

■ YOU'RE MEETING VALERIE EAGLE FOR THE FIRST TIME, and she tells you her lurid life story – how her heroin-addicted mother pimped her when she was 6, how she wound up a homeless crack-head and an HIV-positive inmate, feeling like “damaged goods” and ashamed of being black.

Too much information?

The audience at the Northampton Center for the Arts in Massachusetts seemed to think it was just the right amount. They gave Eagle a thunderous ovation after she wrapped up her tale with an account of her transformation into a college student who embraces life.

“Being in TMI has been a major breakthrough in my life,” says Eagle, 51, now a full-time theater student at SUNY Ulster.

“Too Much Information” can be a good thing, Rosendale residents Eva Tenuto and Sari Botton are proving as their storytelling series enters its fifth season. TMI has played at a number of prestigious Ulster County theaters and the Brooklyn Lyceum in Park Slope and is beginning to make forays out of the state.

“The greatest value of TMI is it’s a phenomenon that is nurturing and inspiring women,” says Hudson Valley freelance theater critic Jay Blotcher. “You can measure it as entertainment, but it’s certainly much more than that. It’s a way to harness self-empowerment through the means of theater. Something more profound emerges.”

A growing phenomenon

Nearly 100 Hudson Valley residents, ranging in age from 14 to 78, have participated in TMI. Most are

By Karen Angel
Photos by
Michael Bloom

women, but the number of male participants – such as SUNY New Paltz professor Al Konigsberg, 69, who tells a story about how his daughter’s abortion affected him – has been steadily growing.

Founder Tenuto and editorial director Botton hope to continue to take the series beyond New York as well as to members of society whose voices are seldom heard – including the mentally ill, the homeless and the incarcerated.

Though TMI may draw from the same voyeuristic impulses that fuel the popularity of reality TV, it digs deeper to elicit raw, edgy emotion and the sense of catharsis that comes with confession.

The TMI Project grew out of a “Vagina Monologues” fundraiser that Tenuto had directed for the nonprofit Hope’s Fund in 2008 and 2009. The performances, at the Bearsville Theater and the Rosendale Theatre, sold out and raised \$12,000 for the group, a United Way of Ulster County program that provides financial and mentoring services to low-income women.

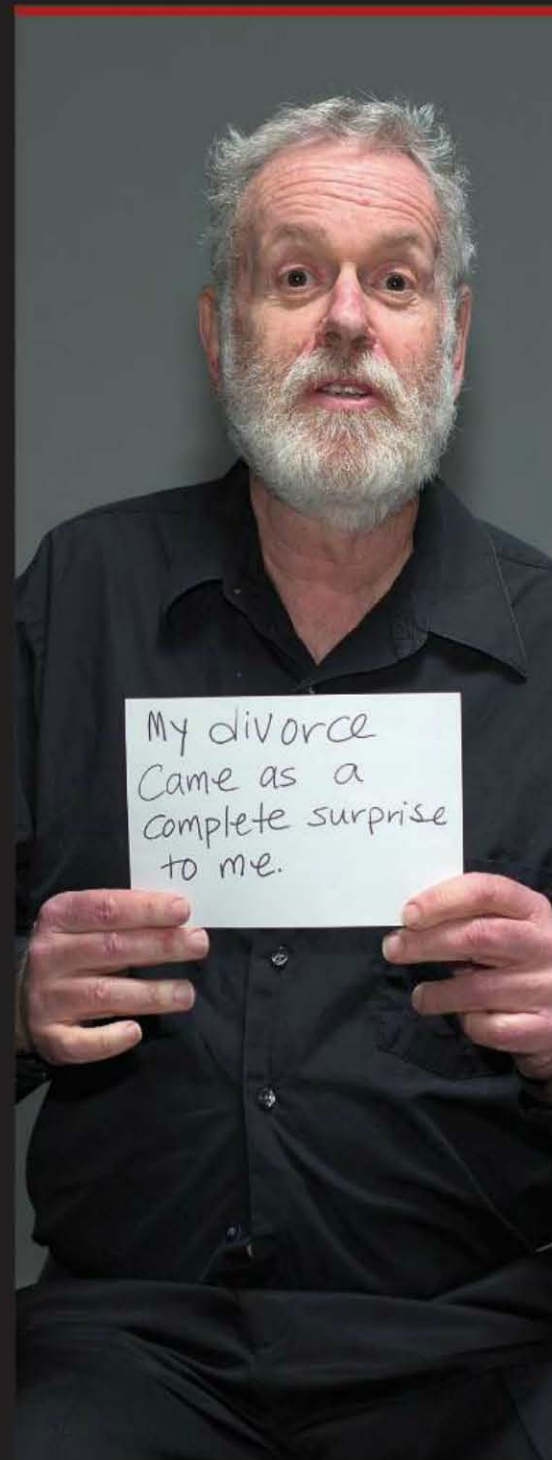
The third year she was asked to direct the fundraiser, Tenuto says, “I just felt vaginaed out.

