

# Write makes might

A talk with author and abuse survivor Davonna Livingston about her work to help empower other women to confront and overcome their pasts

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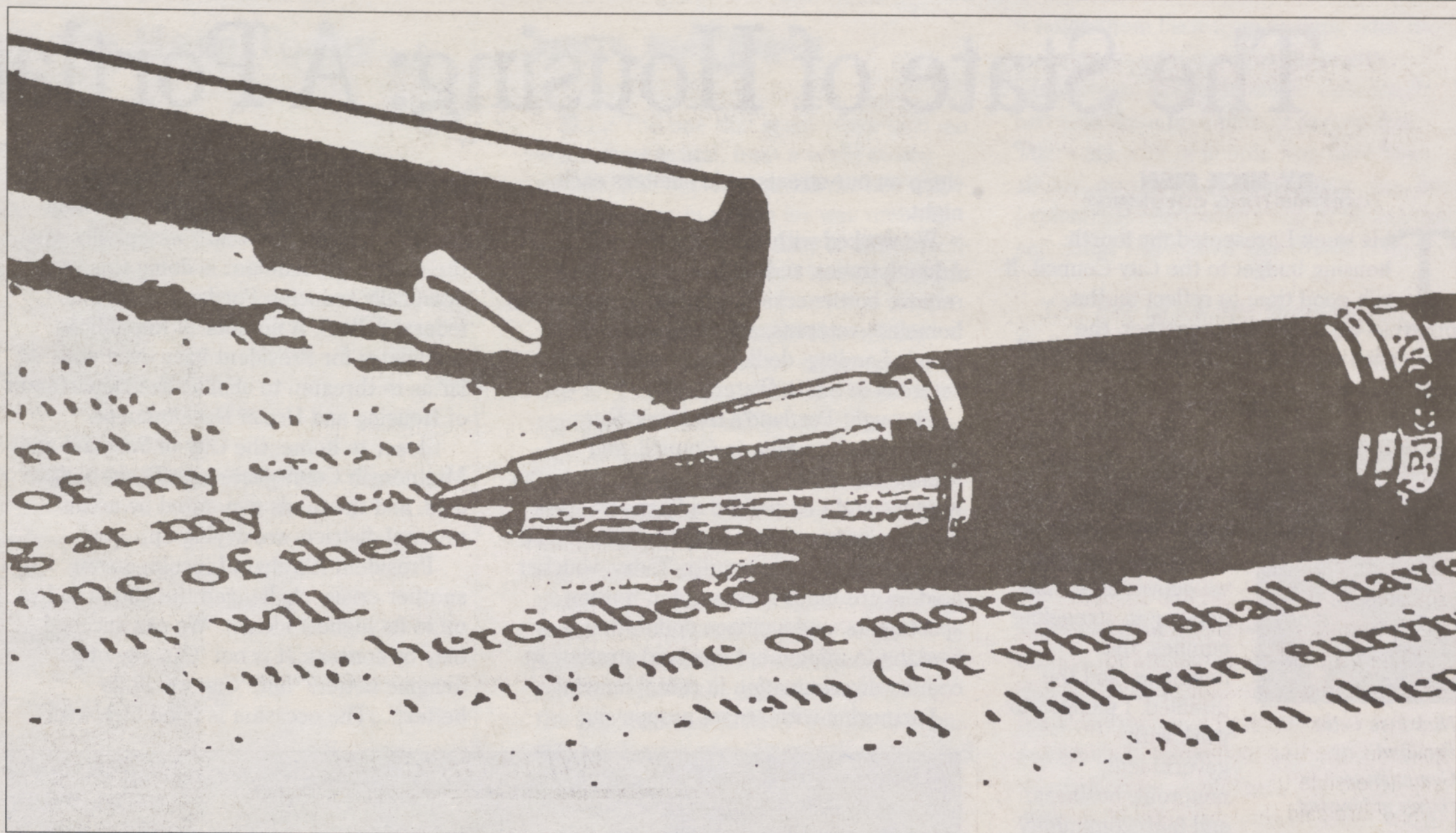
When Davonna Livingston was just 14 years old she and her mother fled Stockton, Ga., which she describes as being just "left of the middle of nowhere." With only a pillow and a change of clothes they boarded a bus at midnight for Portland, leaving behind her father, whom she describes as abusive.

Livingston went on to get a degree in English from Portland State University and worked as a technical writer while also dabbling in poetry and short stories. Several years ago she started having panic attacks, which she discovered were related to the trauma she went through as a child. Seeking to dig deeper to get at the roots of what she was going through, Livingston began reaching out to women in prison who've suffered similar experiences and began documenting their stories for a forthcoming book, "Voices Behind the Razor Wire," which will be released this fall.

Now Livingston, 43, plans to reach more people who've made it through a traumatic experience by launching a new nonprofit organization called Changing Perceptions. Housed in First Presbyterian Church in downtown Portland, Changing Perceptions will lead participants through a series of self-exploration writing workshops meant to confront their past and rebuild their confidence.

**Jake Thomas:** I was hoping you could talk a bit about your background and how you got the idea for this nonprofit.

**Davonna Livingston:** I'm a writer. I've been working as a writer for years, and I'm also a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. A couple of years ago, I started having issues. I started having really bad panic attacks and never really knew why, and I was trying to figure out what was going on with myself. I



**"There's this culture about keeping it quiet, and it's wrong. I understand that in some cases it can destroy families. But you're an adult and you need to be able to stand up and say, 'This happened to me and it's who I am and I didn't ask for it.' It helps them get some confidence back."**

— DAVONNA LIVINGSTON

out other people.

