

Alexa Bigwarfe: It's really a joy today in the Women In Publishing summit to bring you this fantastic group of women with a very, very vast backgrounds and knowledge areas and life experiences. Our panel discussion today is really, really tightly connected to our overall theme of the summit. And that is using your words to change the world, the power of our words to make a difference basically. And this panel is going to dig deep into that with, we've titled it Embracing Your Story and Sharing Your Story. And basically the idea here is how we can take our own personal stories and make a bigger impact in the world. So, I am going to make sure that we have included everyone's full bios inside the message content, the content area of this post. So if you're listening to the audio or listen, you know, not sitting there and make sure you go back and actually look at the post so you can find out about all of these incredible women and the links to get to them. And really quickly we're going to go through and offer everybody the opportunity to introduce themselves. So you know who's speaking and we will start with Nina. Thank you and welcome so much to all of you.

Neena Speer: Yes. Hi Guys. My name is Neena Speer and I am from Birmingham, Alabama, and I'm an attorney at law here and I am the recently published author of Dear Future Lawyer: An Intimate Survival Guide for the Minority Female Law Student

Alexa Bigwarfe: Wow, that sounds like a very relevant topic. Right now. Thank you for being here. All right, Lara.

Lara Lazenby: I'm Lara. I'm from Florida. I'm a four time cancer survivor. I've had dialysis, kidney transplant, you name it. I was originally diagnosed in 1975, so I'm a 43 year survivor so my big deal is helping others embrace their scars and stay groovy despite life's blind sides. And I just recently published my novel Scar Scribbles And The Power of Crayons. It started out as a memoir, but that didn't work. So changed it

Alexa Bigwarfe: That's amazing. Well, congratulations for being here and alive, first and foremost.

Lara Lazenby: Thanks.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Alright, Melinda.

Melinda Kunst: Hi, I'm Melinda Kunst and I am a survivor of domestic violence as an adult and also child abuse. So I wrote my book Call Me Master. That was my first one and that was a memoir based on what I experienced as a child and as well as an adult, so I have experienced at least 25 plus years of abuse and I just chronologically went through how I got healed from that and then I did have a second book that was Rising From the Ashes as well on how I healed my ptsd.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Wow. Amazing. Glad to have you here to talk about that. That's amazing. Lois.

- Lois Strachan: Hi, I'm Lois. I became blind at the age of 21 and my books really are based on showing that disability doesn't mean inability, so I have a set of four children's books, The Adventures of Missy Mouse which show children that someone who's visually impaired is simply a normal person who does things in different ways and my memoir, A Different Way of Seeing is just showing the tools and techniques that I use to accomplish everyday tasks, spiced with a few of the stories of things that I've done since losing my sight.
- Alexa Bigwarfe: Wow. Hi. I'm already flabbergasted and we have three more guests to introduce. Lyn.
- Lyn Fairchild: Hi everyone. I'm Lyn Fairchild Hawks here from North Carolina, I have been honored to be a teacher for many years and now I'm a young adult author and I met so many amazing kids along the way who were survivors of many things and it inspired me, as I hopefully inspired them while they were my students to tell their truths and tell their stories in the classroom through creative writing, I decided to write a story kind of an amalgamation of many stories. I had heard about a girl named Wendy who was a survivor of sexual assault and how she gets through that. So that became a book called How Wendy Red Bird Dancing Survived The Dark Ages of Nought. And then I collaborated with a wonderful illustrator, Robin Follet on a graphic novel called Minerda about a girl who's bullied for being gifted. And I really have a strong heart for kids who are gifted, weird and wise and aren't honored in their community because they're acting too smart. So those are the stories that I've formed. I've just been so inspired by a lot of really strong youth out there.
- Alexa Bigwarfe: Wow. And, you know, I want to take a moment to interject here that this is, this is an excellent example of, it doesn't have to be your story. If you're a talented storyteller, you can change the world by writing it through someone else's eyes or of someone else's story. So thank you. That's, that's incredible that you have become a voice for these people with a voice or without feeling like they can have a voice. So that's great. Kristyn.
- Kristyn Levis: Hi everyone. I'm Kristyn Levis. I'm in Sydney, Australia. I'm originally from the Philippines and I'm the author of two Young Adult books, The Girl Between Two Worlds and The Middle Between Light and Dark. And these books were originally, it came from my desire to write about my culture because my daughter is growing up in Australia. And that means that the Filipino mythology is lost on her. She doesn't, she's not growing up in the Philippines. So I thought I need to share that story with her. I need to share our mythology, our culture with her. And I couldn't find any books here with those things so I figured, "Why not write it myself?" So it ended up being a project for my daughter and then a publisher picked it up and it, it ended up becoming a best selling young adult novel. I'm really surprised that it ended up like that, it was just for her. It's like a project for her.
- Alexa Bigwarfe: Well, and that's another cool point. It doesn't have to be sad either. It can be a good story, it can be stories that are helping people embrace who they are no

matter what that situation is. That's really cool. What a cool thing for you to do. Kori.

