

LIFESTYLE

Cliff Hakim's 'Walk in My Shoes' follows the path of empathy and kindness

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"If the shoe fits," as the saying goes, "wear it."

Cliff Hakim's new book, "Walk in My Shoes: The Path to Empathy and Compassion," shows how kindness has a good fit for the 35 people he interviews from different walks of life

In terms of timeliness in today's turbulence, it could be said to be great path for everyone to follow.

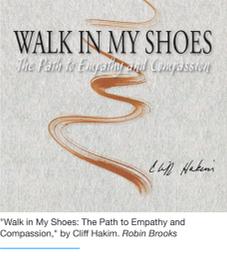
"The message of the book is kindness matters and compassion is a super-power," said Hakim, who grew up in Shrewsbury and is a teacher, writer, counselor, executive coach, artisan/entrepreneur and artist who now lives in Arlington.

"The words are simple, but the work it takes just to go inside ourselves and look at someone kindly, with no agenda — I think these real gestures of how we treat one another add up to the health of society," Hakim said during a recent telephone interview.

"Walk in My Shoes" came out in December and is published by Hakim's own publishing company, WIMS Publishing. It is available at amazon.com.

The heart of "Walk in My Shoes" is based on the 35 people who Hakim interviewed, "ordinary people who are proof that we do still care for one another and have the will to make things better, that empathy and compassion are the glue of American society, and that kindness is a pillar of strength."

They are all extraordinary in their own way, and the stories they have to tell are often very moving. Hakim calls them "storytellers" rather than interviewees.

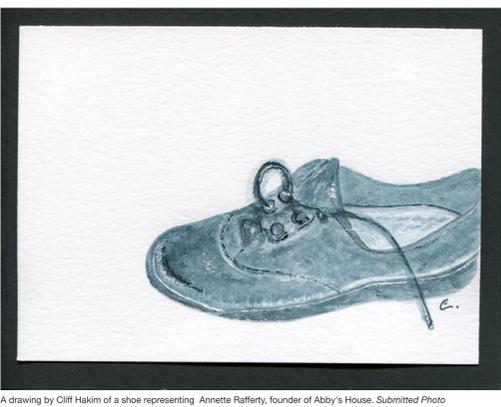


"Walk in My Shoes: The Path to Empathy and Compassion," by Cliff Hakim, Robin Brooks

Notice our new look? As you get used to things, please let us know what you think!



Cliff Hakim Submitted Photo



A drawing by Cliff Hakim of a shoe representing Annette Rafferty, founder of Abby's House. Submitted Photo

Among the storytellers are Annette Rafferty, founder of Abby's House, which provides affordable housing and a shelter for women and their children in Worcester, and James A. Welu, former director of the Worcester Art Museum.

"As I think of Annette's accomplishments, I recall Maya Angelou's words: 'My wish for you is that you continue. Continue to be who you are, to astonish a mean world with your acts of kindness,'" Hakim writes.

In the book Hakim also explores "the importance of compassionate leadership — people who could help us bring this quality to our larger organizations and institutions."

Toward the end of its journey, "Walk in My Shoes" leads the reader to consider "Your Step."

Over the steps of a long and varied career, Hakim has come to know a lot of people in a variety of settings.

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Originally from from Maple Avenue in Shrewsbury, he graduated from Boston College with a degree in special education and taught for a while in California. A desire to return East was coupled with an interest in helping people in the world of business. He took a job as a headhunter and "realized what this was leading to was a great expansion of my creativity," he said in an earlier interview. "I wanted to learn how to write and counsel others."

Hakim went on to write his first book, "When You Lose Your Job," and to found his career counseling firm. His best seller, "We Are All Self-Employed: How to Take Control of Your Career," was published in 1994 (Berrett-Koehler Publishers) and updated in 2003. He has delivered presentations around the country and written a newsletter.

Meanwhile, as an artisan, Hakim founded Inspired Stones, designing memorials using natural stone and reclaimed wood to tell a loved one's story.

About three years ago Hakim said he started taking art courses at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and "drew flowers, seascapes, and somehow graduated to drawing shoes. Things started to come together in this serendipitous way."

Hakim began thinking about people who exemplify empathy and kindness and "how is it to walk in their own shoes and what does it feel like to walk in the shoes of others?"

In his book he writes, "Shoes are an amazing metaphor. They provide a base of support and comfort, stability, and a sense of lightheartedness and grace that allow us to reach out to others. As each person showed me their favorite pair, we engaged in a wonderfully intimate dialogue about how we learn to care for ourselves and then extend that caring to others."

The storytellers had received unusual requests.

"When I approached people for an interview I said, 'Would you think of what your favorite shoes are and take pictures in different positions,'" Hakim said.

