

*Burned by hot liquid as a toddler, Gayle stood in the shadows most of her life, not wanting to be visible. With the support of family, friends and mentors, she overcame fears, phobias, body image and self-doubt and now stands tall.*

**Becoming Visible:**  
**Overcoming Trauma-Based Fears, Phobias and Self-Doubt**  
By Gayle Fein Petrillo

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# Becoming Visible

Overcoming  
trauma-based  
fears  
phobias and  
self-doubt

GAYLE FEIN PETRILLO

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## Introduction

I am out of hiding. After sixty-plus years, it has finally happened!

I am a survivor. Like a cat, I have already had several lives. I am a burn survivor. I survived domestic violence. I was a stalking victim, not once but twice. For years, I was puzzled by the side effects of my accident. My fears and phobias, discomfort in my own skin, self-doubt manifesting in several ways including imposter syndrome. I finally put the pieces together and have come to understand the impact of that trauma.

My struggles started early. At age three, I suffered a serious burn accident that left me with physical and emotional scars. Prior to my accident, my mom claims I was a giggly, girly-girl who loved everything frilly, from bows on my head down to the tops of my shoes. I loved going new places and meeting new people. I greeted everyone with a smile, just like my dad did.

After my accident, I had to learn how to deal with both kinds of scars, physical and emotional, but especially the emotional ones. In my case, I became afraid of everyone and everything. Over decades, I dealt with fears and phobias, rational and irrational. My trauma affected me, my family and everyone around me. It left me feeling different, alone and lonely. I was besieged by guilt and shame. I wasn't comfortable in my own

skin. I even covered the mirrors in my room. I became distrustful, afraid everyone was going to hurt me.

Everyone is afraid of something. But when fear becomes so overwhelming that it interferes with life, then it's a problem. My fears were that big and I had to learn to overcome them.

It took me a lifetime before I could talk openly about my memories and experiences of that time, and all the scars it left me with on the way to becoming who I am. I've learned that I can help others by sharing my story about the accident. Telling our stories helps others understand how one single event can shape a person's life. We heal when we share our stories, reveal our secrets.

We all have them. Secrets. While they feel like a form of protection, secrets can lead to a range of negative emotional and psychological issues like stress, anxiety, shame, guilt, regret, embarrassment, and unworthiness. When we carry a secret, we may isolate or do other things that negatively impact our body and psyche. Carrying secrets weigh heavily on our minds, like a weight on our shoulders. This weight can hinder our relationships with family, friends and work colleagues. My experience has been that when we share our secrets, the assumptions we made about people's reactions rarely proves correct. Worst case scenarios are usually worse in our mind's eye than in reality.

Support groups now assist trauma survivors. They are safe harbors where people can share their experiences and feelings and receive coping strategies to feel less alone and navigate



difficult situations. The Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors, for example, offers support through their SOAR (Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery) program. I obtained my SOAR certification in March 2021, and since then, have helped support survivors on Zoom, locally and across the U.S. and Canada. Sometimes we support by providing space and being present and available should a survivor or family member wish to speak. Sometimes we support by sharing our personal stories, but only after being asked to do so. Other times we offer support by listening as the storyteller struggles to find words. We assure the person that they are not alone and more importantly, remind them that while they may feel and even be different than prior to their burn, their lives are still useful and important, especially to those who rely on and love them. Peer supporters provide a listening ear and a sense of hope for the patient and their loved ones. They do not offer medical advice or information. Sometimes, they connect survivors to medical personnel, including patient advocates, and clinical and mental health providers. Most, if not all, survivors struggle with returning to their previous life commitments, such as school, work and social life.

Scars and other results of accidents and traumas do not have to be scary to show others or to see in someone else. They are like a picture book. They tell a personal history. They tell about struggles and change. My scars tell my story about getting burned. And about how I used my powers of perseverance to achieve my goals.

It's taken me a very long time to share my complete story. So many people have something they are keeping secret. Take it from me. It doesn't have to take a lifetime to let that secret out. That's why I'm sharing my story. I've walked the path, as have so many others, and it is now time to share what's in my toolbox and how I got through it all. I hope these pages empower, inspire, and motivate you to share your secret, your story, even if it's just to one person. You'll be amazed at how you will be able to hold your shoulders more erect as you release your burden and how much lighter you will feel.