I started interviewing a series of women who were in prison. I wrote them and told them I had this idea of putting a book together, and I asked if they would like to be a part of it. All of them said they would love to help.

So I started putting this book together, and in the process I could tell how much it was helping me by helping them. It gave me something to focus on, something to get out of bed in the morning for. So by the end of that journey, I realized, that I was a completely different person for having done this. And I realized what an impact it had on the women I interviewed. So I started working with women in Portland, and I still work with women in prison.

What I do is start out by asking them a series of really benign questions, really innocuous questions: Where were you born? How many siblings do you have? That kind of thing. It's hard to talk about these sorts of things with people you don't really know, so it's nice to have an icebreaker before you get into the details. Then we start to talk about what happened. And over time they meet with me or I get a letter from a woman in prison, I put more of their story together, and I send it back to them.

The premise is that most people are willing to have suffered, as long as it wasn't for nothing, and so when you can give the women or the men something to do with

decided to use writing to figure out myself by figuring

what happened with them, it creates a whole new way of looking at it. Rather than seeing it as an obstacle, they can see it as a way of empowering themselves. They know they have this power that they didn't know they had.

**J.T.:** What prompted you to get involved with this project?

**D.L.:** I love to figure out what makes other people tick, and I wanted to know why it was that my growing up coming from abuse, I grew up and went to college, and I knew so many women who were abused that didn't go that way. Some went to prison. They had very troubled lives and some became alcoholics. I wanted to know why I had gone that way and why so many had gone the other way.

**J.T.:** What drew you to prison populations?

**D.L.:** I had heard lots of stories from someone I knew who works at a prison. I knew that if I was looking for a group of women who were abused, I knew that a prison was a good place to start, and they are kind of a captivated audience for lack of a better term. So I looked for women I identified as having been abused who had been in for a couple years and had accepted that this is where they were and had a couple more years to go because I wanted them to complete the program. And since then we've moved into doing the people on the outside.

**J.T.:** Tell me how writing is different than other therapies.

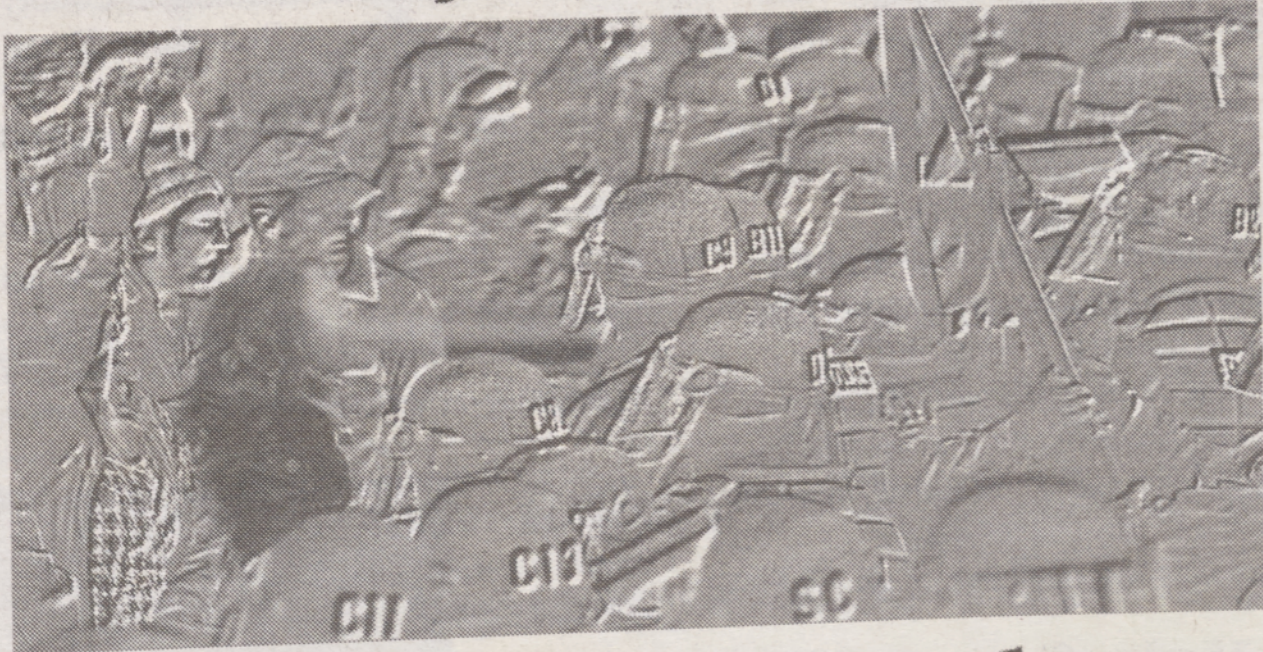
**D.L.:** I think partially, the way we do it, the women work on their own and write in their own words, and it gives them a chance to be heard. And I know that for me it's incredible. It's one thing to know your life, but it's completely surreal to see your life on a piece of paper and to see it interpreted. And women have full control on what does and doesn't go into their stories. And I told them that I would never judge them on anything, and, given the depths of the stuff they've told me, I would imagine that they're coming pretty clean with me. But, again, it was put to them, it was up to their comfort level, and everyone that I work with is anonymous.

That sense of anonymity allows them to get everything out and it gives them a way of purging some of these things that they've held onto for so long that have just been wreaking havoc in their bodies, because you can only expend so much energy pushing this stuff down until you realize you can't hold it down anymore. And once you get rid of it, you ask yourself why you ever walked around like that trying to keep secrets like that.

**J.T.:** Have you heard any stories that really stand out?

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