“We were starting to form this core group of performers, and I knew a

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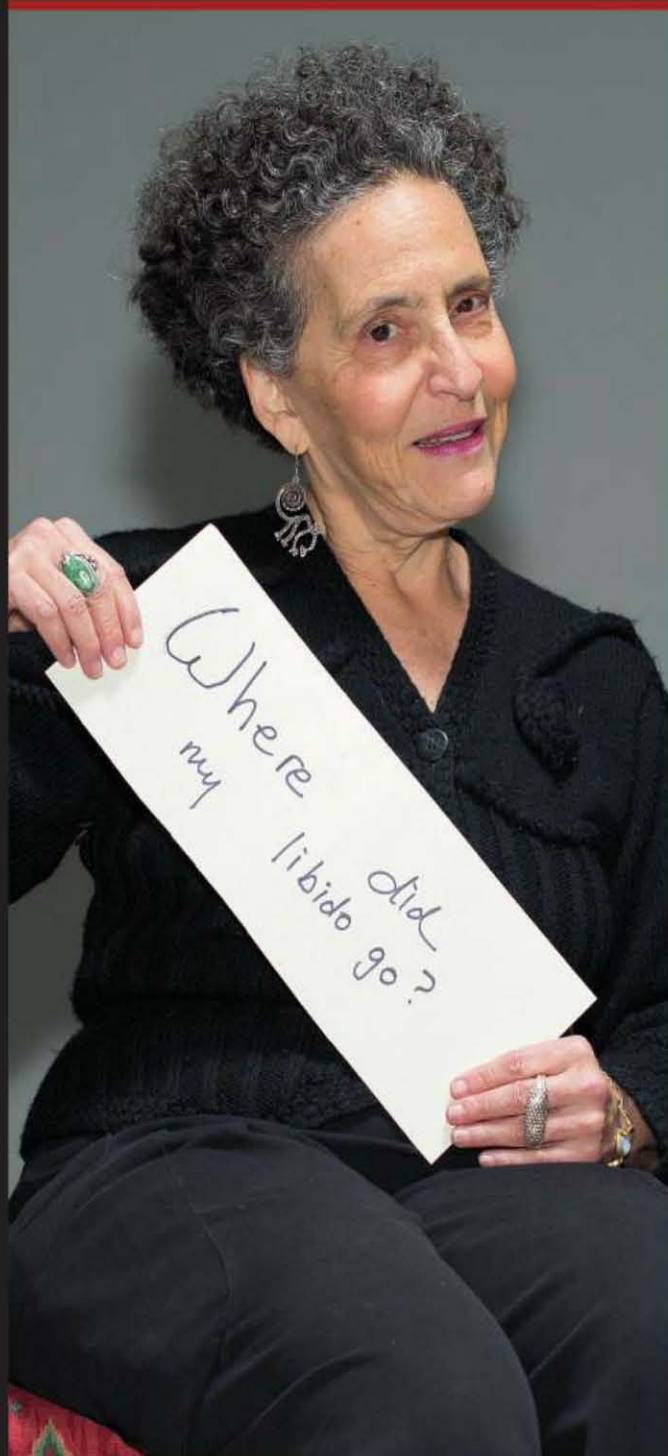
Al Konigsberg, Verna Gillis and Valerie Eagle each share a secret as part of “Too Much Information,” which aims to elicit the raw emotion and catharsis that can accompany confession. “It’s exhilarating. It’s wonderful, wonderful, wonderful,” says Gillis of her TMI participation.

For some, **TRUE**



'Too Much Information' can be a good thing

CONFESSIONS



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lot of the women had one-woman shows they'd written. I knew they had stories they wanted to tell."

Instead of having the actors recite someone else's monologue, Tenuto figured, why not have them tell stories from their own lives?

Tenuto pitched the concept to Hope's Fund and got the go-ahead, and TMI was born.

"We didn't know what it was going to be or how it was going to come off, but I trusted Eva implicitly," says Stacey Rein, president of the United Way of Ulster County. "I knew how she worked and what her standards were."

First show 'extraordinary'

A New Paltz native, Tenuto, 39, had moved to Manhattan after high school to attend the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, then founded the Women's Experimental Theater Group, which performed at Lower East Side venues and East Coast colleges. In 2005, feeling burned out by life in the city, she returned to the Hudson Valley, thinking it would be temporary, but was hooked by "the great artistic community in this area."

Rein was impressed by Tenuto's New York City theater credentials and her goals. "She's a strong, confident gal and wanted to give back and be part of something bigger than herself," she says.

