

All that Jazz

Women Share Feelings At Sun-Times Forum

She had risen early to cook dinner for her family and get the house in order. It was unlike her to take a Sunday afternoon for herself, but having summoned up her courage, she was determined to join other readers of this column at the recent Sun-Times Afternoon for Women.

She was so nervous driving to the women's forum that she got in a car accident on the way. She was nervous, too, when she rose from the audience, took the microphone, and shared her story with the 150 other women. But there was no turning back.

She introduced herself as a telephone operator whose fiance abused her. Once, he broke her leg in front of her young son. Her son had to call an ambulance.

"When I got back to work, people said I should hush up about it," the woman said. "I started to think maybe I had done something to make him break my leg."

Fighting back tears, she said that when she sees her son playing tag with little girls, part of her recoils. What she sees is a male hitting a female.

Her fiance's mother was angry that she pressed charges after the last beating. "His mom said, 'If you loved him, you wouldn't have taken him to court,'" the woman told me. "I said to her, 'If he loved me, he wouldn't have broken my leg.'"

This forum for women, a benefit for the Sun-Times Charity Trust, was a chance for women of all ages—married, divorced, single and widowed—to talk about common issues and struggles, and to offer each other support. It turned out to be an afternoon of very personal revelations that ranged from inspirational to confessional.

"My mother is here today sitting next to me, and she doesn't even know what I'm about to tell you all," a woman announced to the gathering. "At one point in my life, I was feeling very low—I was out of work, out of money. I was walking across a bridge, and I looked down at the water and I thought: It would be so darn easy."

A police officer told of how her child and her husband are terribly ill. Caring

for them is an emotional and a physical strain. Yet her superiors at the police station don't want to hear excuses. "They can't understand if I'm two seconds late for work," she said. She came to this forum partly because she gets no support at work. "You're not allowed to talk about problems if you have them."

For many of the attendees, just being able to discuss their troubles before an audience of empathetic women was a great release.

One woman's husband, a corporate executive, left her after 31 years of marriage. "I'm alone in this big house," she said. "You begin to get critical of yourself. You want to get plastic surgery, to lose weight, anything. You think after 31 years, you're home free. You're not."

When the women split up into small groups, the stories shared were just as personal. One woman said her husband vowed to stop having sex with her if she went over 110 pounds. She looked to be about 125 pounds, and her husband has kept his word. He hasn't had sex with her in 21



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years.

The women were of different races, they were at different stages in life, and they came from different neighborhoods. But there was a sense of sisterhood.

Even though a lot of their stories were very sad, there were moments of laughter. One young woman just lost her mother to breast cancer. As she spoke of her mother, she began to cry, and her mascara began to run. That's when she announced that she sells Mary Kay cosmetics. A good businesswoman never misses an opportunity.

Elaine Levy-Kopf, one of the moderators, said many women have in common a sense of selflessness. "We are caregivers by nature," she said. "We give, we give, and when it's time to retrieve something for ourselves, it's gone."

There weren't any magical solutions offered at the forum. But it gave women a chance to make connections, and most importantly, to think about themselves and their needs.

Many women asked that the Sun-Times forum be repeated as a full-day event. I promise we'll do it again in the early fall. I'll keep you posted.