## Chapter 1 - Family

Let me introduce you to my family. It's important to recognize that no one goes through trauma alone. Our traumas touch those around us, from family and friends to others who you may not even realize are impacted. My immediate family played a very important part in my story. Without their support, I probably would still be in hiding, alone, fearful and missing out on the many experiences I've come to cherish. My parents had to mine their patience and resolve in order to give me the best possible life they could following my trauma. Fortunately for me, they collectively possessed strengths and personality traits that supported them, and in so doing, supported me.

My dad, Nate Fein, was the youngest of six. Four boys, two girls. It was not an easy life growing up in the tenements of New York City in the late 1920's. The family shared a bathroom with neighbors down the hall. His siblings all but raised him.

I never knew his parents. My paternal grandfather died unexpectedly after being robbed on the New York subway. My grandmother predeceased him by several years. I do, however, remember stories about fish swimming in the bathtub before she skinned and cooked them. I also recall stories shared of her cutting off chicken's heads and the birds running around the kitchen until she was ready to cook them.

Dad grew up to be an industrious, outgoing adult. He always worked at least two jobs. For a time, he drove a beer truck, and on the side, made slipcovers. His last and most favorite job was selling men's and women's designer clothes in an exclusive, independently owned store that catered to irregular sized people, particularly tall and large-framed individuals. His clients included Larry Bird and Boston Celtic teammates, New York Knicks players and New York Jets football players.

Years later, well after my dad retired, I learned that Larry Bird and a handful of teammates had dinner at my parents' home on multiple occasions. My sister and I missed out because she was in college and I was married and living in another community. Oh, had I only known!

That was my dad. He attracted people. When he walked into any room, it suddenly became energized. Dad had the biggest, best smile. He not only knew people's faces, but their names too. He knew the other important stuff people want to be remembered for. He knew what they did to earn a living, how long they had been married, how many kids and pets they had and all their names. Dad had the gift of gab. He was the quintessential salesman. And, he only saw the good in everyone he met. How I wish I had his charisma as a young adult. Instead, I had no self-confidence and was saddled with fears and phobias.

Family and friends teased my dad unmercifully. We teased him whenever we traveled to visit relatives because no matter what, it would turn out to be the summer's worst week of

weather. One of dad's brothers took his family to Kiamesha Lake every summer. They rented cabins in the Catskills, and we'd visit for a week each year. Every year, the minute we arrived in the parking lot, the sky opened up and it rained, even though the sun had been shining brilliantly moments before. The sun wasn't seen again until we pulled away from the camp and were too many miles to turn around. The camp was near Grossinger's Hotel, where the rich and famous spent their summers, and I remember climbing over the fence to pet the horses and sneaking into their swimming pool. We'd watch the men play tennis matches. Oh, how we wanted to grow up like those people.

My dad was relentlessly teased as well because he was always warning us, "be careful," "that's too hot", "that's too cold," "the water is too deep," "watch out for that step," and so on. I never really understood where these fears stemmed from until I started sharing my story and the light bulbs went on. My trauma certainly impacted my dad.

One of my earliest memories of my dad is from the years we lived on a small farm in Upstate New York. I probably was about two years old. He would put me on his shoulders, and we'd walk out in the field to see the horses. He'd set me on the ground and let me feed an apple to Tiny, the biggest of six huge workhorses. Tiny's giant mouth would take the apple out of my hand so gently. I remember how his soft nose tickled and made me laugh.

My dad rarely drank, but when he did partake, he liked Old Grand Dad whiskey. On the day of my second wedding, he got

a bit tipsy. Family and friends had gathered after our small, intimate ceremony that consisted of each of our parents, siblings and their spouses and Al's eight-year-old daughter. But our reception, held in the backyard of our home in a suburb of Albany, had one-hundred guests, including extended family and friends, several of whom belonged to Al's fire station. One of the wives was very well-endowed. Kathy and Dave were off in the rear lawn of the house chatting with others from the firehouse when my dad casually strolled over to say hi. He had known them both, as well as other firehouse regulars, as long as I had. This greeting was quite like no other, however.