Instead of the storytellers having a head and shoulders photograph taken for the book, Hakim drew their shoes with an image of them respectfully in each chapter.

"Rather than the face, I used the symbol of the shoe and expressing that in my way the soul of the person — (spelling it out) s-o-u-l and s-o-l-e. The book was really a footprint of the way they lived on the Earth and treated other people."

The subjects/storytellers were a combination of people Hakim already knew and people suggested by friends, relatives, acquaintances and business colleagues. "I asked who they knew that was an exceptionally kind person."

Some of the interviews were conducted in-person, others by phone. A lot of the work for the project took place after the pandemic had started.

Rafferty was suggested to Hakim by his cousin, Linda A. Miller of Holden. Interviewed at the age of 90, Rafferty recalled the start of Abby's House as an emergency overnight shelter for women and their children on Crown Street in 1976 after 2½ years of grassroots organizing. It is now at 52 High St. with 79 units of affordable housing and a nine-bed shelter specifically for women and children.

In the 1970s, Rafferty faced resistance from powers that be, usually male, who didn't think a place such as Abby's House was even necessary.

In terms of her walking, she tells Hakim in for "Walk in My Shoes":

"I have walked with women to the courthouse.
I have walked with women to the hospitals.
I have walked with prostitutes on the street.
I have walked to the homes of women of great distinction to gather support.
I even walked into Harley-Davidson, and they gave us money!
I have walked to inspire people to help others, talking about our mission to schools, colleges, businesses, and foundations.
When I asked one of the residents in our women's shelter, 'What's the hardest thing about living on the street?' she said, 'People not looking at me.' These women need to be acknowledged as human beings. That is why we refer to them as our guests.
Fear of the other gets in the way of compassion."

As for her shoes, Rafferty told Hakim, "My feet are slim, and I could hardly get a pair of shoes to fit." She began buying SAS (San Antonio Shoes) shoes and has worn the same brand ever since. They were of a practical design back then. She said, "Perhaps today my favorite shoes have a bit more flair!"

Welu told Hakim, "When you asked about my favorite shoes, I almost chose my baby shoes. My parents used to hang ours on their Christmas tree. I still have mine.

I have large, narrow feet, and these Allen Edmonds Classic Cap Toes fit me well. My shoes are a constant in my life, a foundation. Just like the values I inherited from my family. My father ran a local ice cream store for nine years, and my siblings and I worked in it seven days a week for no pay. We learned to work hard and to make ice cream. I am probably more famous for making ice cream than I am as a museum director."



A portrait of shoes by Cliff Hakim, representing James A. Welu, former director of the Worcester Art Museum. Submitted Photo

Welu worked at the Worcester Art Museum for 36 years and was director from 1986 to 2011.

He tells Hakim, "The goal of the museum is not just to show off beautiful objects. It's to educate, to teach people to care more about their lives and the process of civilization. A museum holds the DNA of history. The world has seen both good and bad. Maybe by knowing the dark side, we won't have to repeat it."

Other storytellers in "Walk in My Shoes" include Valerie Andrews, a book editor who edited one of Hakim's early books.

"I had not been in touch with her for 20 years. She became one of the storytellers for this book and also the editor for the book."

A landscaper Hakim knew, John Saule, also became a storyteller. "He started telling me stories about paying it forward in his life," Hakim said. "Karma is real," Saule says.

Another acquaintance, Stephen Cocuzzo, a cyclist and hairstylist, recalls a customer who had little money. Cocuzzo told him to pay what he can. One day the customer showed up with a huge wad of bills.

Katherine Switzer was the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon in 1967, but during her run the race manager repeatedly assaulted Switzer trying to grab her bib number and stop her competing. Her bib number was 261.

"She started 261 Fearless, an educational program to help women get esteem and live fearlessly," Hakim said.

He interviewed her from New Zealand where Switzer now lives.

"It's not about running. It's about changing women's lives," she says.

"The timing (of the publishing) has been great," Hakim said. "My feeling of why I wrote it is mirrored in society. People are saying, 'I've been feeling sad.' 'I've been feeling angry.' What I've been dismayed about is the number of people who feel they don't count."

This in "a world that seems deaf to the needs of others."

Hakim asked, "If we can't have a conversation with each other, then what do we have? ... Without kindness we can't save the planet."

However, regarding the book's timeliness amid the political landscape, "I don't really want to turn it into a political issue. It's really an issue of humanity and one another's being," Hakim said.

"One thing that flowed through the 35 stories was the courage they had to give of themselves," he noted.

"I wanted to paint this landscape of people who are helping the world in small and large ways."

For more information, visit: walkinmyshoesart.com



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