Kori: Hi, I'm Kori [Tomelden] and I am from Albany, New York and I am in the process of starting my first memoir. I'm still not sure what part of my life it's going to chronicle. I had self esteem issues as a teenager that took me about 20 years to finally reconcile with and I have two adult children with special needs. I write a lot about that on my blog, in particular with my autistic daughter, she's nonverbal autistic, so she will be with me the rest of her adult life that's my background.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Thank you for sharing that. I mean I just had chills listening to each one of you and it really like I, you know, it's, thank you all for being here and for being brave enough to use your voices, whether it's your own story or someone else's for, you know, taking your words and making a difference in our world and, and helping to share whether it's cultural or whether it's, you know, how people treat you and respond to you. I think it's so important. What I'd like to do now is offer the opportunity and we'll go in the same order because, you know, there are, there are lots of us, everybody has a story, like we could talk to any woman anywhere and there's something in her life and her story. So I would like to know what it was that made you decide to be a voice for the cause that you are standing up on. Kristyn. We kind of, we might ask you a little bit of a different question, but we'll start with Nina again and go around and I'll have to come up with a special question for Kristyn at the end today, but what made you decide, you know, I'm gonna stand up, I'm going to help other people realize either they're not alone or show the world why we need to do something different or whatever it was that made you jump in that way.

Neena Speer: Thanks, Alexa. So I always like to tell people, if want to get specific, It's very rare that you find people who learn and connect with you based off of uninhibited success. It's usually through countless failures that people open up to you and they listen to you, not because you don't know what you're talking about until you fail, but you really just don't know how exactly you come out of life that you experienced, you know, crushing failure until someone really, you know, take something from you that you truly value. With me it was school and grades and failing the bar exam and almost flunking out of law school, and then to be an attorney now is just, it's a shock and awe game, but throughout my entire life I have met women and the best way that I have learned to connect with women in general is for us to be more honest and transparent about our own failures.

Neena Speer: And that has been the biggest hangup is that we always try to maintain this strong facade and that's just not, that's not the reality I wanted to lead. I've always lead with, "I'm going to tell you how it is." My favorite catch phrase is "Do you want the truth or do you want me to sugar coat it?" I usually use my life and my testimony as a true, honest depiction of what really happened to me. And it's not necessarily, you know, easy. It's not necessarily fun for me to tell that story, but I would much rather you be inspired by who I really am than some fake person. So that's my big motivation.

Alexa Bigwarfe: That's such a great point. We've talked a lot about authenticity with different people throughout all of this thing. And it is very, very true. I think when you're selling a book, especially when it's a memoir or self help or something based on something that's very deep and personal, authenticity is so important because people can read right through it. If you say, you know, what are you, I have an example, but I won't call out the author in here, but there's a very popular self help author out there right now who I don't believe is authentic at all. And when I read her book, I threw it away. So that's not the impact you want to have on people if you come from a very, very like there's what it is, truth, truth side. So all right, Lara.

Lara Lazenby: It's extremely difficult to be vulnerable. It's hard to open yourself up. I've spent my life hiding and one of the things I've had to deal with is really exposing and getting down to the reality of cancer. There are a lot of books out there that kind of skim the surface. But when I was growing up, when I was in elementary school and a teenager, and even as a young adult, there were no books about people like me back in those days. There were no ribbons, bubbles, beads, colors representing any of us, and I started out writing a memoir and I was going to write about my late effects, my late effects of sterility and not being able to have children. It's been very devastating, but it didn't quite work out that way. The little girl in me wouldn't shut up, so I started with my seven year old self and it's important that we're authentic and I'm going to share something I've never shared with anyone.

Lara Lazenby: It's one of the reasons why it's taking me so long to write my book because there's. I have never met anyone else like me in this regard and I know there are other young girls and women out there that are suffering alone. We all cry in our pillow at three or four in the morning. Grief is grief because we feel ostracized and we feel alone. But I found out when I was 14, number one, that I would never have children because of the late effects, but I also never went through puberty. I have the body of a five year old. I had breast implants at the age of 16. I saw commercial growing up about getting your cat neutered or spayed and I didn't know what that was. So I looked it up and it said without male nor female parts. So that is how I grew up and that is what I believed all through college.

