

Advocating Creatively
by Anne Pasquale

Why does anybody do anything? Because they have to.

My dad was a carpenter – he built things. One of my young students studying colonial times recently said, “Oh, you mean he was a craftsman – a housewright.” I said, “Yes.” My dad definitely was a craftsman. Every day he made use of his strength, girth, sense of space and proportion, his Venetian sensibility, and he built things. He crafted strong homes and wonderful facilities that housed and sheltered people he cared about – whether he met them on the job or had known them all his life. He was never idle or out the door later than 7am. I loved and admired him for that: his early morning rises; his resourceful and tireless work ethic.

I guess that is why I too am a craftsperson – writing and creating and performing works that serve. I just can't help myself. I don't have much patience for works that don't. Why would you build something that's not as sturdy as a table or as necessary as a home? It seems to me to be a frivolous waste of one's time. Give me a topic worth teaching, a few good strong tangible metaphors, and you'll find me like my dad, at work. Throughout the years I have had the privilege of creating educational programs that tour schools, libraries and museums. I have self-taught myself American history and shared it with young audiences from kindergarten through high school. The topics of my plays cover a wide spectrum, from the hardships and triumphs of westward expansion told through the eyes of Calamity Jane, to the rebellious and emancipatory life-changing pen of Nellie Bly. I market these programs under the title Living History Programs and perform them throughout the school year along the East Coast. I created them to educate and entertain my audiences and myself. (You have not lived until you've stood beside a 3 foot 4 inch third grader, him grinning from ear to ear, dressed in an oversize cowboy hat, as he giggles and shakes your hand and you get him to say: “Little lady, you are a mighty fine lady. I names you Calamity Jane, ‘Heroine of the Plains’.”)

Over the years I have become fairly facile with plays in the one woman, quick change, no fuss format. I've adapted the shows for Broadway stages as well as over-sized janitor's closets. It takes tremendous energy and focus but is so rewarding. When I hear a gasp of disbelief, or see a room of 300 fifth graders sitting transfixed before me, I know that I am – regardless of anything else such as fame or money – in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. There are no words for moments like those. It's as if all is right with the world. It's these times when I feel I am most like my dad, standing on scaffolding, building, crafting. I am not crafting a home but images, memories, a transformative event. My shows may be the first live performance any of my young audience members have ever seen. Some teachers find the material a valuable resource for their social studies classrooms and refer to it for days to come. Like my dad, I choose every day to use my art, my craft, to serve, to educate, and in some small way, to make a difference. It simply makes me happy!

So I guess it's no wonder that two years ago I decided it was time to write my most ambitious piece to date, ***BOB: Blessed Be the Dysfunction That Binds***. Based on my family's story, BOB was written to shed light on the premise that when one person has mental illness the whole family has special needs. It follows my family on a crazy, crisis-filled ride as they grapple with

my brother's mental illness from his fateful fall as a toddler, through diagnosis, to middle aged acceptance, change and success. Through BOB, audiences are able to see the amazing progress we have made in the area of behavioral therapy and mental health care over the past 50 years. Progress that has led to success stories like ours and progress that, in the face of devastating budget cuts, could very well be lost or mitigated.

It's not an entirely new cast of characters for me – after all, I've used my family as prototypes throughout the years and they've made countless appearances in elementary school auditoriums. In *Liberty Belles*, my assembly program on immigration, I enter as my Italian grandmother, grab a dismayed teacher's attention and, speaking in broken English, demand to know, "Where is the musician? He was supposed to meet me at the door this morning!" This has become my favorite way to start the day! However, BOB represents the first time that I have dared to craft a performance for *adult* audiences and tell a story that I feel they need to hear.

I wrote BOB when I felt that I was finally well enough and strong enough to tell it. I read in Victoria Secunda's book "When Madness Comes Home" that it takes 40 years for a family to heal from mental illness. I believe that is true. I was only ready to write BOB once I had faced my life as a special needs sibling, broken old patterns, made some hard choices necessary to change, and was ready and free to be a worthy advocate. To date, we have done 30 performances of BOB and have another 50 scheduled. We have performed for general audiences, health advocates and university psychology departments. The program, which advocates for the mentally ill and their families, has been cited as emblematic of the good works done by a variety of healthcare providers. We have received the gracious support of the RI Office of Rehabilitative Services, ReFocus, and VSA arts Rhode Island, the Cardinal Cushing Center, Growthways, and VSA Massachusetts, Fordham and Columbia universities, Fountain House, St. Malachy's Church/The Actors Chapel, and the Guggenheim Museum.

It is through this work that I have been able to advocate for myself and have received the new found love and support of my family. My mom, before I brought back the work to my home state, said, "I just can't see it. I hope you understand. I just can't live through it again. But if it does someone else some good, please do it." My sister Donna, who did not even want to see the work, is now in the process of building key set elements and acts as our out-of-town director. My older brother David outlined a key scene that illuminates my father's journey. I am so grateful and proud that I can now go home again.

Where do I go from here? It is my hope that I and my work will continue to have the opportunity to serve. Make no mistake, I love it when audiences laugh at my craziness, or identify with my pain, and walk away, saying, "Wow. I needed to see that." Or when a kid comes up to me, smiles, and says, "I loved your show!" Or a teacher says, "This was so worthwhile," or "That show spoke to me personally," or "I'm just really glad I came." However, that's not the thing that makes me happiest. It's getting up early, like my dad, seeing the sunrise, and having the opportunity to create and craft something that will be put to good use.

To find out more about Anne and her work, go to bobtheshow.com and/or www.livinghistoryprograms.com