

Writer seeks to help women heal with life story of triumph over abuse

By Oluatoyin Alleyne - January 12, 2020



Fionna Harewood

Thirty-one years ago, Fiona Harewood fled the country of her birth to escape an abusive husband and over the years has worked herself up from cleaning houses to being employed with the US Federal Government. She is now about to release a book about her abuse and finding a path to healing.

Harewood was a mother of two, an infant son included, when she left Guyana with limited education. And while her journey, which saw her living in two countries, has been one of highs and lows, it was her decision to return to school at the age of 44 that has seen her coming of age and using her past experiences as a motivation for other women.

Now that she has completed *River Never Smooth: Reclaiming Power After Abuse*, which is set to be released later this month, Harewood admitted that she is somewhat nervous about putting her life out there.

“It wasn’t easy putting myself out there like this, as one reviewer describes the book as raw reality,” she told *Stabroek Weekend* during an online interview.

In the book, she used the persona ‘Angelique’ to chronicle her journey and sets out how she overcame abuse and became empowered. The book ends with tips on finding healing.

“I have structured my book with discussion questions, a test where anyone can answer personal questions and decide for themselves if they are being abused, and information on next steps,” she said, suggesting that it can be read and discussed at book clubs and other forums so that people will obtain further knowledge.

She revealed that she initially wrote the book as fiction as she was not “sure I could face my critics”. She completed this version in 2006 but faced difficulty in getting it published and following many rejections shelved it for almost 11 years. She picked it up again in January 2019.

“I wrestled with many things regarding the book during that time, including the title, but then I came face to face with a consultant who said to me, ‘Fiona you need to own your story.’ That’s when I revisited it, removed fictitious stuff and changed it to nonfiction,” she said.

Today Harewood works as a Staff Assistant to the Regional Director, Department of Labour, Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs, but the titles author, speaker and life coach are just as important as it is through these that she gets to impact individual lives. Her job with the Federal Government entails fighting for workers who are discriminated against in workplaces, due to race, age, sex, pay, veteran or disability status, country of origin or religion.

In 1988, when Harewood left Guyana, she moved to Barbados, where she remained for 13 years. During that time, she cleaned homes, then worked part-time with a small insurance company. For the last seven years she spent there, she was employed as the secretary to BWIA’s Area Manager.

Magna cum laude

Harewood is the eldest of eight children and her formative years were spent in Agricola, Eccles and Mc Doom where her mother, Doreen Lord, still resides. She said that she lost a sibling in March last year, eight years after he was shot in Jamaica. Dr Linden Lord was shot in 2011 just as he was about to enter his home in Jamaica. “My heart still hurts,” she said about her brother’s death.

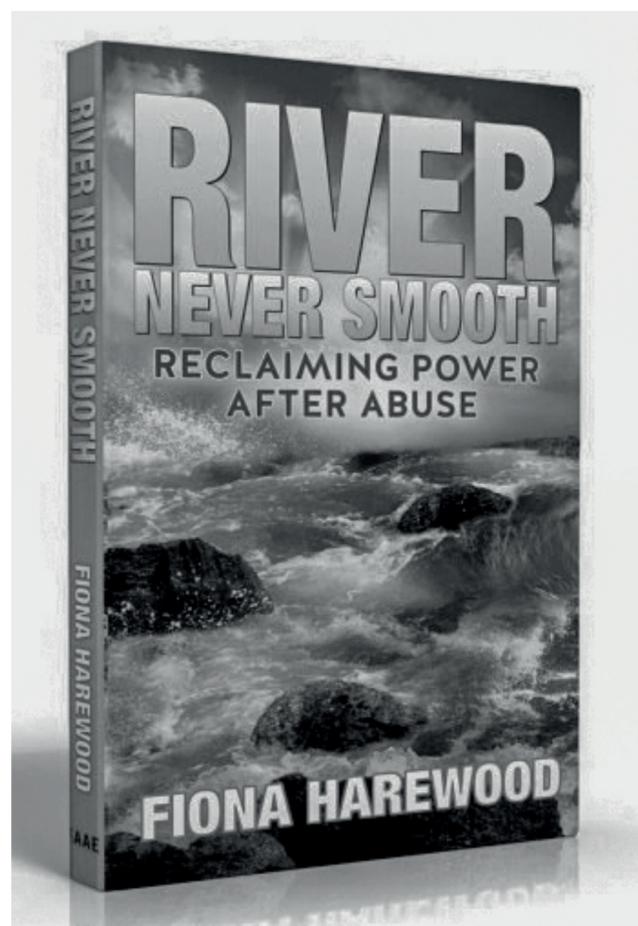
James Lord, who died in a tragic accident in July last year at the age of 80, was their father, whom, she said, moulded them after having first set the standard himself.

