

# Orleans Teacher Imparts Life Lessons In New Memoir

by Debra Lawless

Cirrus Farber, a fifth grade teacher at Orleans Elementary School, has just published “Normal Rebel: A Memoir” (Create Space 2020) because although she was ashamed of her family when she was growing up, she wants young people to know “you are in charge of your future.”

Farber’s shame came from being “a poor kid living in a really rich community,” she says. Her shame, which she wore “like a bad case of poison ivy,” often prevented her from opening up to others and making friends. Yet even now, she finds that telling her story remains unsettling. “Could I be brave enough to share my story with the world?” she asks.

Farber spoke about her book during an Oct. 3 Zoom presentation sponsored by the Snow Library in Orleans and during an email interview after the presentation.

Farber and her twin brother Oceanus, known as Osh, were born in Provincetown. When the twins were one, the family moved to Wellfleet. Four years later, when Farber’s mother divorced her father, the family moved to Orleans. Her mother now had three children and was pregnant with a fourth.

The oldest three children “all had the same dad. The same dad who abandoned us when he found out that our mom was pregnant by another guy,” Farber writes in her memoir. The other guy is Rob, an apparently-unemployed carpenter whom Farber portrays as an “evil boyfriend.” Rob lives with the family in the unfinished house where bed sheets substitute for doors. The house is so shoddily built that



Cirrus Farber. COURTESY PHOTO

light leaks through the exterior walls at night. The family often sleeps outside in the car.

A key factor in the family’s descent into poverty and food insecurity came during the divorce proceedings when Farber’s father told the judge that “he would rescind any contact or fatherly duties in exchange for not paying child support,” Farber says. “The judge allowed it, and so my mom struggled to keep us all fed.” As a result, the family lived “in poverty and through trauma.”

The children had a “ragamuffin life” growing up. Farber’s mother, who comes

across as well-meaning, spent lots of time in the chaotic house drinking coffee, watching TV and worrying about the kids. At night, she and Rob sometimes smoked something that “was probably illegal.”

“As the oldest of the four kids, I took on a mother hen role in the family,” Farber says. “I remember doing piles of dishes when I couldn’t stomach looking at the messy counter.” She overhauled the house every season “when my mom’s messes got overwhelming.

“I knew that a work ethic would be my savior, so I worked and babysat as soon as I could, and this helped me escape the house in addition to helping me make money for my future.”

The lessons of this chaotic upbringing are what Farber aims to share with young readers. Each

chapter ends with a “note to self.” For example, the chapter on how the four children were given their unusual names ends with this: “Life’s hard enough as it is. Spare your kids the headaches and give them names they don’t have to explain.”

Farber excelled in school and began to come into her own in high school when she was cast as Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.” She discovered she had a talent for acting. The moral at the end of that chapter? “The dreams that you dare to

dream really do come true.”

When it came time to choose a college major, she opted to become a teacher. She has no regrets about giving up acting as she says “the stage is my classroom.”

Farber did not intend to return to the Cape after college, but she married her high school sweetheart Dawson. They are now the parents of three teenagers — Madelyn and identical twins Lachlan and Grayson. “I feel lucky that I was able to raise our family in this magical place and give them memories that will last a lifetime. And I feel honored to give back to the school and community that gave so much to me so that I could have hope for my own future,” she writes at the end of her memoir.

Every now and then, Farber has a student “in whom I saw my younger self, either with their work ethic, their love for school, or their home situations. They are the reason that I wrote the book and why I wanted to share my story.” She wants to give all kids hope for their future.

“More than anything, I just wanted to share my story so that kids know that they are not alone,” Farber says. “In a world where people seem further apart, I want to bring people together by sharing our stories and what lies in our hearts.” She tells students that they need to find their passion, as that may be their bridge to the future.

Farber is also the author of a novel, “Off the Grid.” Both books are intended for grades four through seven.

“Normal Rebel” is available in Orleans at Snow Library, Weekend and The Farm.

