

Nashua author shares her family's deadly secret

By KATHY MacKAY
Special to The Telegraph

Like so many others, Melanie Brooks' family kept a secret. In her case, a deadly one.

The Nashua writer's memoir, "A Hard Silence: One Daughter Remaps Family, Grief, and Faith When HIV/AIDS Changes it All," is a primer for those holding onto trauma and the damages of unspoken words. "The secret that was meant to shelter us from the stain of HIV/AIDS didn't stop it from bleeding from our lives anyway," she writes.

Brooks was 13 when her father, Orville Messenger, a highly regarded thoracic surgeon in New Brunswick, Canada, contracted HIV from a blood transfusion during emergency heart surgery. The year was 1985. There were no life-extending medications.

Brooks' parents hid the nature of her father's illness from friends and community. They chose not to discuss AIDS with her. "They tried to hide the anxiety they felt, but its frightening presence was always there, weighing down the surrounding air."

Through parallel timelines and vivid prose, the reader is able to understand the culture of the early days of AIDS and its

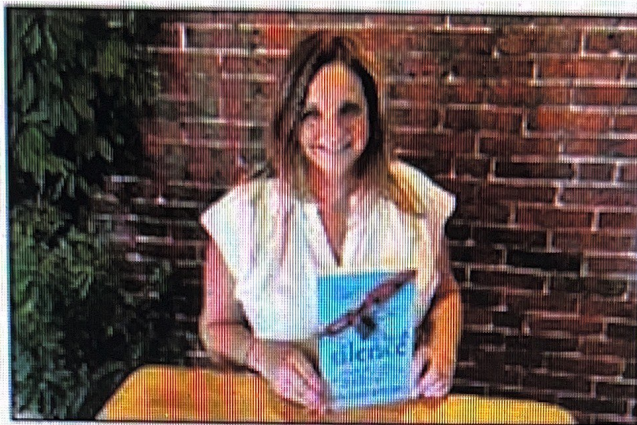
impact on the author and her family. One timeline begins with her father's diagnosis in Canada and stretches into her life in Nashua where she was raising a family with her husband, Chris Brooks. In those chapters, the self-proclaimed "Daddy's girl" creates a rich portrait of her father and their relationship. "On Christmas morning, he always made a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice just for me."

The second timeline focuses on her healing journey, which began years after her father's death. That's when a series of panic attacks began to interrupt her life. Brooks writes that she started therapy "to chisel an

opening into the fortress that housed my most conflicted emotions – the ones that I was still trying to name."

Faith is a theme that runs through the memoir. Brooks writes of the stigma of AIDS and how it contributed to her parents' decision to hide her father's illness. A fact made more complicated by her family's evangelical Christian beliefs. At that time, televangelists, like Jerry Falwell, declared AIDS as God's punishment for "homosexuals." Brooks tells the reader those "hateful messages from powerful evan-

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Courtesy photo

Nashua author Melanie Brooks

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gical leaders" were critical factors in how "isolated" she felt when her father was sick.

Those feelings of isolation were exacerbated by the cruel facts behind Canada's tainted blood scandal — one that left thousands dead. While this is not the dominant narrative of the book, Brooks does provide a glimpse into the culpability of the Canadian Red Cross. She writes its "biggest failures included a lack of proper screening to eliminate high-risk donors, unnecessary delays in implementing available screening methods of the blood products for HIV, and fateful decisions to save money by using up inventory of suspected contaminated products."

In an author interview, Brooks said the Red Cross "knew with certainty that there was contaminated blood in the system and they chose to use that blood, anyway."

Her story resonates with this writer. In 1997, my husband, Dave MacKay, a special education teacher at Fairgrounds Junior High School, was among the thousands of hemophiliacs in the United States to die from HIV and hepatitis C infections contracted from FDA-approved blood products.

Messenger, Brooks' father, died in 1995, with his family singing hymns at his bedside. The reader experiences the beauty in the heartbreaking moment, along with the author's raw

RECEPTION, BOOK SIGNING

WHEN: Tuesday, Sept. 12,
6:30-8:30 p.m.

LOCATION: Nashua Country Club, 25 Fairway Street
Sponsored by Ballin Books.

emotions. "I knew he was gone. I felt him go at the same time that something inside of me ruptured."

Through the writing process, Brooks has learned not to blame her parents for their silence. "I think for a long time it felt like ... I either had to be angry at them or accepting of it," Brooks, a mother of two, understands the stigmatized climate and her parents' desperation to keep their family life as normal as possible. "They couldn't have known (at the time) what the consequences of that would be ..."

Like many memoirists, Brooks said she began writing her book for herself. "Along the way, I started to understand this story does have value for other people. If this book can become a catalyst for someone else feeling less alone, then I certainly am willing to put this story out there."

Kathy MacKay is a photographer and writer, currently working on her memoir. In 2004 she published "Dying in Vein: Blood, Deception, Justice."

Melanie Brooks teaches writing at Northeastern University and Bay Path University. Her first book, "Writing Hard Stories," was published in 2017. For more information, visit <https://www.melaniebrooks.com>.