“My mother, Doreen Lord, always encouraged us to be the best we can be. They expected nothing short but were there for us when we fell. It is now a generational thing among our siblings where we ensure our children study and encourage them to excel in their endeavours,” she added. “My dad used to ensure we wake up every morning at five, or earlier, to study. Sometimes I slept, unknown to him.”

In Guyana, she attended the Covent Garden Secondary and South Georgetown Secondary schools before moving to the Government Technical Institute. Harewood said she was never a high achiever, but she tried her best.

In the United States, her limited education prevented her from securing the job she wanted, and she eventually returned to the school at the age of 44. At the time, her children—she had a third child while in Barbados—were aged 17, 13 and 8, yet she graduated magna cum laude three and a half years later with a degree in Paralegal Studies, then a Master’s in Public Policy, a few years after that.

“Prior to that I did cleaning and while I made a career out of cleaning, I thanked my mother for teaching me to clean,” she said.



Different forms of abuse

Her path to where she is today was marred by the many forms of abuse she experienced at the hands of two intimate partners.

She was candid enough to share that she received many beatings at the hands of her first husband, whom she did not name, and who has since passed away. The relationship also saw her experiencing emotional abuse because of her then husband’s adulterous affairs and financial abuse came into play as well as she was forced to provide for herself and children as well as take care of other expenses.

When she met her first husband, Harewood said, she was just about 16. Her parents did not approve of the relationship and encouraged her to continue with her studies. But being young and in love, she continued to date him and eventually married him four years later.

“Even before I was pregnant with our first child, I used to hear of him with other women. He was hardly home,” she recalled. “When I was eight months pregnant with our daughter, my mother saw him in the cinema making out with another woman. Confronting him with that issue I tasted blood at his hands for the first time.

“Our marriage continued downhill. I tried holding it together even after he took a woman into our home and ... in our bed, while we lived in an apartment below my parents. It’s been long. It’s been hard.”

When she could take it no longer, Harewood said, she managed to flee to Barbados, but her exposure to abuse did not end there.

“Like someone with a penchant for making bad decisions, I relived many of those experiences, in addition to sexual abuse. I am not blaming anyone for my suffering and exploitation. I made bad choices and suffered the consequences,” she said.

A firm believer in God, Harewood said it was prayer and her faith that saw her through but also the support of friends.

“I always had at least one girlfriend with whom I could share. Sharing and not going through those marital problems alone helped me to stay strong. Hence, I advise victims of abuse to not suffer alone. There must be someone with whom you can share. It is harder when you are alone.”

Harewood said she has since learned to love herself and see her worth, which helped her to find healing.

“I knew when I found healing because looking back at certain things it felt surreal – as if it never happened. My book was penned many years ago, when issues were fresh, and sometimes when I revisit some scenes now, I ask myself if some of these issues really happened,” she stated.

Still to get reactions

Asked about her family's reactions to her public chronicling of part of her life's journey, Harewood said she is still to get reactions as many have not read the book as yet. She hopes to release the book on January 20, the day her father would have celebrated his 81st birthday.

Her older daughter said she was fine with their story being published as she has gotten over it and it may help someone else, but her son said he was not comfortable promoting it, because it makes his father look bad.

"We had a mother-son talk. He understood some things clearer and he said he has no doubt that the Lord is going to allow this book to be the change agent for many. I dedicated this book to my children because for the most part, they walked this road with me. They suffered with me. And it was all because of the bad choices I made. I told them if I could do it again, I would do what it takes to offer them a pain-free childhood," the writer said.

This book is not Harewood's first. She related that when she recognised the dropout situation in the United States and the success of going back to school, she wrote and published her first book: *I Did It ... You Can, Too!* It chronicles her life going back to school at age 44 and she dared dropouts to become dream makers and inspire current students to finish their education.

While in Guyana last year for her brother's funeral, Harewood and her husband hosted Vacation Bible School for the Agricola Seventh Day Adventist Church. And for her father's memorial, she found time to visit schools and churches on the East and West Bank Demerara, inspiring students to stay in school and encouraging those who had dropped out to pick up from where they had left off.

"Those are rewarding sessions. I love when students share with me how my talk/workshop motivated them," she said.

Taboo

While domestic violence and abuse are found in every walk of life and in every country, Harewood said that the topic is taboo and because of that people are afraid to face it or speak out.

She said people do not discuss it, hence they suffer in silence, sweeping domestic violence and abuse under the carpet.

"Women lose their lives and even men, resulting from abusive relationships. It is time to take a stand. You matter, your children matter. Society expects you to bottle it up, but you do not have to. Love yourself enough and draw strength from the Creator to rise above your circumstances. If you are in a troubled relationship, seek help but while you do that, stay safe," she advised.

More about Harewood and her work can be found at www.fionaharewood.com and www.fionaharewood.com/blog.