

## **THE AUTHORS SHOW – Young Adult**

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My Incredible Journey.

Better to be a late bloomer than not to bloom at all". So I told myself when I decided to self-publish my debut novel, I'll Always Be With You, at age 74.

I first completed this novel twelve years prior in the young adult genre. I worked diligently to find an agent through persistent queries... and endless rejections. I finally met an agent at a writers' conference who gave me great hope when she said my book "had a lot of heart." She tried for a year to get a publisher to agree but was unsuccessful. It did not have the WOW factor that seemed to be in most of the popular young adult novels addressing issues of teen suicide, drugs, or blood-sucking vampires. Mine was, as later one reviewer said, "a simple but engaging tale of life after loss." Teddy, age sixteen, is dealing with the loss of his father after a tragic accident for which he felt responsible. A driving lesson gone bad. Discouraged, I put Teddy in the drawer and my life-long dream of being published along with it.

But through the years, I often thought of Teddy, and believed he had a positive message for other teens. I decided to do a major re-write, adding adult characters to make it a mainstream novel for all ages. I gave it three first-person voices: Teddy, his mother, and his dead father's high school girlfriend. I added an old-world Bulgarian grandmother (and her recipes because she believes food soothes all hurts) and two quirky new friends for Teddy who moves across the country to start over in a new high school. There is an additional challenge for his mother who discovers a hidden secret of the father's from his high-school years. Although the novel takes place in 1999, a major section is during America's turbulent Civil Rights history in the sixties and the dad's forbidden love of a black classmate.

To keep me on task with the re-write, I took an on-line class through Writer's Digest, 12 Weeks to a First Draft. When I finished, I once again began my agent search. I read that Kathryn Sockett (The Help) received 44 rejections, so I vowed to make at least 45 attempts. Between October and December I contacted 25 agents. Only eight responded with form letter rejections,

but one was encouraging, "You have a high-concept novel that I am sure will find a publisher." I wanted so much to believe she was right.

I took a holiday break and planned to start my agent search again the first of the year when I got an email from a self-publishing company that was having a half-price sale. (Who can resist a sale?) I thought of all the research another 20 queries would take, the waiting, the rejection and decided to take the plunge to self-publish. I wanted to see something to completion before my life was over! It was one of the best decisions I have ever made although at the time I was terrified. What if it was now rejected by readers? What if it was awful?

Within a few months I was thrilled to have a copy of my book in hand, in print at last. My first shipment of 100 books arrived at my doorstep at six pm (UPS' last delivery of the day to our remote summer home community) the very night before I was scheduled to do a book signing at a ladies' golf tournament the following day. To my surprise and delight, I sold every book. In this small community of 3000 summer residents, their positive responses were overwhelming and humbling. They liked my book! Soon everyone was reading it-- men, women, teens and each time someone said they loved it, I cried. My 14-year old grandson happened to be visiting the day of the book signing (thank goodness as only he knew how to run credit cards through my phone). At one point he put his arm around me and said, "I am so proud of you!" I knew in that moment I had made the right decision to have followed my dream and set an example for him to do the same at some point in his life.

My publishing package included book reviews from three major reviewers. As each of their emails arrived, my heart beat rapidly and I was so scared to hit the "enter" key to read their comments. Once again, words beyond my expectations. Kirkus, Blue Ink and Clarion all said wonderful things like, "A gem of a story that has heart, soul and empathetic insights and is potent in its small moments." Amazon reviews from readers began posting 5-stars with nothing less than 4-stars. I was asked to speak at many book clubs which I happily did. Encouraged by all this, I entered contests and won two awards. One was an honorable mention and one was the top award, a GOLD, in the young adult category. So the life of the book came full circle and Teddy's young voice was finally heard by many.

I have had fan mail from teens (saying I was spot on with the teen romance) and from teachers saying they would keep it on their bookshelf to give to students in their classroom who experience grief. I received emails from readers who lost loved ones saying the book was a great comfort—it made them cry and it made them laugh. I marveled that my words touched another person. And the best part of all-- they are begging for a sequel. I attended a Pitchfest in New York City that my publisher sponsored to pitch the book to TV and film producers and I was chosen as a spokesperson on their website to encourage others to self-publish.

My journey? It was a long one, but the message I would give other aspiring authors: Follow your dream, believe in yourself and find the courage within you to make it happen.

In *I'll Always Be With You*, Teddy is struggling to find his way again when he discovers an old Bulgarian book in Grandma's attic with quotes of wisdom that inspire him on a daily basis. One of them is "Life is a song. Find your melody and play it". I am so grateful that I found my melody. A bit late in life but that made the music even sweeter. You might say harmonic.