

The Real Impact of Writing

By Hana Schank

A few weeks before my 40th birthday I overestimated my skiing ability. I was right at the age where one's body starts to behave less like the friend you've known since childhood and more like a cranky adult. I took a run too fast and tore my ACL to shreds. When the doctor looked at the MRI he seemed somewhat awed by my complete lack of an ACL. "Look," he said. "There's just nothing left."

As I rehabbed my knee over the next year through surgery and physical therapy, I came to see the world differently. I understood that I was experiencing a new disability—albeit temporarily—and it changed my perspective on the city I'd lived in for most of my life. I was also now living with donor tissue in my body, and I thought a lot about what a gift this unknown person had given me.

I have always been a writer. At that point I was focusing mostly on personal essays. I told my friend that I wanted to write about the experience I was having with my knee but that I didn't know what publication might want to run such a thing.

"What about the New York Times?" my friend asked. "They just launched that new section about health."

"Right," I laughed. "I'll just send it to the New York Times."

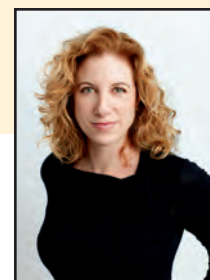
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A Story of Gentrification in Brooklyn

BY HANA SCHANK

But I couldn't get the thought out of my head, so a few weeks later I sat down, wrote an essay, and sent it to the Times. To my complete shock, they accepted it.

After that first brush with success, I submitted a second piece, a story about gentrification, and they published that one, too. After a few more pieces at the Times and the Washington Post, I began to think that maybe this wasn't just a fluke. Maybe I had hit on the formula that these newspapers wanted.



I also discovered that words have power. My first essay, about receiving donor tissue so I could walk again, found its way to a large tissue and organ donation organization. They invited me to speak at a luncheon honoring donor families. My doctor posted the story—which did not mention him by name—on the front page of his website. The more I wrote on different topics, the more I was asked to speak at other places about those same topics. I wrote stories about gender identity, summer camp, being shy, and why we should all take the month of August off.

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Parenting the Non-Girlie Girl

BY HANA SCHANK

But perhaps the best gift came when I helped my daughter's ophthalmologist write an essay. She had a story she wanted to tell about the volunteer work she did with local middle schools. She gave free eye exams and glasses to students in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the nation. Some of those kids had correctable vision issues that were undiagnosed for so long they were left permanently visually impaired. The day after the New York Times published the story, New York City responded by allocating five million dollars for improved school vision screenings. Writing, I learned, can change the world.

Opinion Writing Workshop

with author *Hana Schank*

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Since then, I have readily given my time to help other people tell their stories. If you have a story you'd like to tell, or a change you'd like to see in the world, please join me in my upcoming workshop for NOAH members, friends, and anyone else who

is interested. Learn how to harness the power of words to make real change, shed light on a topic that is ignored, or just, for a moment, bring focus to an insight you've had that the rest of the world should know about.