

# LIFE

## Healing oneself, healing others

January 28, 2010



Ute Lawrence, the author of *The Power of Trauma*, a book about conquering post traumatic stress disorder, sits in her London, Ontario office, January 26, 2010. Lawrence survived a horrific 87 car pile up on the 401 highway near Windsor, Ontario in September of 1999 which killed 8 people.

Ten years ago, Ute Lawrence was living a full life. An independent woman with a positive outlook who had launched her first magazine publishing business in 1980—a rare thing for a woman to do in those days—she was publisher of Limited Edition magazines, distributed in 23 markets in Canada and the United States. “Between Christmas and New Year’s, I used to write down my goals for the next year and put it in an envelope,” says Ms. Lawrence. “And the next Christmas, I would open it and tick off all the goals I’d achieved.” None were ever left unticked.

Sept. 3, 1999, changed all that, suddenly and horrifically. Life can be like that. One minute, there's sunshine; the next, unbearable suffering. As Ms. Lawrence and her husband, Stan Fisher, were driving on the 401 from their home in London toward Windsor, a dense fog suddenly swallowed them up along with 86 other cars and their passengers in a surreal nightmare of mangled, piled-up metal, explosions, flames and human agony that was all too real. Eight people died, including a 14-year-old girl whose cries for help led rescuers to Ms. Lawrence and her husband.

Images of the largest pile-up in Canadian history haunted TV screens and viewers. But the days passed. Life went on and so, most people assumed, did the survivors. But Ms. Lawrence remained trapped in the fog, ensnared with survivor's guilt, haunted by the girl's cries and gripped by fear and darkness. She gave up her business and isolated herself. "For about five years, I didn't have any goals," she says. "I had lost my belief system. I didn't believe I could get anything done."

Finally, she was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. "PTSD is the most misunderstood and misdiagnosed disorder in the planet," Ms. Lawrence says. "Somebody goes to the doctor and says 'I can't sleep,' they get sleeping pills; they say they're depressed, they get anti-depressants; they have panic attacks, they get anxiety pills. And the cause is never looked into."

With treatment, Ms. Lawrence is healing. But she went further. She and her husband volunteered for leading-edge research conducted by Dr. Ruth Lanius, world-renowned PTSD specialist and neuroscientist at the University of Western Ontario, who established the PTSD clinic where Ms. Lawrence was treated.

She strengthened herself with a wealth of knowledge on PTSD, which included discovering that the condition afflicts a far larger number of people than just soldiers and survivors of catastrophic life events such as car accidents. From victims of childhood abuse or crime and those who've faced the death of a loved one or a life-threatening illness, to the lengthy list of life crises that can come like a fog out nowhere, the tentacles of PTSD are vast and numerous.

"I said to [Dr. Lanius] that Stan and I would like to volunteer with a PTSD association. She said, 'there isn't one,' " says Ms. Lawrence.

So in 2006, Ms. Lawrence founded the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Association, the first in North America. She became a public speaker, raising awareness and educating everyone from the public to physicians on PTSD. "Wherever I talk about PTSD, there are always people who say they've recognized the symptoms in themselves, and many have

told me I have helped them,” says Ms. Lawrence. In 2008, she published an award-winning book, *The Power of Trauma*, written for PTSD sufferers.

“I’m dedicated to sharing the insights that I’ve had to help others,” she says. “The mind and body are so strong, you can get over anything. But with PTSD there are memories that are stuck and you have to process them. Without the proper care, it will fester. But the bigger the trauma, the bigger the learning curve. If it was easy to get over something, it would never become a life-changing experience. ”

Now, she’s expanding her focus, writing another book called *Power up Your Performance: The Seven Secrets to Achieving Anything*. She wants to use her learning curve, which she says has enriched her life with greater compassion, spirituality and self-awareness, to help just about everyone.

“When you’ve had a traumatic experience, your roots are ripped out of the soil,” she says. Resilience and making the best with the life and body you have been given, she says, requires a strong root system. “And the taller you want your life to be, the stronger the root system needs to be. The image of the tree was a turning point for me because if you don’t have a healthy root system, how can you grow and branch out.’

“I don’t want people to wait until they’ve had a traumatic experience.”