Lara Lazenby: And it's only, it's only been in my forties now, I'm 51 where I started coming to grips with that and I haven't got that book out yet. But that's what I'm working on now. And it's difficult and it's beautiful to see every single one of your faces here because we all suffer and we cry. But we are not alone. Well, we are not alone. We are a sisterhood. And together we are more powerful. I have never shared this story in public ever, but I know that through this sisterhood we have the power to share those stories that no one else wants to hear. We're here and we're speaking now

Alexa Bigwarfe: And it's, and you know what? If I can, everyone obviously is very touched by Lara's story.

Lara Lazenby: Sorry.

Alexa Bigwarfe: If I can take a deep breath here. This is the power of our words right here in embracing your story. And I assure you, you're not the only person. I can't identify with your exact, but I will identify with feeling very alone with what, you know, what with whatever I may have gone through and I know I'm writing for grieving mothers. I mean the response that I often get is "I feel so alone, no one understands." So I mean, right, you've nailed it like this is why. Because we've taken the step to say, I know I want other people to feel like they aren't alone. I want to share my journey to help someone else. Thank you.

Lara Lazenby: Sorry.

Alexa Bigwarfe: This is why I only do this with women because we can have our therapy session all here together.

Lara Lazenby: It is therapy, when we write, and when we bare our soul and tell our stories, every single one of us have done that and we need to celebrate that.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Agree. Agree. Melinda. How about that?

Melinda Kunst: That was beautiful. Thank you. Thank you and it's like you were talking to my soul, you really were. You said so many words that are exactly why I did my own book. I didn't want to publish it. I'll be honest with you because I didn't like being, sharing my vulnerability, sharing things that I was ashamed of. I didn't want to press that publish button, but I did have an urging from a higher power and also my family just said, you need to do this not just for you. You need to think out of the box this is for someone that is struggling silently like you were for so many, many years.

Melinda Kunst: Somebody that doesn't have a voice or feel like she has one, so that's why I published it. It wasn't for glory, for glamor. It's not for me. It's for someone else that's struggling out there and that feels so hopeless and they are silent and they don't know where to turn. They don't think they have anybody to help with them at all during their situation. So that's why I wrote this and it was very healing and it was a struggle as well because I had to dig deep and go back through my childhood up to the present. And there were a lot of memories when I was confronted with them. It was like hitting a wall. I would automatically, lots of triggers, automatically I would, like as an example, I started to wet the bed again. I started to have panic attacks, and I had to stop.

Melinda Kunst: I had to stop writing. So this was a long process. 2009 to 2017, so it took me a long time to get it out. It really did. But I am so happy I did. I was able to reach out. I figured if I can just touch one person to let them know that they're struggling right now, but they can find happiness they can overcome. And that there is beauty in this life even though they're not in it right now, but someday they'll get there. They will. They just have to take baby steps. They'll get there.

And, it was just very overpowering, overwhelming. And when I first got that email in the, oh gosh, actually it was a facebook message that someone said, "Thank you for writing that. I needed to hear this, that I'm not alone. That the struggle that I'm facing is real. I'm not crazy for feeling this way or for not getting out of bed and you get it." And that made a world of difference to me. And that made the whole thing worth it .

Alexa Bigwarfe: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for sharing that.

Melinda Kunst: I'm sorry.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Lois.

Lois Strachan: Just listening to what everyone else has been sharing. I think my reason for writing is very bright in comparison. I really wrote my book because one of my, I'm a professional speaker and one of my speaking mentors said to me that the challenge is that as an inspirational speaker telling my story, getting up on stage and just talking about the things that I do, people are sitting in the audience with the question, "Yes, but how." And to me it had never been an issue because I just thought it was, it didn't matter how I did it as long as I could do it and when I asked the question of friends and family and associates on Facebook, the message came back. "We are so curious about how you do things. Everything from selecting your clothing, applying your makeup, pouring a cup of coffee, cooking, traveling overseas, working with your guide dogs, everything."

Lois Strachan: And I really sat down and took the questions that people asked and went, I can answer those and a book is probably the best way to do that. And it was only after I wrote it and started sharing the book that I realized that there was a second audience of other people and the families of people going through visual impairments and blindness because it's a book that they can read and go, "Wow. I can still do things and I can experiment, I can find out what I can do, I can use technology" and it's just a way of empowering other people going through visual impairment to understand that the world isn't completely lost when they lose their sight.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Fantastic. Lyn.