Dad nonchalantly took out a quarter and dropped it down Kathy's cleavage. She had no words, stunned as both she and Dave were. Dad then proceeded to try reaching down to retrieve his coin. Several fire brothers came to the rescue and turned my dad around. Those of us who witnessed the incident were so shocked, we too had no words. Dad fortunately never remembered his faux pax and though many of us later recalled how it was so out of character for him, we rarely mentioned it.

Dad passed away in 2009. He and Mom had retired to Florida. While still in good health, he learned to play tennis, and he ultimately taught me how to put spin on receiving serves. During the years he struggled with health issues, my sister and I made frequent visits. She flew from Upstate New York; I came in from Tucson. We had to share a bedroom in my parent's small condo. Just like when we were little, I was tempted to redraw a

line down the middle of the room to separate our stuff, but I didn't.

The last time we saw our dad was a few days before he passed. He was lying in bed. My sister and I sat beside him on one side and my mom sat across from us on his other side. He looked at Ruth and me. "Girls," he said, "I know you have many differences, but when push comes to shove, the most important thing we possess is family. Promise me you two will do your best to put those differences aside and love each other, respect each other and rely on each other—always." My sister and I continue to try to meet his expectations. It doesn't come easy. But we keep at it.

Then, there's my mom. Claire. Mom. Meema. They all describe the same strong, ahead-of-her-time woman who married the love of her life at age eighteen in 1951. Claire Axelrod grew up before the depression, back when my grandparents "had money" and my grandmother purchased the newest styles in clothes and furniture. In stark contrast to my dad's upbringing, Mom was raised by a nanny. Although my grandmother knew her way around haute couture, she did not know how to navigate the kitchen. The exceptions were her kugel (noodle pudding) and varnishkes (buckwheat or barley and bow tie pasta), which we could never get enough of. Thus, the nanny taught my mom to cook at a very early age. As a result of her nanny's tutelage, my mother became a wonderful, creative and knowledgeable cook and baker, especially

compared to my dad who didn't know how to boil water, though he did learn to grill, which he did with aplomb!

Nine years after my mom was born, there was an oops and my aunt Sandra came into the world. A different world, altogether. The depression had stolen my grandparents' opulence. My grandmother found herself without a nanny and often left my mom in charge of Sandra while she continued her social obligations. Resentment reigned between my mom, the surrogate mother, and my aunt. The sisters never reconciled. In fact, the only times I remember them being together was when I hosted Thanksgiving or other holiday dinners, as well as the time Sandra, at the request of my sister and I, helped care for my mom during her recovery from back surgery.

While my grandparents weren't the warm cuddly types with either of their children, they exceeded everyone's expectations when I came along and continued with the birth of my sister. I joyfully recall many weekends spent in their home. That said, because my sister and I frequently bickered, we rarely visited them at the same time. Maybe they had heard enough of sister arguments while their own daughters were growing up.

My grandfather loved classical music. I have vivid recollections of him using a screwdriver to pull weeds in his backyard while classical music blared from the radio or victrola through the screen doors. I knew not to ask him to play the Beatles or other pop music that I preferred. He wouldn't allow it in his home. I owe my love of classical and jazz music to him. I'm also an avid reader because of my grandfather. He read the



dictionary not only to perfect his English, having legally immigrated to the U.S. with a non-native tongue, but to increase his overall vocabulary.

Mom was thirteen when she noticed a handsome, eighteen-year-old young man winning every match of ping pong in a regional tournament. She told her friends, "I'm going to marry that boy." And she did. They married the summer after Mom graduated high school. She turned down a full art scholarship to college to marry the man of her dreams. My parents were both so young, but so in love.

Nate and Claire were the couple everyone envied. Until the day my dad died, even after fifty-plus years of marriage, he and mom would walk hand-in-hand, whether down the street or through the grocery store. And they loved to dance. They danced at family events and in their kitchen. They went out to hear live music whenever possible.

