

Joella Aragón
Interview by Sue Staats

At Stories on Stage, Joella Aragón's an energetic whirlwind — setting out chairs, helping set up the tables, greeting everyone, taking photographs. But behind all that energy is a deeply spiritual commitment to serve others and to involve herself in the writing community. Her story to be read at our September event, "Obeah Child," grew out of that community — a nine-month workshop with Janna Maron, publisher of *Under the Gum Tree*, and working one-on-one with former Stories on Stage Sacramento director Dorothy Rice, who helped inspire and open up the final version of the story. Joella learned from them that writing is community. But before that, she learned an even more valuable lesson from a grandmother in Belize, under circumstances nobody could have predicted. That's what "Obeah Child" is about, and that's the story I wanted her to tell.

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: The story "Obeah Child" is a memory from your childhood in Belize, where you lived with your grandmother. Tell me about the experience you write about so beautifully and your life there. Were you born in Belize?

Joella: No, I was born here (in the U.S.). But when I was a child in New Jersey, my mother went blind. And she ended up in a mental institution because of that. I'm the middle child of five, and it was during the Vietnam war, and my mother was in a hospital and my father had to go to Vietnam. There was nobody to take care of us. So, my father took my mother out of the mental hospital and the six of us got on a plane — without my father — and went to live with his mother, my Mamacita Ella, in Central America in a very small village, Santa Elena, just outside of Belize City, which was then called British Honduras. And the lessons and the trauma of it all have unfolded over the years and that's how I ended up writing about it.

Sue: So, there was one specific day — the day your grandmother taught you how to make the Obeah doll. What about that day stood out so much that you were compelled to write about it?

Joella: Well, we were five light-skinned children in a dark-skinned city. And I can't speak for my brothers and sisters, but I was teased relentlessly for having a mother who was blind and for having a mother who was mentally ill. It is what it is and you learn to deal with it. And then my grandmother, in all of her wisdom, said you have to learn how to stand up for yourself. And you can't go crying to the teacher, you can't come crying to me. You have to learn to stand up to bullies. It is a part of childhood. It is a part of growing, it is a part of life — learn to stand up for yourself. That was really the message behind it all.

Sue: So, what did she do that taught you to stand up for yourself?

Joella: She taught me how to make the Obeah doll and how it would protect me. I remember that day so clearly. My grandmother was an amazing seamstress. And I remember her bringing out the cloth and making me cut this cloth. I remember almost everything she said and everything she did. The way she showed me how to cut the cloth. The way she showed me how to sew on the eyes. The things that she said to me about not being a tattletale. "Here," she said, "you gotta have a secret way to protect yourself. You just do it," she said.

It's not like I think about it every day. But sometimes a story kind of bubbles up inside of you and you've just got to get it down on paper whether anyone likes it or not.

Sue: What an amazing experience. Had your grandmother been part of your life before that?

Joella: No, she had not been part of our lives, other than through stories my father had told us about life in Belize, in British Honduras. My father was a grand storyteller. And actually, so was my mother — even blind and mentally ill, she could tell a good story. And so could my grandmother.

Sue: So, I can see you're from a long line of storytellers. Joella, at the end of the story, you say that making the Obeah doll taught you never to hold a grudge. Something else I see in the story is that it was also a way to get back at people who had hurt you. So, which is it?

Joella: Well, I think this touches a natural part of who I am. It's very exhausting to hold grudges. But I also believe that it's very exhausting — and I learned this as an adult — to let people walk on me, or anyone that I love. It gets very old and very tiring. I don't like grudges. And I don't like being walked on. How that weaves together comes out in the story. And I will say I don't think I truly understood all of that as a child. And now I'm 66. It's taken a long time to unravel this stuff and get a clearer picture.

Sue: There's quite a lot of one kind of spirituality in this story. I'm wondering if the spiritual continues to inspire you — spirituality of all kinds.

