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Shelly Fitzloff, left, and Barbi Walker-Walsh

— Photo courtesy Christopher Walsh

The joys of listening to, and drawing strength from, personal stories

Our writer shares a tale of grief, resilience

By Barbi Walker-Walsh

While writing and telling people's stories motivated me to become a journalist later in life, I never

thought my first book would be a memoir, let alone someone else's.

Throughout my career as a flight attendant, which started in the mid 1980s

with Tempe-based America West Airlines, storytelling has been a constant. I found listening to and sharing travel tales and

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sometimes more personal stories with passengers and fellow flight attendants enriching and perspective-broadening.

Then, in the mid-2000s, I wanted a change of careers and a move into the field of journalism.

I graduated from Arizona State University with a freshly minted journalism degree. My timing was off. Journalistic jobs were being cut, much as they continue to be today.

At the same time, I was also navigating the unexpected joys and challenges of motherhood with a toddler.

Fortunately, I was able to freelance while keeping my day job.

Fast-forward 14 years, a pandemic and two airline mergers: our little hometown airline, America West Airlines, is now the world's largest, known as American Airlines, and my life has taken a different turn than expected.

But my love for narrative storytelling has never wavered.

In 2022, on the tailwind of the pandemic, fellow flight attendant and longtime friend Shelly Fitzloff approached me with her diaries filled with the raw pain of losing her husband during the pandemic.

She'd heard I was in the middle of getting my master's in journalism from New York University and asked if I'd help shape a diary of her harrowing experience of her husband's tragic and unexpected death into her memoir.

I said yes without hesitation. It was a terrifying prospect for both of us.

"I felt very vulnerable actually putting it all out in print for the world to see," Shelly said. "It was incredibly scary to put my real thoughts on paper," she added. "It is one thing to talk with people about your feelings and intimate thoughts. It is an entirely different matter, sharing it with everyone."

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I couldn't agree more. Not only was I entrusted with her story; I was also putting myself and my skills out there for all to read.

And like Shelly, who says with so much more confidence in her voice now: "But it is my trauma, and I own it."

I've learned to do the same in my work. Owning what I write. Facing these moments together of laying it bare, as it were, was another moment of growth and connection for the two of us.

Our other shared experiences as flight attendants, mothers, caregivers of our aging parents, plus our sense of humor, helped us persevere through the most challenging times of putting a book together.

Now, the "The Widow's Tale" is a testament to our resilience and the enduring power of friendship.

"Writing the book and seeing it organized was cathartic. I think it made me realize that—damn!—I have been through a lot!" Shelly told me.

The process through her trauma and grief is now a timestamp, showing how strong the human spirit is and that, even in the darkest of times, one can find hope.

Seeing it laid out like that has made her feel much more confident and stronger—and deservedly so, she says. Shelly wants her book, "The Widow's Tale," to give hope to others who are grieving, to show that they are not alone and that, maybe, one day, they can find life with a new kind of routine—beautiful in its own way.

Shelly's book and my experience helping to tell her story are what I feel it means to connect with the power of storytelling, especially when the unexpected takes our lives into uncharted territory.

For me, helping Shelly and listening to her tales allowed me to process the loss of my beloved mother. My mom had been ill but was still strong and independent. When she slipped getting out of her tub, the trajectory of her life became a series of complications, leading to her eventual death. Having Shelly's memoir, her experiences and Shelly to lean on made getting through my loss a little easier.

Although her memoir is a deeply personal story, it also resonates with the human experience of navigating life after loss and learning how to rebuild our new narratives. Losing a loved one is hard, and learning how to live again after they are gone is even harder. But through storytelling, we find a way to connect, heal, and move forward.

You can preorder Shelly's memoir either in hardcover or e-Book format on Amazon.

Check back to get updates on a book signing party.