The first TMI show, in February 2010 at the Rosendale Theatre, "was extraordinary," Rein says. "The house was packed."

The performers told stories about coming out of the closet, becoming a widow, becoming a mother, breaking up – and raised \$5,000 for Hope's Fund.

Tenuto knew she had tapped into something unforeseen. "I'd been doing a lot of theater before, but I'd never experienced the audience being so moved by a piece," she says. "There were people who said it cracked open something in them, and many said they ended up talking about things they'd never talked about before. One woman said she went home with her daughter after the show. They'd never talked about the death of her father, but they talked till 3 a.m., and she answered every question the daughter had.

"That's what makes me know the work is worthwhile," Tenuto says. "It's not just what's happening onstage – it's the sort of contagious truth-telling that ripples out into the community after the show is over."

Round 2

While the first series took shape in Tenuto's living room, she decided to formalize the process after it became clear there was more than enough interest to do another. There would be a 10-week writing workshop held once a week in the spring and the fall at the Mohonk Arts Building in High Falls (this spring, there will be a special section for teens). It would be open to members of the public for a fee of \$450, ensuring a supply of fresh material. Each workshop would culminate in a performance at a local theater, consisting of 10 to 12 people telling 10-minute stories.

Tenuto brought in Botton, 47, a freelance journalist and ghostwriter, to help run the workshops. Tenuto's partner, graphic designer and improvisation actor Julie Novak, designed promotional materials and a website (tmiproject.org/Too_Much_Information/home.html) and became the improv coach. Tenuto, Botton and Novak decided they would also workshop and perform their stories with the group, so they would share their students' sense of vulnerability and engender trust.

Through a Kickstarter fund, they raised \$20,000 to hire more graphic designers, a bookkeeper, an accountant and a grant-proposal writer.

When the second series, dubbed "Round 2," played at the Rosendale Theatre in September 2011, it was clearer than ever that the series had struck a communal chord.

"There was a line down the block," says Stephanie Ellis, a member of the theater's board and chair of its marketing committee who also took the workshop and performed in the show. All 270 seats were full, the first time in Ellis' experience that any Rosendale Theatre show had sold out.

"I think we turned away 60 or 70 people at the door," Tenuto says. "That's when I thought, something is really happening here."

Sari Botton, left, and Eva Tenuto work together to run the TMI workshops.

"It gets people to tell their story in a different way and understand their story in a different way, and that's what helps it be so transformative."

SARI BOTTON

TMI editorial director

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EVA TENUTO

TMI founder

Though TMI is a big moneymaker for the theater, the group's contribution goes much deeper, Ellis says. "They fit our mission as a community-run nonprofit theater. They're spreading messages and ideas and themes that are beneficial to the community. It's people telling their stories, and that's a very powerful way for human beings to connect with each other."

Tell me something

The workshops are the key to peeling away the layers to produce an honest, compelling story. Botton, who has taught personal-essay writing at SUNY Ulster,



uses writing prompts she created for that class that are uncannily effective in getting people to open up.

She starts with light prompts – write about your first kiss, tell me about a lie you once told – and progresses to ones that dig more deeply: the day your childhood ended, the you nobody knows, a secret you keep from your family.

“The four ugly emotions I’m always trying to get people to reveal are fear, anger, guilt and shame,” Botton says. “They’re the most universal, and the ones everyone runs away from.”

“My biggest role is drawing the stories out of people, helping them access the

stories, asking them the right questions. I want a story that’s going to reveal something and maybe comfort me because I’m going to learn that I’m not the only one who has these ugly emotions. I listen for the story, then I get them to expand, to go to the part they’re afraid to tell. Specifically, I’m asking them to look at, ‘What is the part you usually leave out because it’s too embarrassing or too painful?’ It gets people to tell their story in a different way and understand their story in a different way, and that’s what helps it be so transformative.”

That’s no exaggeration, according to the storytellers, several of whom have per-

formed at multiple venues.

“TMI has been life-changing for me,” says Verna Gillis, one of the oldest members at 70. “That’s my main focus now.”

A veteran of four performances, Gillis now spends her days fine-tuning her story, a humorous riff on the indignities of aging that opens with the line, “How do you define a good day? For me, if I don’t start peeing before my pants are down, that’s a good day.”

She got involved with the series through T.M.Idol, a story-slam offshoot of the main project. The first 10 would-be storytellers on a list are chosen to perform, Continued on next page



Ten-week writing workshops culminate in a performance at a local theater, consisting of 10 to 12 people telling 10-minute stories. The workshops are the key to producing an honest, compelling story from participants.

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and the audience votes on the winner. Gillis won her round in August 2011 at Market Market in Rosendale, qualifying her to perform last March at the Brooklyn Lyceum, where TMI had won a berth for a subsidized run in a competition among 10 city-based performance groups.