"Loosen up your hand so you're floating, not pulling," Dad would say at parties or weddings when Mom gave him up for a few minutes so my sister or I could finally dance with him. "Keep your shoulders straight," he'd remind us with his beaming smile. He was our lead and our leader. He was the kind-hearted softy who everyone adored. But no one more than my mom.

I came along just two-and-a-half years after they were married. When I was born, I was premature and so small, at just under four pounds, that the hospital kept me in an incubator for seven weeks. When I finally came home, I slept in a dresser

drawer for nearly two months before I ever saw my crib. While my dad immediately was in love with me, he also was afraid to hold me because, as he said, I might break.

Growing up, we lived in apartments, moving every few years from one flat to another. Mom used to say, "When the windows are dirty it's time to move." The first house my parents purchased was on Whitehall Road in Albany, New York. They were so proud of it. It was a two-bedroom brick cape cod with a steep staircase that greeted you when you opened the front door. The bedrooms were at the top of the stairs along with one small bathroom. Ruth and I shared a room. My side neat, her side—well, not. At the time, her messiness so bothered me that I drew a line down the middle of our room delineating her area from mine. As I alluded to earlier, my sister and I bickered all the time. Rarely was it physical confrontation, but every so often one would push the other or pull the other's long hair.

Once I remember my mom having had enough. "You'll be sorry when your dad comes home!" she said. Though we knew Dad was the softy and Mom was the one who usually towed the punishment line, we still anxiously waited. As soon as Dad walked in the house, Ruth and I started squabbling again. Dad summoned us into the hallway. "This has to stop," he said, face turning red, voice angrier than usual. He yanked on his belt. He'd never hit us with a belt, only with his hands and never on bare skin. As the belt slipped off, so did his trousers. They dropped right to the floor. Ruth and I burst into giggles. Dad stood there for a few seconds in his white jockey shorts, which

we had never seen before, then put his hands over his crotch and ran into his bedroom to escape. By then, Ruth and I were laughing so hard we were crying. My dad was the most self-conscious guy I've ever met. None of us ever mentioned that event again.

Our mother was not a morning person. At age four, my sister learned how to make coffee and would bring it to her in bed so Mom could get up and on with her day. Let this not sound like she was lazy or uncaring. Quite the opposite. Unlike me, but similar to many of us, she just wasn't a morning person, and did the best she could, but always after her first cup of coffee. And mom drank coffee all day long. She set a pace few could keep up with, even into her eighties!

When my sister and I were young, Mom started selling Avon. Later she became a cosmetologist in a large, independent department store. When we were teenagers, she got her real estate license and eventually spent three summers at Ithaca College, becoming one of the first women realtors in Albany County to earn a GRI (Graduate, REALTOR® Institute) designation with an in-depth knowledge on technical subjects as well as the fundamentals of real estate. This set her apart as a trailblazer—a female real estate sales leader in a mainly male-dominated career.

Mom was a working mother who juggled family and career. She was our Girl Scout leader. Years later I followed in her footsteps with my stepdaughter. Mom hosted monthly mahjongg games with her friends. Ruth and I would sneak

down the stairs, though she knew we were there, and often had us come in to say hello. We then were treated to a quick piece of chocolate candy before being rushed back upstairs to bed. Our family also hosted many holiday celebrations. For Thanksgiving, Mom always cooked turkey, made gravy from scratch, and rice and mushroom stuffing. She had a chocolate banana cake recipe that my sister and I still bake. And her brisket surpassed all others. She was left-handed. She taught me to tie my shoes backwards compared to a typical right-handed person. This has been the subject of much teasing, including from my husband who laughs out loud to this day when he watches me put on my sneakers.

We lived in that tiny house until I reached the ninth grade and was accosted in the girls' bathroom at Hackett Junior High. (More on that later.) Within weeks, my alarmed parents sold our Albany home and moved us to the suburb of Voorheesville where Mom began to sell new construction in the development where we lived. My mother had learned her craft well, and quickly became respected and recognized among her peers, including the male tradesmen like plumbers, roofers, and electricians. She knew how to recognize quality work and when to ask questions. One of her gifts was how she asked those questions. She never spoke loudly or criticizingly, but with a firmness that no one ignored. She was the one who decorated our home, including hammering the nails to hold pictures and paintings. She also was the one who either fixed the plumbing

or called the plumber. Dad was not the handiest around the house.

