

At this, a facilitator asked Sunshine if she wanted to say something. Sunshine responded, "Well . . . I . . . I thought . . . I . . . might . . . read."

In an instant, the entire class of twenty-five fell stone-silent, as if holding their breaths.

Then Sunshine began. She read out next section and, without pausing, two following ones - three in a row. As she paused, all twenty-five women rose, applauded, and patted her back. There was not a dry eye in the room.

From her first workshop to this moment, ten to eleven weeks later, Sunshine had revealed to us that she was the daughter of alcoholics and regularly abused. There was ample reason why Sunshine had become fearful of her own voice.

From that night on, Sunshine always took her turn to read. We noticed also that all of Sunshine's written assignments were in what looked like youngster's handwriting.

On graduation night, at the conclusion of the second of seven distinct sets of workshops, Sunshine came forward to receive the certificate of completion with a gold star for perfect attendance that she had earned. In front of everyone, she said, "Because of the work we've been doing in Step by Step, I began to remember I had learned how to read and write, and I've been practicing ever since."

Sunshine had been sentenced to four years in state prison and she had just begun the sentence when she entered her first Step by Step group. It is important to say that Sunshine was the first woman in Step by Step's experience to complete all seven sets of these workshops. This was an outstanding accomplishment, a testament to Sunshine's determination and strength. Moreover, Sunshine had reached to others for help with reading and writing. This took considerable backbone. In sum, over a year and a half, Sunshine had told us a great deal about her growth in understanding of who she was and who she was becoming.

Because the workshops are strength-based, woman in the group gave Sunshine considerable feedback, particularly in naming strengths they heard in her because of the manner in which she shared her life experiences. Though initially Sunshine seemed to disregard these responses because they didn't seem real to her, eventually she incorporated them. Her classmates' repetition and assurances took root, sprouted, and flourished.

In the course of Sunshine's testimony, she had related stories of her marriage to abusive husbands and her habitation with an equally abusive boyfriend. Things were changing, however. On the night of her graduation from the seventh workshop, and because she was the first person in Step by Step experience to have achieved it, Sunshine earned a second certificate. This was made especially for the occasion. It explicitly listed Sunshine's achievement as well as the beginning and end dates of the seven workshops, all but the first marked with the gold stars that signified perfect attendance.

With the certificate in hand, Sunshine spoke out again: she had learned so much about herself that she could now speak boldly, and this obviously inspired others in the room: "Standing here tonight I realize that at the beginning, when I thought I had it, I really had not gotten it at all. Will you allow me to begin again? There is so much more I have to learn. Otherwise, why would I be talking about moving back in with a man who regularly beats me? Today I am a recovering alcoholic. How can I even think about returning to an active alcoholic. I have to start learning how to live all over again."

Sunshine did in fact complete the entire second round of seven workshops. And, now, she was to appear before the Parole Board to request early release from her four year sentence. As is often true when incarcerated people face Parole, the response was negative. The Board denied Sunshine's petition, meaning she would have to serve out the remaining year and a half of her term in prison.

Again, Sunshine demonstrated steadfastness in her own unique way.

Over the course of nine years, we of Step by Step have known women who did not appear in class the evening following their Parole Board disappointments. Not so with Sunshine. She did come to class that night, a mere two weeks before she would complete the second set of workshops.

Not only this, but Sunshine said to us, "Tonight I am grateful that the Board 'hit' me because they must see in me a need to grow more. The best way I can think to do this is to ask you to let me start the workshops again."

This was not as if Sunshine did not have other things to do. Indeed, in addition to her regular duties and further to enhance her situation, she was studying to earn her GED and taking every other course offered during her recreation modules. And Sunshine did stay with Step by Step groups until her release to the Adirondacks, where her daughter lived.

Three and a half years later, Sunshine contacted us. She wanted to make a spirituality recovery weekend retreat Step by Step offered to graduates. There, Sunshine shared with us a book, "My Journal to Freedom," that she had produced. We were elated and astounded as we looked through it. Demonstrating computer skills I cannot even now imagine, Sunshine had created a gorgeous display of most poetic reflections on her journey into a life that is free and joyous.

Sunshine, now 66 year old, is very much changed from the meek individual we had first met almost a decade ago. She has presence. She stands erect and, with a warm smile, she is at ease yet exudes confidence. Sunshine has become a real and strong person in the light of her own travail, discoveries, and maturation.

### **My New Life**

by Sunshine, March 18, 2004

As I venture on into a world of my own,  
I will experience the freedom of being  
Who I really want to be. I will know the  
joy of the opportunities I have set out to  
explore. Life will have its ups and downs,  
but I know I will accomplish the  
necessary  
things I need to do. I will take steps  
that will lead me in the right direction.

I have a positive attitude, and I'm very  
pleased on how my life has turned out so  
far. I have come a long way, and I will  
continue to meet my goals. I will meet  
new challenges each day, and will over-  
come all obstacles that will hinder me.  
I will take one day at a time, and I have  
my Higher Power to guide me through.

My Journey through life will be a  
challenging  
and rewarding one.

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