"As of last August, I had no idea I would be doing this, and suddenly I feel greatly energized, refocused, on a new path," Gillis says. "It's exhilarating. It's wonderful, wonderful, wonderful."

"I can tell you everyone who took the workshop was transformed in some way," she adds. "Everyone was telling their stories and finding their voice and dealing with very sensitive material."

That's particularly true for Eagle. Before her first performance, she says, "I was scared to death. My fear was I would be looked at as ugly, nasty and something was wrong with me."

The outpouring of support she received from her fellow TMIers gave her the courage to go onstage. The effects have been

profound.

"Being in TMI has been a major breakthrough in my life," says Eagle, 51. "I've come to a whole new level of acceptance of who I am, and it was because of the love and wonderful response and the identification that I was able to get from people in the audience."

"If it wasn't for Eva, Sari and Julie, I don't know if I'd be at this point in my life. I'm at peace."

Franklin Demuth, a 36-year-old computer programmer and yoga teacher, also



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FRANKLIN DEMUTH

Computer programmer, yoga teacher

the point that as a teen, she thought about killing herself. Like Demuth, Novak experienced a newfound sense of freedom and self-confidence through TMI, spurring her to sign up for an improvisation course in Chicago.

"When we don't tell our stories, we come up with conclusions that are often negative, and we just feel bad about ourselves," she says. She has gone to Second City in Chicago to study improv for a couple of months. "I probably wouldn't have been able to do that if it hadn't been for the confidence I gained through TMI. Now that I don't have that negative commentary about myself, it's given me the confidence to be like, 'Hey, we're pretty cool here. I'm pretty awesome.'"

The shows are cathartic for the audience, too.

"It was completely inspiring, touching, moving, heart-opening," says Adele Marcus, 46, a psychotherapist who attended the Northampton, Mass., show. "It made me cry and laugh and feel more connected to people. There was something in each story I could relate to."

Brendan Burke noticed a similar effect on the audience at the Shadowland Theatre in Ellenville, where TMI played in May 2011.

"It really hits a vibe with people – that idea of a secret and the cathartic nature of expressing it in public," says Burke, artistic director of Shadowland and an adjunct professor in SUNY New Paltz's theater-arts department. "That sharing with the audience is an idea that's good for the audience and the performers. It's a communication that goes both ways."

Gaining momentum

Requests for performances and workshops are growing, and Tenuto, who also works as a Realtor, can finally envision

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gained a sense of self-acceptance through TMI.

He had struggled with gender identity issues throughout his life, and was so hamstrung by "shame and embarrassment" that he told only his therapist and a few close friends.

Being able to talk about his struggles with a group of supportive people and, ultimately, in front of an audience at theaters in Rosendale, Woodstock and Brooklyn "freed up all of the energy I was using to keep these things secret," says Demuth.

"It was a relief to have this off my chest

– a tremendous relief. I had sort of an intellectual sense that there was nothing wrong with me beforehand, but I didn't really feel it till afterward. I feel accepted by my friends and my community, something I never could have imagined prior to this process. I really can't overemphasize the amount of love and acceptance I feel both from and for my fellow TMIs. Sharing intimate details of my life and receiving back acceptance, understanding and compassion has been life-altering."

TMI also helped Novak, 39, come to terms with the masculine parts of her self-image, which had disturbed her to

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a day when TMI will be her sole source of income.

In the meantime, she says, "I'm kind of floating by faith and luck. I'm trying to stick with it during this time period where it seems we're about to push over into this next stage where we'll be getting enough gigs and doing enough workshops that I can support myself."

They have begun applying for grants to help bring the program to people struggling with severe challenges. This fall, they ran a storytelling series for the Mental Health Association of Ulster County and the Highland detention center for boys, and plans for a storytelling program at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility are in the works. They also have begun marketing TMI to nonprofits that work with troubled teens.

"Seeing what we've been able to do for people who pay for the workshop, it's such a no-brainer," Botton says. "One of our mottos is, 'Healing the world one story at a time.' We really believe if we take this to places where people don't get to be heard, it will foster greater understanding and compassion."

Already, they have seen signs that this is happening. After a show they did for lesbian and gay teens in Rockland County last winter, a girl raised her hand and asked Novak, "I think you're really awesome – how do I get to be as awesome as you?"

"That's exactly the demographic I want to reach, because that girl is living in a really strict Roman Catholic house where they've said they'd disown a gay child," Novak says. "I can put out a message of hope: 'Yeah, I went through some of that stuff, too, and it really sucks, but just don't give up.' I love knowing that my story could help even one person deal with that."

Eagle is looking forward to hitting prisons and shelters with her message: "There's life after shelters. There's life after prison. There's life after drug addiction, and they need to hear that. I'd like to be a role model. If I can do it, anyone can do it."

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