Lyn Fairchild: Oh, this is so inspiring just to be part of this. The question is, how did my part begin, besides the students I told you about, about 10 years ago when the idea for the Wendy book was formed, I had just spoken to family and friends who also were survivors or had someone close to them who were survivors and that it overwhelmed me, the pain they were going through, I say it overwhelmed me. I can't imagine obviously what they were going through, but I felt so deeply for them. And then an interesting thing happened. I had my step son with me who was going through a lot of troubles to himself at the time. I don't think he'd mind me saying that he was kind of struggling with adolescent troubles and he

was very shut down and depressed and we were watching TV on June 25th, 2009 and Michael Jackson died and I tried to explain to him at age 11 who Michael Jackson was and how much he had impacted me and I walked away from that moment

Lyn Fairchild: not sure that I really connected with my stepson on this, but I thought, what if there was a girl who was a survivor and she's had no way to voice it because you think 2009 Tarana Burke was talking about #MeToo, but nobody was listening. Right? All of us women were experiencing sexual harassment, many experiencing assault, but it was not a culture where people talked about it much and it just hit me that a silenced girl could suddenly find a voice through worshiping a celebrity and that when he died it somehow activated this energy in her to find her voice. And I know that sounds like a really strange premise, but that's fiction for you, right? I think my brain was just turning going, I need to out this story somehow and so that's what happened is also, and I grew up with Michael Jackson, I mean he was my hero when I was in high school and so we all know he has a complicated history since a lot of things have come out and people have different stories and I was dealing with all of that in the book because there's a lot of gray in this, but what is not gray is that survivors need to be able to tell their stories.

Lyn Fairchild: We need to listen. And finally it seemed like in the last three or four years, America is a culture woke up to "Oh, me too." And you know, seeing all these women post that on social media was so empowering and going back through my own history of things that had happened to me and saying, "Oh my gosh, yeah, that was harassment. Oh, that was assault." But as a 50 year old woman, not feeling like I had the power to say that. So that's a little bit more story behind Wendy. So.

Alexa Bigwarfe: I think it's great. Thank you. Kristyn, I'm going to come back to you. Unless you feel like after listening to this you have something that I have a different question for you.

Kristyn Levis: Actually. I actually, because before I wrote the two young adult novels, I actually self published two children's picture books because the reason was that my daughter was growing up in this first world country and I wanted to share with her how I grew up in the Philippines. So I wrote a children's picture book that ended up people started saying like, "Is this for real? Like, did you just make this up, is this fiction?" It was actually based on my life growing up in a house where half of the house had no floor and no ceiling. So we only lived in the other half where there was a floor and ceiling, we had no windows, no doors.

Kristyn Levis: There was, there were three months when all we ate was like fish and rice. It was, we went through hardship growing up. But my daughter Madora won't have that and I'm very lucky. But then I want her to know that people in other parts of the world actually still have difficulty surviving just day to day. So the picture book was actually to share that with her and so that she can see it and other kids here as well in Australia. Because I donated my books to the libraries

here just so kids can have another perspective of what's actually happening in countries around the world. It was inspirational and extended outside of my family as well. And the other picture book was about a story that my mom used to tell us because we couldn't afford to buy books as kids. So we didn't have books growing up.

Kristyn Levis: It was just not a thing and there were no public libraries that we can borrow books from. That was just a fact of life. So my mom would come up with a story that we would all listen to, my sister and I, over and over again each night. And I thought before we all have dementia and can't remember the story, I better write this out because it was our favorite story that my mom made up and she's forgotten bits and pieces of it. She can't remember what happened to the thing again, now, what happened to the prince and the what? So I wrote it, I asked my sisters to help me remember all the bits and pieces and we put it together and that's why I ended up having two children's picture books that ended up evolving into young adult books. So yeah, that's how it started.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Well that's a whole different side of like embracing your story. It's embracing the family history and the traditions and I mean, I think that's really, really cool and I wish that, I wish we had something like that in our family where I had stories to pass down from past generations. We read lots of books but no one in my family told us stories. So I think that's very cool. Kori.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Do you have anything to add to it? You look, you look like you're very.

