

Author 1990

Features

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Listening to old women

Observations on aging process led publisher to harvest anthology

By CHRIS WATSON
Sentinel staff writer

MAYBE SOONER, maybe later, a woman looks in the mirror and notices permanent wrinkles, loose skin and circles under her eyes. The changes remind her of her mortality, remind her that the only way to the future is down the road of old age.

Gracefully or bitterly, we all travel the same road.

That thought sobered Watsonville editor and publisher Sandra Martz and led her to publish "When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple," an anthology of stories, poems and photographs about women and the aging process. The anthology is one of 10 books nominated for the American Booksellers' Association "Book of the Year" award.

In the sun-drenched living room of her home atop Murphy Hill in Watsonville, Martz, 46, recounted how the idea germinated and grew into the book.

"I was in my early 40s at the time, and was noticing how some of my friends who were 15 to 20 years older were settling into old age.

"They were, for the most part, bitter. They talked about how, because they were no longer attractive, they had become invisible. One friend complained that life didn't seem to be worth living.

"Seeing them, I began to struggle against that happening to me. I wanted my own experiences to be different.

There's more to growing old than disabilities, loneliness and financial hardships, she said; you reap what you have sown.

"Those who are successful at aging don't wait until they are old to start changing. Old age is really only a yeast to making a new self. People who have spent their whole lives questioning and exploring still do it when they get older. And even if they have to accommodate an increasingly fragile body and new living arrangements, they don't give up and quit living."

Martz started a new life three years ago, when she left Los Angeles. She left behind two sons, a granddaughter and a middle-management job with an aerospace company.

She wanted to leave the city and start her own business. The strawberry fields, apple orchards, sheep, chickens and dogs of rural Watsonville reminded her of the Texas and New Mexico of her

childhood.

"If I had known how difficult it was going to be, how big a risk I was taking, I might not have done it," said Martz, who works out of her home and ships her books from the kitchen of an attached apartment.

"I started the venture in L.A. in 1984 as a part-time hobby. When I came up here, I put all my money, all my plastic into the business to get it started. It wasn't until 1989 that I made it into the black, finally. And I think I'll get out of debt (she knocks on wood) this year.

"For all the worry and work, it has been, without a doubt, the most satisfying thing I've ever done in my life."

Part of that satisfaction, she said, has been getting to know some of her contributors.

"The nature of my work has allowed me to become very close to some of my women authors. I am a safe person for them to share with. But since I have been publishing, two of my author friends have died — one I knew very well. I try very hard not to let myself get too attached, but I don't think I can really stop that."

Martz finds anthologies — of which she has edited and published five — particularly satisfying.

"The beauty of theme anthologies is that you get to read what writers are really interested in. I choose a theme that is deep enough to inspire passion in the writer but broad enough to provoke different perspectives. The material that I get in the mail tells me what the major focus of the book will be."

Martz said the writings in "When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple" reflect the social reality of the current crop of older women.

"The book has acknowledged a lot of the pain and spunk that these women have experienced. It validates their experiences and lets the reader know what they might have to deal with."

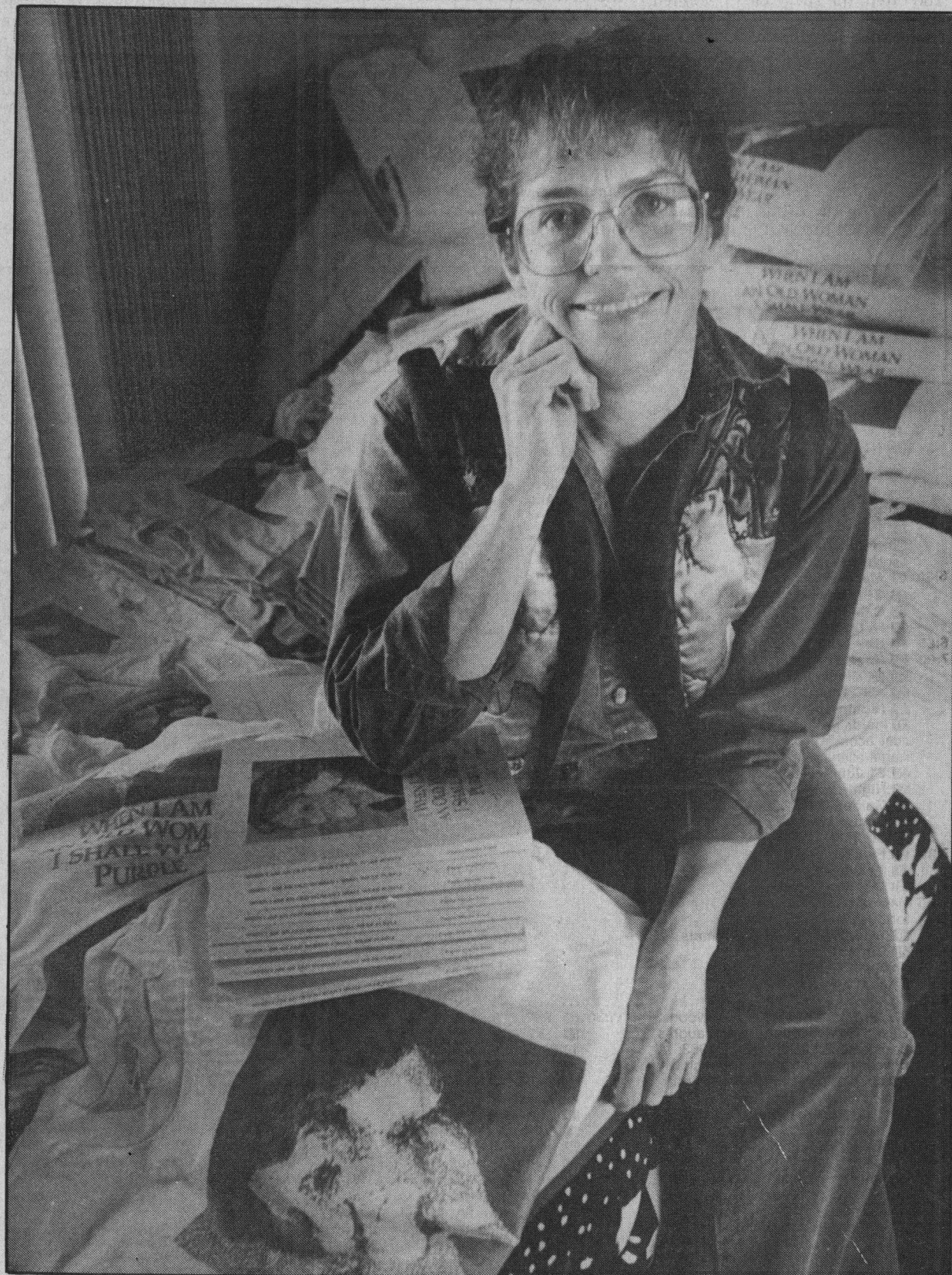
Due next spring is a book on women who have built their own homes.

Martz has published more than 10 books, but knows that her anthologies of women's writings and anthologies on aging are what keep her afloat in the cut-throat publishing business. Martz said that small publishers can compete only if they find a niche and pursue it exclusively.

"I get lots of appreciative letters from the authors and from readers — sometimes embarrassingly so." Martz couldn't be happier. "It's very, very gratifying."

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— Sandra Martz
publisher



Booksellers nominated anthology by Pajaro Valley publisher Sandra Martz

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel