

## GUEST VOICE

## Look at us now



Gayle Kirschenbaum

I was convinced I was adopted. I couldn't understand why my two older brothers were being treated so differently from me.

Once I realized I was not adopted, I had to figure out what was going on. I knew that I didn't do anything wrong – I was just born a female to a mother expecting a boy. But for mom, there was never anything right about me – my nose was too big, my hair too curly, my body too fat (even though I was quite thin). Humiliation was her specialty.

I tried to hide in my room and escape into my diaries, where I wrote and drew. Even those were found and read by mom. I lived filled in fear, never knowing what might trigger mom's rage toward me.

I went to university – 320 kilometres away – so I no longer had to live in what

felt like enemy territory. My friends became my family, and all the things I had been criticized for, I was now complimented on.

My confidence started building, and soon I found my path in life. However, I still struggled with my relationship with my mother. I knew, for my own mental and physical health, I needed to find a way to forgive her. I knew I had to render her abuse powerless over me, but I was still seething with anger and resentment. All I wanted to do was get away, nurse my wounds and wallow in being a victim.

I started searching for answers, delving into mom's past to find out what happened to her as a child. Mom's response was always, "I don't know. I don't remember." I kept digging.

I also agreed to visit a plastic surgeon, as long as she let me bring a film crew. I ended up making a funny short film, *My Nose*, about my mother's relentless campaign to get me to "bob my schnoz." I was overwhelmed by the reaction to this little film, and I started hearing other people's stories. I knew I was not alone.

I was on a mission to heal my relation-

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*I was on a mission to heal my relationship with mom and record the journey*

ship with mom and record the journey for personal purposes. Mom agreed. As I started to understand her better and we grew closer, I knew I was tapped to make an in-depth film about the (hopeful) transformation of my relationship with her from loathing to love. I had no idea how hard it would be to make.

With the help of professional therapists, mom began to open up, and I researched what she did not remember, finding answers through archival records and newly discovered family members. As family secrets were uncovered, mom revealed

a childhood filled with tragedy and struggle – attempted suicides, financial hardships and untimely deaths.

Armed with this knowledge, I was able to change how I looked at her. I stopped expecting her to love and adore me, and starting looking at her as a wounded child.

Today we are extremely close. Since dad died, we have become each other's preferred travel companions. I feel lucky to have gotten to this place in my relationship with her and can treasure and enjoy our remaining time together. Judaism teaches us that every descent is for the sake of an ascent. If it weren't for my difficult childhood, I would not have had the opportunity to grow. I am forever grateful for the obstacles I have faced – they provided me with a chance to learn. The greatest lesson I have learned is the ability to forgive, which is the biggest gift you can give to yourself. ■

*Gayle Kirschenbaum's film Look at Us Now, Mother! screens May 8 at the Royal Ontario Museum and May 10 at the Cineplex Cinemas Empress Walk 6 as part of the Toronto Jewish Film Festival.*

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