Kori: I don't know if I have anything else that I can really say aside from the main reason that I wanted to start writing and sharing my story was not so much, it was in part because I find it very cathartic and very therapeutic if I do it in spurts because if I do too much of it, then I get taken back to a place where I don't want to be, that I'm not equipped to be in and then it can just completely go back there and my mind is just not ready to deal it. So I learned, at least from experience, to set it aside for another day because I need to be able to function. I have kids. They need me. So part of the reason I want to do writing is because it's very therapeutic and the other reason is again, wanting people to know that they aren't alone. Even though your story might not be the exact same as mine

Kori: it's like, well, this is what I went through and you know, quite a bit of the information out there is still from medical professionals or education specialists or from psychologists and psychiatrists. And I wanted to give that parent, like, the real parent perspective of "This is what it's like" because that's what I was lacking when my daughter was younger. I wanted to see what was going to happen later on. What was gonna happen when she turned 13? What was gonna happen when she turned 21? What can I expect? I could not find any of that out there. I'm still hard pressed to find it out there and it was just very frustrating. So if I can help at least one person not have to go through all of that and just tell them like, "Hey, this is what's going to happen, and yes it is okay to have that meltdown while your child is having their own meltdown and you will be better off for it. So don't and stop beating yourself up about it. Don't feel

guilty about things because there are some days that it's all you're going to be able to do and you just keep moving on." So

Alexa Bigwarfe:

it's a, community is an amazing thing and I think the one thing that all of us have, while all of our stories are so different, all of our backgrounds are so different, we span a wide variety of ages and generations and here on life experience and all of that kind of stuff, but the one thing that I think we could all agree on is that the power of community is so important and I think to wrap kind of all of us are saying here is that with our words, with our stories, with everything that we're doing, like we are fostering community or people who are like us, who are with us, who are sharing the same things, who are going through the same trials and tribulations and I think the reason that we are most passionate about taking those experiences and writing the story is because we want to help people in that community cross the bridge from where it hurts really, really, really badly to where they can get beyond and maybe heal or, you know, move forward. Nenna, my question for you then would be you are targeting an audience of young women who are about to embrace their journey and you're giving them the tools basically to, in my opinion, to weather the storm that they may be facing. So have you had, have you had success with your book? Have you reached the people that you wanted to reach? And well, we'll just start there,

Neena Speer:

I think it's a great question and I want to like dial it back a little bit there so that people get perspective because I think that you touched on when I first talked about it, is that this is a key audience that is often missed, a lot of the times when you talk about law school and things like that, they usually say, "Well, Neena, you should just talk to all women." And I love that. I love empowering all women, but I know that I was a minority woman in law school and I faced challenges that were unique to me and I was minority for many different reasons. I was black and Indian, but I was also the first in my family to go to law school and that minority is, it applies to a lot of different women but for me to actually be able to talk from that perspective, we often get that missed. We always try to cater to everybody and we miss the people that we're trying to market to because the people that can hear our story sometimes, no, I haven't experienced something like someone else, but the people who need our stories are people who are like us and people who have some similar life experiences and they're getting missed because you keep trying to market yourself to one to everybody.

Neena Speer:

And it doesn't always fit. It doesn't always fit everyone, but everyone can be inspired by your story. And that is what has been my big success is that not only have I been asked to speak at multiple events, I think I have about 10 events already booked and more are being booked as we speak, but I've been asked to speak to young men about my job and career as an attorney. I've been inspiring young men to buy the book. So it is not about how you market and target your demographic for your success. For me, my success has been that the people that I targeted are not the only people buying the book. I have black men buying it, I have, you know, white women buying it, Indian women, it's just awesome.

But when you target based off what you know about where your comfort zone is, where you grew up in, who you are, I'm a ghost, see your point lower.

Neena Speer:

And then it also goes to your point, Kristyn is knowing where you're from and who you are and owning that and talking about who you are and your culture, people really, really attach to that. But more than that, they connect with you on a level because you're willing to be authentically you and being able to go back. And, you inspired me because nobody told me how to do this when I was failing and flunking out of school, nobody was helping me and I had no one in my family to turn to. It was really, really frustrating. So I had to write a letter to myself almost to inspire myself to go and finish the race. And in each year of law school I wrote another letter to myself and another letter to myself and that turned into a book. So that's what inspired it and then in the book, you know, we all talked about journaling.

Neena Speer:

I put a journal after each chapter of the book so that they could share their own story and be inspired to write their own books. I don't think that the buck stops with us, but I don't think that any of these stories ladies would be written without first recognizing our value, how much value we add just by knowing who we are and putting it on the table and it opening up other people to be able to talk about it. I mean, it's that way. That's what's brought success to it. That's why people have been buying the book. I've seen the book, you know, it's not the best selling by any means, but this is my first book. So hopefully I can learn from you guys who are very well seasoned to get me to a first best selling level. But it's definitely, you know, doing very well right now, especially here in Birmingham and Alabama and then outside of Alabama.

