

A Beacon of Hope:

Linda Tuininga turned her trauma into a light for others on the road to recovery

By Lisa Rymer

Before Linda Tuininga found New Horizons of the Treasure Coast, the 60-year-old former human resources executive was sleeping in her car with a gun under the seat. She had no money, no home and no family.

On a February morning in 2014, Linda decided this was the day she would end her life. Instead, she met a church pastor who drove Linda to New Horizons, a mental health and substance abuse agency in Fort Pierce.

“New Horizons saved my life,” says Linda, a survivor of chronic sexual abuse. “I came into recovery here. I had people around me who cared, my meds started working and I began to feel better.”

Linda spent 6 months living on an inpatient residential unit at New Horizons, where she attended therapy, developed relationships and gained self-esteem.

In the three years since, Linda has completed the Florida Recovery Peer Specialist Certification, which required 500 hours of volunteer work, secured employment at New Horizons helping others, and just last month published her memoir.

“Every Fourth Girl,” is the nonfiction account of the sexual abuse Linda suffered by her father that began when she was only 10-months-old and ended at age 38.

“I had no recollection of any sexual abuse my whole life until the age of 43,” says Linda. “I disassociated -- blacked out. I know I had to go to the doctors a lot for shots of penicillin. I was always getting sick, apparently with STDs. I had a lot of difficulties: anxiety, depression... I attempted suicide, but I didn’t know why. I had no memory of the events with my father.”

When she was 43, at the height of her professional career, Linda went into a grocery store after work to grab a few items. Suddenly, the memories caved in on her... like an avalanche of misery.

“It was like a Kodak carousel slide projector flashing before my eyes -- all the images of abuse from childhood to adulthood flooded over me as I held on to the grocery cart for dear life,” she says. “My body was re-traumatized all over again.”

What followed was Linda’s mental and emotional breakdown from the realization of all that her father had done. “My father was a sadistic, sociopathic pedophile,” she says.

Her memoir, a page turner from start to finish that is imbued with unimaginable tenderness, mercy and humanity, sets the record straight about what life was really like in the upper-middleclass Scottsdale, Arizona house where Linda grew up.

“My story of sexual abuse is actually so common,” she says. “The reality is one in four women are sexually abused before the age of 18.”

Along with Linda’s memories came a deep depression which no amount of alcohol or other substance would alleviate. Despite her efforts over the years to rise above the trauma -- to will it away -- Linda continued to spiral downward.

“I attribute my healing to the compassion and support I received from New Horizons staff,” she says.

Now, she gives other clients that same compassion and support as a Recovery Peer Specialist, helping them on their road to recovery from mental illness and substance abuse.

A Recovery Peer Specialist is a person with significant life experience who supports individuals recovering from similar experiences. Peer specialists have an expertise, called “lived experience,” that professional training cannot replicate.

“I believe this is the work I was destined to do,” says Linda. “I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. I have a purpose greater than myself.”

Will Joyce, PA-C, Program Director of the New Horizons Primary Care Clinic, and now Linda’s supervisor, was introduced to Linda while she was living on the unit.

“I met her on medical rounds when she was a resident here,” says Will. “I also did her six-month client survey assessment -- the same ones she’s doing now with

clients as a Recovery Peer Specialist -- and I could just see her blossoming. Her confidence was coming back and she was regaining her swagger," he recalls.

Together, Linda and Will have developed a wellness program for clients of New Horizons.

"I assist group members and individuals articulate their goals for recovery, learn and practice new skills, help them monitor their progress, model effective **coping techniques** and strategies based on her own recovery experience, and support them in **advocating** for themselves to obtain effective services," Linda explains.

"I should have started doing this years ago," she says. "It helps me as much or more as it does the clients I serve."

Linda also wrote several complementary workbooks for the wellness program and recently became a certified yoga instructor. Now, she has built a new relationship with her daughter, with whom she lives, and has two novels being published soon.

Linda exemplifies human resilience and the miracles that can occur when people help one another. She shares this message of hope with everyone she meets: "No matter what happens in life, recovery is possible."

New Horizons, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, is the most comprehensive mental health and substance abuse agency on the Treasure Coast, with eight facilities in four counties serving 11,000 children and adults annually, regardless of their ability to pay.

To learn more about New Horizons or the Recovery Peer Specialist program, please visit www.nhtcinc.org or call (772)672-8333.