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Duo shares strategies to combat bigotry

By JENNIFER SPRAGUE , Press Staff

MIDDLEFIELD - Roger Brewer grew up as a sharecropper in rural Georgia and attended a segregated high school in the 1960s. As a child, he was kicked out of whites-only restaurants and recalls an experience when two white men forced his mother's car off the road.

Roger's daughter Nicole graduated from Coginchaug Regional High School in 2000, where she was one of two or three black students and, at times, the only black student.

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Although she encountered few acts of overt bigotry, there were many times she was treated differently from her peers.

Roger and Nicole's experiences with discrimination led them to write "Withstanding the Lie," a self-help book about protecting yourself on the inside when others commit acts of bigotry against you. The father-daughter co-authors will hold a book signing and discussion Tuesday at the Levi E. Coe Library in Middlefield.

A collection of essays, personal stories and short fiction, "Withstanding the Lie" tells both Roger's and Nicole's experiences with bigotry and self-esteem.

"The problem was that some people saw me as black first and as Nicole, the individual, second," Nicole writes. "Sure, from time to time, others called me disparaging names and excluded me from things because of my race. (I was lucky I did not experience much of that sort of thing). However (and probably more importantly), I was not given the dignity of individualism that most of my white classmates and friends had been given."

"Withstanding the Lie" arises from the experiences of both Nicole and Roger, and addresses bigotry without assigning blame or attempting to change the world.

"I think today if someone were to say to you 'I have a book written by two black people about bigotry' they probably assume its going to be about placing responsibility or what people can do to resolve the problem," Roger said. "This book is different because it does not attempt to solve the problem of racism. Today many of us are trying to resolve bigotry and hopefully a day will come when we don't have bigotry anymore, but it's not going to happen today. Meanwhile, people are being destroyed on the inside."

"Withstanding the Lie" looks at how to withstand the pain of alienation, the indecency of bigotry and the misery of having one's fate compromised by prejudice.

"It's important for people to know how to deal with bigotry of any kind," Nicole said.

A simple concept, but easier said than done. The book says to deem all bigotry a lie.

"That diminishes the hurt you have," Roger said. "You have to look at yourself differently. You have to define yourself in a different way."

"Who you are and your value as a human being is something inside and nobody can take that away from you," Roger said. "They are not the basis of your self worth. That is an awesome message and we thought it would be great if we could share that with others. Putting in that in the form of a book was a challenge."

Roger and Nicole started writing in 2002, working long-distance while Nicole was in college in Virginia, then at graduate school at NYU. Roger took an early retirement from his job as a trial lawyer for a national insurance company.

"Financially, that was probably a foolish thing to do, but I felt so strongly about it," he said. "I started to think about bigotry and I felt I had a contribution to make, especially when Nicole started to struggle with some issues."

They encountered some challenges in the creative process, as Roger is methodical while his daughter is creative and free spirited, but Nicole said their differences complemented each other.

"To have those two sides working together kind of solidifies the book," she said. "He can rein me in a little and I can bring him out creatively so I think that really worked for us."

Working on such an important project together also brought the already-close pair even closer.

"We are very similar. We think a lot alike. We have the same value system, and what we find important in life is very similar," Nicole said. "I

think we discovered that more-so working together."

In writing the book, Nicole said she also learned about herself and her friendships. She recalls an experience on the playground as a child when another student said she did not share with black people.

"I had a friend who was able to defuse the situation and left with me," she said. "It's kind of an amazing thing for a young person to do. When I was writing the book, I realized how much that meant to me to have other people stand up for me."

Roger and Nicole said the techniques from the book apply to the different forms of bigotry they each faced and can apply to discrimination based on anything from economic status to gender to height and weight.

"I think what makes the book interesting is to show the techniques we are using work for all types of bigotry," Nicole said. "Even though our experiences were different, it comes from the same place. It's still bigotry. We can still use the same techniques of developing self esteem."

Roger and Nicole Brewer will hold a book signing at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Levi E. Coe Library in Middlefield, followed by a presentation and question-and-answer session at 7 p.m.

"Withstanding the Lie" is available for \$15.99 at amazon.com. Copies will also be sold at Tuesday's book signing.

For more information, visit withstandingthelie.com or e-mail info@withstandingthelie.com.

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