Joella: Yes, I am very spiritual. I was raised a Catholic, although I walked away from Catholicism years and years and years ago. But I felt lonely in my life without something bigger than me. And so I went on a very long search, and I'd say in my 40s, early 40s, came upon spirituality. But it really started in my childhood, in the roots of how I was raised. And it was there when my grandmother taught me ... let's call it voodoo, Obeah magic, whatever you want to call it, and I was sticking a needle in a cloth dolls' knees. There is something spiritual about all of it, whether you agree with Catholicism, or Obeah, magic, or spirituality. For me, it's all important — and fascinating.

Sue: So, how long did you live with your grandmother in Belize? When did you come back to the States?

Joella: I lived with my grandmother for about two years, then the Vietnam War was slowing down. My father came home in the late '60s and he sat us down at the kitchen table in my grandmother's house and said, "We're moving to California because your mother and I don't have money to send you to college. And if any of you want to go, the only thing we can offer you is free community college." I remember this very clearly, too. He said that the guys in Vietnam told him about free community college. And that's why he signed up to move back after the war to Travis Air Force Base. So, we ended up at Travis and then we ended up in Vacaville.

Sue: Such a short time in Belize for such a powerful experience.

Joella: Yeah. It sometimes amazes me, that impact. I think sometimes the impact of a minute in your life, or the impact of a year or two years, can stay with you forever. It's not necessarily the experiences of 10 years that sticks. It's sometimes the experience of three minutes.

Sue: I completely agree. So, you returned to the U.S. and to California. Then what?

Joella: Well, I did what my father told me to do. I went to community college. And then I transferred to Sac State and I became a teacher for 13 years, was president of the teachers' union and was union rep for the California Teachers' Association. It's a very, very volatile business and the experience gave me backbone. As my grandmother said, I learned to stick up for myself, and for others. Although it took me a lot longer to learn to stick up for myself!

Sue: Did your grandmother live long enough to know how she influenced your professional life?

Joella: No, unfortunately. At the end of her life, for a long time, she had a form of dementia called sundowners. I did visit her a few times with my father, but there was no way I could tell her. So really, when I saw her, I was just really mostly interested in her stories, and in my dad's stories when they were together.

Sue: So, you recently retired, and now you're volunteering for Stories on Stage Sacramento. Let me ask, what prompted you to volunteer?

Joella: Well, it started at, of all places, the Belize Writers Workshop that Joey Garcia started. And one of the speakers said that we're all literary citizens. She didn't say it's our duty, but she encouraged us to reach out and help other writers, and to help others who are trying to bring the written word forth, and I actually took it seriously. So, when I came back, I had listened at a heart level to what that woman said in that conference and decided I needed to help. I've really enjoyed it. I like putting up chairs.

Sue: Well, you do a lot more than that, but yes, the chairs are important. And it's just cool that another Belize connection led you to us! I agree, though, that it's important to support writers and writing. For me, it's kind of like church. A good habit to have.

Joella: And what a great way to meet other people who love words. You know, sometimes writing can be seen as a nerdy thing, and I'm a bit of a loner. But when I get around other writers, I'm like, yay, I'm in a community of other nerdy people who love words and stories!

Sue: Another way you contribute big time is the photographs you take at events. You're a really gifted photographer and I'm wondering how photography fits into your world of spirituality and writing and work and looking after yourself. How's your photography fit into that? How did you get started?

Joella: I have thought a lot about this and I think it might be because my mother was blind. I was her eyes as a child. There were five of us. And I was truly the only one interested in saying to my mother when we were in a restaurant, "Oh, the tablecloth is this color. And oh, that lady over there has beautiful brown hair. And her dress is beautiful." I was the describer, if that's a word. I was my mother's eyes. My brothers and sisters did not want to be involved in that, so I came upon it naturally. I like to think that I have been looking at things since I was six. And it was just a natural transition to pick up a camera and go, click. I can easily see the beauty in other people, it's not hard for me. In a second, I can say, Oh, look at that face, click, and I get it. I really link it to having been raised by a blind mother.

Sue: What an amazing inspiration, and we all benefit from it. One last question: Let's get back to that Obeah doll with the pins in it. If we see you with a little cloth doll, should we worry? I mean, you do have special powers ...

Joella: Oh, no. I believe in protecting myself. But I am not mean-spirited. So, if you see me with a voodoo doll in my hand, it's not to hurt anyone. It's to protect me.

Sue: Good to know!