Alexa Bigwarfe:

Well, I think you raised some really great points. I mean, just kind of even just beyond the topic of, of embracing your story, the whole idea of niching down in your market and finding the people who need your story first. But I love and I think that is so true. I think the way to have the most success as an author is to find the people who need your story most first. But I really love what you said about the, about the outside impact that it's having on other people who need to hear that story. And it kind of connects with what Lyn was talking about with the whole Me Too movement. And not only are we talking about it, but I think people who are willing to open their horizons and look at bigger picture are starting to embrace other people's stories and read different perspectives and feel, like, I feel a big movement,

Alexa Bigwarfe:

well, it's not big enough yet, but I think it's growing. I feel a movement of people who are willing to say, you know, some of these things are happening because we don't understand each other and we don't understand different perspectives and backgrounds and so I think in your marketing efforts, I think you could do a lot to reach out to HR perspective people and things like that and say this is, this is a perspective you need to understand if you're working with, if you're hiring minority women, if you're working with minority women, if you're, you know, you could take it that way. You could take it in a whole bunch of different ways- Go ahead. I hear somebody saying, if somebody has anything-

Kori: I said that was a great idea.

New Speaker: Yeah.

Kori: My mom is a law professor. She was at Stanford University for her law school. I was in elementary school. It's like tagged along to some of her classes with her, but she is very, very active in the women of color, a student organization. And then throughout her professional career as a law professor, she was often chairperson for the student minority clubs and organizations. So Neena, I have so much admiration for you going through law school like that because I remember my mom's struggles firsthand and it's not easy because it's the two strikes automatically. It's one, you're a woman and then Oh, you're also a minority, so here you go. Here's your hurdles, let's get across.

Neena Speer: I don't want to leave without saying that most of law school, don't let anyone tell you differently, is painted from the perspective of a white man and that has been the hardest thing to take is that that cannot be the perspective that we all have to learn from forever. We have to be able to push back from that notion because we are limited on our own discovery and self-discovery. So she struggled a lot because people just don't understand what being minority really is in that field because people don't recognize your value.

Alexa Bigwarfe: And I think, yeah, I mean, well we could talk about that topic all day but the piece that I want to draw on is the knowing your value and I think that's something that comes like women in general, like, we struggle just across the board. Women, I think women struggle with value a lot of times. It's very rare to find truly self-confident women who don't struggle with any of these things, but to be able to take, and this is kind of the next question that I go to and I'm not going to ask a particular person. I'll just say if you have something you want to say on this question, to jump in here, to take a story that for all of us is very personal, even though all of our stories were very different, there is a very personal element to each one of them and to take it and to put it in front of hopefully millions of people is the goal. Right? There's a lot of fear that comes along with that and there's probably a lot of questioning of "Who am I to tell this story and do I have enough value?" And all of these types of things so if Neena wants to answer this one go for it. Like, how do you deal?

Neena Speer: I don't really want to take it back to me, but I'll just say it varies so much and I'm 26 so you all probably got me beat by knowing more about what everything has been going on for awhile. But I tell people my story is very unique. When I was six years old, I almost died of chicken pox encephalitis and I was in India visiting my family abroad. I hadn't had the chicken pox vaccine, whatever, and it went crazy, but it really happened y'all because I refused to take my medicine as a child, my own stubbornness, and I realized very young at a young age that I was just a stubborn child and even if I was totally wrong, I would go out there and do it and I have been given this advice. I think that each one of you ladies have taken this advice and ran with it is that even if you do it really, really raw, you get out there and you tell your story and I think that's what it is. That's what it's

going to take for people to really recognize your value is that you tell them, "I don't care if I do this completely wrong."

Neena Speer: I came here to tell you a story and that story is only gonna get better with my experience and my grind and my hustle, and every time I step up to the stage and I talk about my story, that's going to bring me to the next level, that's what I feel like. That's how we get to recognizing our values. Not being so afraid of not having all our i's dotted and our t's crossed and I think that's what hangs up a lot of us, confuses us is that we think it has to be all perfect before we can get out there on a big stage and market ourselves to this company and say, "No, I want \$20,000, thank you. That's what I want." That we don't feel like we have everything perfect and after a while you just have to put yourself out there and start asking for the low figures. That's the one thing that I would say.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Yeah. Go ahead Lara.