We were one of only two Jewish families in the Voorheesville school district. But again, showing her daughters the priorities of love, leadership and life, Mom committed to driving us to Albany, about a forty-minute drive, several times a week to Temple Beth Emeth and the Jewish Community Center where our friends and social activities had always been.

Claire Fein worked and lived a passion and truth that influenced us, always, right up until today. By most people's accounts, Mom was smart and savvy. She was loving yet unemotional. I don't know that any of us saw her cry more than once, unfortunately a trait my sister says she learned from her. I'm quite the opposite. I wear my feelings on my sleeve; tears flow when I'm happy and sad. But those who knew my mom, knew where they stood with her because she openly shared her thoughtful insights and wisdom. In her own way, she showed us loving support for whatever it was we thought we wanted to do.

Three things that still stand out being taught by our mom, from the time we were very young were: 1) your mother is always right; 2) you can do and be anything you want, just work hard and you'll get there; 3) you will be the first generation of this family to go to college —so start saving! And she would always add: if and when your mother is not right, revert back to 1) your mother is always right. And she was right because hard

work helped me not only survive but move through obstacles that sometimes felt as dense as granite.

Mom was an artist. Could she draw and paint either by copying others or from scratch! She gave up a full scholarship ride to F.I.T, the Fashion Institute of Technology, instead choosing to stay in Albany and marry my dad. Her talents came out often. She hand-decorated our birthday cakes. She made many of our clothes when we were little, which was helpful since material was often less expensive than store-bought clothes. Sometimes the three of us wore dresses with coordinated, complimentary fabrics, cleverly combined to look related yet not identical. While they matched, they were not too matchy, and we were often complimented by those who knew us, as well as strangers we met on the street.

Mom once made the most magnificent bridal party dresses for our Barbies, from white satin and blue taffeta with tiny buttons down the back. All her designs were hand sewn without a pattern. Then Mom being Mom, without a sentimental second in her day, gave our dolls and those beautiful outfits to the neighbor for her young grandkids to play with. She had no idea how extraordinary her work was. Nor did she expect that Barbie with the black and white swimsuit would be worth money in the years to follow.

But like any mother or person, Claire Fein was not perfect. I learned at an early age that children were to be seen and not heard. As a result, I grew up a “pleaser.” I didn’t ask questions. I didn’t rock the boat. My responses were almost always in the

affirmative. I learned as a youngster that families don't air their dirty laundry. Dirty laundry at the time was defined as anything negative that happened within the walls of your home. These included any type of sickness, accidents, alcohol, drug use, and mental health issues. Likewise, my accident was dirty laundry; no bleach could remove it.

As she got older, Mom softened. She was so proud of both of her daughters, and she loved hearing about and seeing her grandkids, including my stepdaughter who she and my dad adopted as their granddaughter, as well as my sister's two sons. She especially adored her great-grandkids, who were Lisa's son and daughter, though she didn't get to see them often.

A few months after she had a stroke, my sister and I put our armor on and visited her in the middle of COVID. It was a week when my sister tried but couldn't hide her low blood counts and very slow pace. We remember Mom looked at her, shook her finger in her face and said, "Don't you dare die before me." We believe that she believed it possible, and it scared her into being around for a while. We can only hope we are able to finish living the legacy that honors her and her strength, her love and leadership, and of course her Scrabble smarts.

In her ending days, when she knew she would have only a few more waking hours with us, we watched Mom say a quiet, tearful goodbye by phone to a few relatives. Conversations with my nephews, Zachary and Max, were the most touching. Zach was able to tell her that he and his wife, Rachel, had decided to name their soon to be born son Nathan, for our dad. Though

sadly she didn't have the opportunity to meet him, we could see the pride and joy on her upturned lips.

When we hung up the phone, she said, "I didn't think it would be so hard. I don't want to say any more goodbyes." She left that to us. And so many of our family sent texts or called with wonderful thoughts for her. She was in a drug-induced sleep by then, but when read to, or when we had a caller on speaker phone, her eyebrows raised and she made very clear sounds to tell us that she was still there and listening to every word.

