

POSTSCRIPTS

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Tulane University
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Life experiences fuel alumna's Arizona Thriller Trilogy series

TSSW alumna Sharon Sterling, formerly Sharon Hickey (MSW '97), has always had a passion for writing, and now she has gained the life experience to put that passion on paper.

Sterling just finished her second book, *Fatal Refuge*, the second installment in what she calls her Arizona Thriller Trilogy.

"When I was younger, I didn't feel that I had that much to write about," she said. "My life experience didn't seem interesting or important enough to actually write about. But after being in social work for about 15 years, I had such a wealth of experience and met so many interesting people that thinking of the plot and creating the characters was not hard at all."

Those experiences have run the gamut from her first job as a crisis counselor at a community mental health center to her work with the National Health Service Corps in Yuma, Arizona, where she was the only social worker in an 18-bed inpatient psychiatric unit.

Now she's semi-retired, working part-time at a retirement community of about 700 residents while honing her writing.

"My focus is not only to entertain but also to educate my readers about mental illness," she said. "In the first book, one of the characters was a woman who had borderline personality disorder and who had been sexually abused. The book was all about a plot for revenge against the abuser."

That first book, *The Well*, was set in Sedona, Arizona, and follows social worker Allie Davis along with a beautiful young Apache woman, in a murder mystery saga.

Fatal Refuge, to be released this month, is set in Yuma, Arizona, and features a

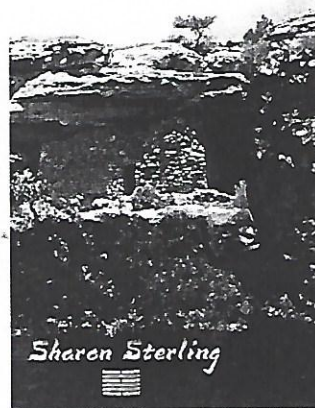
woman who has schizophrenia. Sterling said her third book will be set in either Flagstaff or Prescott.

"So the question is how do you write an entertaining mystery thriller and educate people and get them to drop some of their preconceptions about people with mental illness? That's my challenge," she said. "I discovered that writing fiction is not easy, and a person needs support. A lot of my support comes from 'Sisters in Crime' which is a national organization of women who write crime fiction."

Sterling said it takes six months of dedicated work to write a good fiction

novel. As part of her novels, she weaves in the Arizona landscape and scenery as well as flawed and realistic characters.

The Well



"It's very rewarding," she said. "Of course, after the first book I sent copies to all my family and friends to say 'Look, look what I did!'. I think the biggest reward is just to have people say that they learned something about Arizona or about a mental illness. To know someone learned and gained a different perspective from one of my books is very rewarding."

Sterling, who is an avid hiker and reader, said her time at Tulane was very special.

"It was definitely a life-changing experience," she said. "I met some of the sweetest, friendliest and most loving people. Tulane was really a very wonderful experience. I just love social workers, and I love to get people interested in social work. Unfortunately, the average age of social workers is going up at an alarming rate. We need to start recruiting and training younger social workers, so I guess I'm a woman on several missions."

For more information about her books, visit <http://sharonsterling.net/>.