Lara Lazenby: Can I add something there talking about our value as people, as individuals, as mothers, daughters, as women in general, as human beings. One of the things I really try to teach people to embrace your scars because we've all got scars, emotional scars, physical scars, psychological scars. I got a whole bunch of all those and one of the things that I really try to teach people is look to Mother Nature. How many of you have ever been to the Grand Canyon? How many of you have ever looked at jewels and gems? I, when I got married, I didn't want a diamond, I wanted an emerald. Because an emerald isn't real unless it has a flaw. We spent all of our money and we travel all over the world to see these most amazing scars, whether it's hiking to see a waterfall or the more the rocks are crumbling, the more the layers and layers of beauty and

Lara Lazenby: we're like that. We have these layers and layers of stories and, and beauty. We're extremely complex. And the other thing I write about is turquoise. And when you look at a piece of turquoise, when it's real and not fake, you'll see it's fused together with colors and veins. And it's the same with marble. I call it touching the finger of God. It's like, if you think about Mother Earth, the next time you picked up a rock or a pebble or a stone, you look at that and you look at the beauty of that because under all that pressure, it didn't break. And we are just like that. We are precious gems. And under all of that pressure we didn't break. So who are we to tell our story? We're unique, every single one of us, we have a right to tell our story and I gotta tell you my first writer's conference I pitched my book to two producers in Hollywood, and the first words out of the one woman's mouth was "Nobody wants to read a book about a child dying with cancer" and I just smiled and I thought, "I've been waiting for that book my whole life."

Lara Lazenby: So whatever book you want to read and you feel like nobody's out there writing it, now it's your job to write about that because you're the precious gem and you've got to help other people see the beauty in themselves.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Well, I think to wrap that up nicely as well. That's one of the beauties of self publishing is that, and I don't, I, you know, if people want to traditionally publish however they want to publish, I think that everybody should follow their own route, but I think that traditional publishing is very, very difficult for many people because of that same thing. When we're talking about the types of things that we're talking about it is potentially a much, much smaller market. And traditional publishers look at how they can make money and what you just said is so important because, you know, the only barrier for us is ourselves to getting our message out into the world and I think that's really, really, really important that you know, you don't have to put yourself through that idea of going to an agent and having an agent tell you that your story is not good enough or no one's gonna read it because somebody wants that story. Not to bash traditional publishing at all. There are lots of them, I'm not going to lie, if Random House called me tomorrow and was like, "We love your story. We'd love to publish it." I'd be like,

Lara Lazenby: "Right on! But in the meantime, just go do it."

Alexa Bigwarfe: Exactly.

Lois Strachan: Part of it, I think, is because so often we feel like we are alone in what we're going through and that's part of what brings us to write. But in fact, the reality is that there are people out there

Lois Strachan: who can benefit from hearing our stories. They can learn and they can grow. And in a sense, by us having the willingness and the strength to share our stories, we are helping people to avoid going through some of the suffering, the struggles, the pain that we've gone through because we've shown them that there is another side of it. And I think that's a very important point for me is the, not the redemption, but the ability to know that we can survive and get through, through sharing someone else's experiences and reading someone else's experiences.

Alexa Bigwarfe: I agree. I would like to say, okay. So, this is what we're going to do. We're getting really close to an hour. So I'm going to do like a lightning round here. We'll just go through quickly and have everybody give their one piece of advice or tip to a writer. But before I want to follow up on what you just said by one of my favorite, favorite quotes that I have held so close to me ever since I published my first book and with everything that I am doing. And that is a quote by Emily Dickinson that says, "If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain." And you know, I think that's where a lot of us come from with our writing and it's just so beautiful what all of you bring such different backgrounds, such different stories. It's, you know, beautiful. So, thank you. So we'll go in the order and everybody has their opportunity for their one last tip for aspiring writers or maybe somebody who's already written and is feeling scared or downtrodden or whatever. Whatever you want your tip to be. Okay, Neena, here we go.

Neena Speer: All right. I want you to take a pen and write out everything that's been on your mind lately and find that inspiration. It's almost like a rorschach test with your writing. I think a lot of people tell you just write, no, write everything that's been on your mind for the past few years or so, and find that inspiration in there because it is wrapped up in there.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Good advice. Lara.

Lara Lazenby: A couple of things: mentors, mentors, mentors. Look for them, find them, follow them and then become them. And my other top thing is I write with music. I have it on all the time. I use it for time travel. When I'm writing about those difficult moments, I take one piece of music and I hit play over and over and over again. And I love exactly what you said, Nina. Write it down. I call it the midnight purge, purge with music. It makes all the difference in the world. You will find a power you never knew existed.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Thank you. Melinda.

Melinda Kunst: Well, I'd like you to write the book that you would have loved to have had when you were going through whatever situation you're going through. And also to keep, my favorite thing, is to keep spiral notebook. Keep a pad of paper with you.

Melinda Kunst: Don't do what I did and have like little gum wrappers in my car and find months later, keep a pen, keep a recorder, do what you need to do to capture that moment. Use Facebook. Don't worry about the structure, don't worry about grammar. You can fix that later.

Lara Lazenby: Amen.

Lois Strachan: Well, in my case, it's the voice recorder on my smartphone, but same concept, just different technology.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Lois, what's your tip for us?

Lois Strachan: That even when you are, feeling, well, no, that was just reinforcing what Melinda said, but just to reinforce that even when you do feel that you're at your most alone when you're writing, to remember that your book, your story will have the power to change someone else's life and even many people's lives and to know that there's something inspiring in that.

Neena Speer: Lois, your voice is so comforting. I just wanted to say that.

New Speaker: I know. Just keep going.

Alexa Bigwarfe: I think that will be deep thoughts by Lois, so we call all-

New Speaker: I'm ready for more.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Lyn.

Lyn Fairchild: I do this workshop with writers called Writing Your Resistance, and so there's two things that are kind of connected. We live in a crazy age where people don't listen to statistics even though they're important. So when you're writing fiction, I say round out your characters and make them as weird and unique, strange, tell that unique story because people then lean in and listen. Don't, write stock characters. Write that unique, weird. Go into all the weirdnesses of your character and you'll have to cut some stuff, but really explore that in your fiction. And then the other thing you've got to do, especially if you're a white girl like me, is you resist the bullying, because if you live in privilege, females don't live in privilege but white people do. You have to think, am I somehow bullying somebody with my writing, really self-interrogate, if you're going to write stories, write your resistance. So that's, those are my thoughts.

Alexa Bigwarfe: I want to say that that's a really excellent point to bring out and thank you for addressing that. So, Kristyn.

Kristyn Levis: Mine is super practical. I'm a really pragmatic type of person, but give up something every day, like if coffee or something and put it aside because you can use that money to hire an editor who can help you while you're writing. Even if you have a really good story to tell you need a professional to help you polish that. It's hard to self edit. I know that for fact, that's what I did. I put aside coffee money or I dunno, handbag money or shoe money or something and just did not buy anything for that month and put it in somewhere. I couldn't touch it. And then I used that to hire an editor who could, who was able to polish my work and how it ended up being picked up by a publisher after that. So, you know, I thought the first draft was the bomb because you know, I'm so awesome. It's not. It was so bad. So the editor helped a lot with my writing.

Alexa Bigwarfe: Yeah, I totally agree. Everybody needs a professional editor and I'll put in a plug for one of our sponsors, Pro Writing Aid. It's a wonderful self publishing tool, sorry, self editing tool. But I would say even they would tell you once you're done self editing, then take it to the professional editor. So, yeah, that's great advice. And I see many, many people cut corners on the stuff where they really need to not cut the corners, like a good cover and a good, you know, and it only does you a disservice because if people can't get your message because they're so bogged down in the mistakes you've made and the grammatical errors that tripped them up, then, then you've lost the opportunity to impact someone. So that's, that's a great point, Kristyn. Thank you. Kori.

Kori: My one tip would be to grant yourself the grace to take a break. You don't have to get it done in one big fell swoop, even if the perfectionist in you is screaming, that yes, you do need to get it done, tell her to shut up and if you need to cry and take a break, go cry and take a break because yes, if your goal is for this to

be therapeutic, that's awesome, but if you're just going to set yourself back that much in the process, it's not worth it.

Alexa Bigwarfe: You remind me of a session that we did last year that I didn't do this year, that I really should have every year, and that is self care when writing is, especially when you are writing about topics that are triggering it can be so, so, so, so important. So thank you for that reminder. The break, taking a break, walking away. Don't trigger yourself to the point that you can't function in society.

Speaker 1: Oh my goodness, ladies, this has been more than I ever dreamed of in terms of what you all brought. This has been so wonderful. Thank you for sharing your very, very, very open hearts and, you know, I just, I will make sure that all of your contact information is very, very available for people because I'm sure you're going to have people that want to reach out and connect. Don't forget if you're an all access pass member, you can join us in the Facebook group where you can interact with these ladies one-on-one or whole group on one or whatever you want to do. Thank you, I just, my heart to yours. I am very appreciative of your time and everything that you just poured forth into our audience. So thank you.

New Speaker: Thank you very much.

Lara Lazenby: Thanks for this amazing opportunity.