

Literary journeys lead back to childhood for 2 women

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While at Rocking Horse Ranch Resort recently, Marcia Ivans of Chatham Township asked her son for batting pointers so she could hit better in her next game with the Chatham Adult Women's Softball League. She's 68. He's 44.

Meanwhile, Ethel Lee-Miller of Lincoln Park is taking tap dancing lessons. She's 61.

"Some peers tell me it's nice to dance, but tap dancing?" She laughed. "I want to be a tappin' granny."

At their so-called "certain age," both women have published books--Ivans, a poet, "Over Easy" (Arseya Publishing, \$13) and Lee-Miller, an author, "Thinking of Miller Place: A Memoir of Summer Comfort" (iUniverse, \$25.95).

Their literary journeys and joie de vivre will bring them together to present "Red Ribbons & White Shoelaces" July 29 at the Bernardsville Public Library. Each will read from her book and open the forum to questions. The evening is dedicated to the proposition that youthfulness is achievable at all ages.

Red ribbons represent an idyllic time in Lee-Miller's early life. On the first page of her memoir she recounts her grandmother brushing her hair into a silky ponytail, tying it with a red ribbon and lovingly sending her out to play:

The girl ran past Grandpa's flower gardens, past the cement birdbath, past the old stone fireplace. It felt as if her six-year-old body was lifted entirely off the ground. The red ribbon lifted up in the running breeze.

The white shoelaces are metaphoric for Ivans' transformation from the polished white sneakers and bleached laces of her girlhood to the vibrancy that would color her life, and her sneakers, much later:

Now we are rebels

Wild, carefree

Vibrant colors

Dazzling sunset orange

Sparkling rose pink

Brilliant sea blue

Jumping and dancing.

It would be a mistake, though, to assume either Ivans or Lee-Miller had an easy childhood or carefree life.

Ivans spent her first 58 years seeking self-confidence. This lack of belief in herself was instilled by her parents, she said, and was a force so strong she bypassed college and for years buried her first poetry book -- "Yesterday: A Collection of Thoughts" -- in her closet. The self-loathing persisted in spite of raising two children solo, holding down a 30-year career in sales in New York City's Garment Center, moving to New Jersey and running her own housecleaning business for a decade.

The "Over Easy" cover photo of Ivans at 5, dressed in feminine frills, was taped in an armoire where it never saw the light of day. Next to the picture was another of an angel shining a light. For years, Ivans said, her gloomy mind interpreted the juxtaposition as the angel waiting to take the girl into death.

"Then one day I realized the angel was shining its light on me," she said. "How perspective changes."

A little confidence goes a long way -- all the way, in fact, to featuring that photograph on the cover of a published book, starting the popular Poetry and Pastries series at Café Beethoven in Chatham, finding a new job in a bookstore, and working a publicity circuit so fast-paced Ivans now needs her colorful sneakers to keep up with it.

Despite the freedom of Lee-Miller's young self running through the gardens of the Miller Place beach house on Long Island, she sharply felt the injunctions of growing up in the 1950s. Her memoir is a way to preserve all the loving, nurturing parts, the jelly in the donut -- the joy of growing up with Eileen, her twin, also known as "My Finn," a reference to their Finnish ancestry; the heroism of her father with his big smile and strong arms as he rescued her from a tree or kept the family calm during a hurricane; the beauty of skipping down the cleared Poison Ivy Lane, the shortcut to the beach; and the fun of barbecues with corn-on-the-cob eating contests.

But between the lines readers can hear the volcanic rumblings of darker forces, such as alcoholism and racial prejudice.

"We went to Miller Place till I was 16," recalled Lee-Miller. Afterward she struggled with the era's messages to young women: Be quiet. Do not be too happy. Do not become a dancer or an architect. Those were her two dreams.

Lee-Miller did earn a master's degree and had two careers as a teacher and as a counselor and life coach. But the Arcadian road of youth eventually also led to sudden young widowhood and a descent into despair.

"I needed building up to realize that life could be good again," she said. That was the era of positive self-talk, as Lee-Miller calls it, of hanging mirrors in the house and repeating good, kind and hopeful things to her own reflection. Words like "You are a prize."

Emerging from the mist of that dark time came her second love and current husband of 18 years, Hank Miller, whom she calls "a national treasure."

"Today my quest is to gather more people into my life who support what I do," Lee-Miller said. One of her favorite strong women now is 40-year-old Olympic medalist swimmer Dara Torres, who birthed her first child last year and hopes to make the U.S. Olympic team for the 2008 games in Beijing.

Ivans and Lee-Miller keep an early icon of female strength on their refrigerators -- Rosie the Riveter, her hair in a bandana as she makes a muscle with one bicep. The words "We Can Do It" are emblazoned below Rosie's confident countenance.

What Ivans and Lee-Miller can do is forever evoke their inner little girls who have always wanted, against all odds, to just come out and play.

More: Visit Marcia Ivans at <http://mivans.com> and Ethel Lee-Miller at <http://web.mac.com/etheleemiller>.

"Human Interests" appears every Sunday and other days of the week from time to time. In each column Lorraine Ash explores interesting angles on local life that may otherwise escape attention. Reader mail is welcome at lvash@gannett.com.



John Bell / Daily Record

Ethel Lee-Miller, left, of Lincoln Park and Marcia Ivans of Chatham Township will read from their books and take questions at a program called 'Red Ribbons and White Shoelaces.'