

Featured Writer Interview with Barbara Lambert

Barbara Lambert, who just turned 73, is a longtime Portland resident—so long in fact that she attended Kennedy School when it was actually a school, not a quirky hotel with a soaking pool. These were the days when you could cut real estate deals with your neighbor with a handshake and a \$50 down payment. Or so Barbara tells it, and listening to her stories is a delight. In our interview, like in her writing, she opens up about her upbringing in Portland, her dad’s work as a railroad engineer, and how she and her mother survived after his passing.

This past fall Barbara participated in our creative writing workshop where she lives at Whitewood Gardens Residential Care Facility.



Life Without My Dad When I was Ten

Barbara Lambert

I am very sad and worried about my life without my dad. My mother cries all the time and it is my job to be brave for her. Dad died in an accident with a rototiller.

Mother found a job at Meier & Frank in the bedding department. It is a very hard job because my mother is only 5’2”. I am liking school and I work hard at my studies.

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Interview with Featured Writer Barbara Lambert

Interviewed by Alexa Weinstein, Write Around Portland volunteer facilitator.

Tell me about your experience in the Write Around Portland workshop.

The workshop is very good at bringing back old memories, things that we have stuffed away into the backs of our brains. It makes us think about it, review it and hopefully most of those thoughts are good thoughts. For me it brought back pleasant memories.

Do you recall anything specific that when you were writing you started to remember?

Well, when I was 9 years old my father died which was huge. Huge. It left my mom and I by ourselves and she was worried all the time. Because she hadn’t been supporting us at all—she was a housewife and my father had been a railroad engineer and had made a good salary. His death was huge in many ways. Besides not having a father any more we also were in a position where we had to watch our pennies. There was one real positive thing which was the house was paid for. So my mother didn’t have to worry about mortgage payments, she only had to worry about taxes and upkeep and maintenance. So that is part of getting into the workshop, those memories came back. It was good to remember that.

Even the painful parts?

Yeah.

So you think you remember new things or different things by writing about it?

Probably some new things that I hadn't thought about before. Now that we're looking at it 60 years later (laughs). Yeah, because I was 9.

I remember you wrote a lot of powerful things about your father's death when we were in the workshop and that there were a lot of memories about you and your mother after he had passed. Had you ever written about that time before?

Uh-uhn.

This was the first time you ever wrote about it?

Yeah.

How did that feel to get that onto paper?

It felt good, I think. It has its own way of purging itself from our memory banks. Releasing it. I was an only child, an only adopted child so I didn't have any sibling to share things with. Fortunately, I had some really close girlfriends so I had someone to talk to. I didn't talk to my mother about it because it was too painful for her. She was in her own little world of misery. Because she had to support us now. She had never done that before; she had to get a job. It ended up she found a job she really, really liked. She sold women's clothes at Lipman's and she was real good at it. She wasn't one of those salespeople that tried to talk you into everything. She would say—if she didn't like it on you—she'd say "I'll go find you something that looks better on ya". Instead of "Oh, honey, that's the cutest thing I ever saw."

A lot of what you wrote about your father and mother is very intimate, deep sharing. Did you feel nervous about doing that in the workshop?

No...no. I didn't say anything bad. If I'd been venting or something like that, you know, sharing it with the group probably would have been bad for me, but I didn't have anything to vent about really. Because I had a pretty good childhood...with a few bumps.

Do you think that writing down memories is different from talking about them? Does it feel different?

It feels different in that it's evidence. It's documentation.

What's good or bad about that, about writing things down?

Well...the good thing is that I can refer back to it at some other time. I'll be real honest: I only have one son and there's no way in hell he'll read this stuff. There's no way he'll be interested. So I don't have to worry about that.

I guess you can say whatever you want then.

I guess. I hadn't thought about it that way, but it's true.

Did it change your relationships with people here, that you had shared these intimate stories?

It may have made the relationships deeper. It adds a depth that it adds to any relationship when you're just getting to know someone and you share a bunch of stuff, because then they learn more stuff about you and how you respond to stuff. Yeah.

Do you want to say anything about being published in the book? Was that an important experience for you?

I thought it was nice, yeah. It didn't throw me into rapture. Probably few people will read it. Probably most people won't read it.

I don't know. It's at Powell's, it's at the library. It's out there in the world now. I was wondering on my way over here: we do a lot of workshops in residential care buildings like these ones. Do you think we should keep doing workshops like this?

Yes. It gives people something to think about. What am I going to write about next week? Yeah.

If they were going to do another workshop around here, would you recommend it to a new friend who lived here or somebody who was thinking about it? If they asked, why should I do it? If they said, Oh it sounds like a pain, why would I go?

Well you might learn something new about yourself.

Good reason.

Yeah, because when you write own words you have to think about how it affects you right that minute or how it affects you in the future. I would tell them to do it.