She was with us then, having never lost an ounce of her mental acuity, and she remains with us today in all our hearts. And we need to keep in mind that she always told us she would come back to haunt us as a cat, so we were never to turn one away. Well, a bobcat strolled by for a drink a few days after she passed. While we weren't about to welcome that feline in our house, we're waiting for a more typical house stray to wander in. After all, Mom always kept her word.



## Chapter 2 - The Accident

As a toddler, I loved everything frilly. The dresses Mom made me always had ruffles. I also loved accompanying my mom everywhere she went. I frequently was by her side and thus, was surrounded by adults. Even though I was small for my age, I often overheard that I seemed older than I was. People were surprised when I held up three fingers after being asked my age. But I was not quite three years old on that beautiful, sunny late autumn day.

That day, Mom and I were going to our new neighbor's house for a grown-up "tea party." I was dressed for warmth in a handmade pair of corduroy pants with a matching top and flannel jacket. Before walking out of the house, Mom zipped me into my winter snowsuit. It was quite chilly outside, and my internal thermometer has never run on high. No frills that day, just warmth.

When we arrived, the fall leaves were piled high in my neighbor's yard, and I excitedly jumped into them with my new friends who were much older than me and had told Mom they would watch over me. We threw the brilliantly colored leaves high into the air. Red, yellow, orange, they crunched as we walked on them when they landed on the ground. Playing

outside in the leaves was so much fun but oh, the smell of those warm cookies escaping out the back door!

My mom and her friends had just put a forty-cup pot of coffee and the cookies on the kitchen table. Hot chocolate was on its way. Still wearing my snowsuit, I tried to climb onto the wooden bench that ran alongside of the table. But it was too high. As I put my hands on the table to boost myself up, the accident happened.

As I reached for a cookie, I tipped the coffee pot off the table and all over me. The boiling liquid spilled onto my snowsuit, which quickly absorbed the hot liquid.

The hostess was a nurse, who had been trained on the protocol of the day—remove clothing when burning. So that's what she did. Thank goodness, years later medical experts would realize this was the wrong thing to do. The heat was so intense that all three layers melted and stuck to me, then burned through several layers of skin on my chest and belly. Within seconds, forty percent of my body had third- and fourth-degree burns. As the nurse removed my clothes, she realized the coffee had scalded my chest from my breasts to my belly button, causing the skin, now stuck to the clothes, to tear away from muscle and even bone. It's one of the few memories my mom shared with me before she passed away. She said she was never able to forget that image.

My mom phoned our pediatrician, Dr. Pesnel, who told her he would meet us in the emergency room. Back in 1956, there was no 911, much less pediatric ICUs. Our neighbor drove us to

the hospital. Until the day Mom died, she credited Dr. Pesnel with saving my life.

How my dad found out that afternoon of my accident, before cell phones and computers, that he needed to meet my mom and me at the hospital is still a mystery to me. No one wants to get “that” call. I can’t imagine what went through his mind as he heard that I had been seriously burned. I can, however, imagine the feelings he must have felt. Guilt because he wasn’t there to save his little girl, who he cherished. Things were now out of his control. And anger. How did this happen? Who caused this? And why my daughter?

And then there were my mom’s feelings. Surely guilt, shame, grief, embarrassment, and who knows what else. After all, she WAS there. She didn’t protect her daughter. How could she have let this happen and what would her husband think of her?

That day, doctors told my parents that I might not live. I was hospitalized for months, my parents not knowing for weeks on end if I would live or die. One afternoon while I was napping, my mom took my dad by the hand and said, “We have to go home and make a baby because ours might not survive!” My sister was born nine months later.

Obviously, I lived to tell this tale. I never blamed anyone for the accident, including my mother. Never have I felt anything negative toward her. We were always close. Friends even. We shared a special bond few moms and daughters have. While I didn’t blame her for the accident, I did try over the years to get her to talk about her experiences. She never would. She couldn’t

get over the cultural stigma of discussing unpleasant events and emotions. Her golden rule remained: You do not air dirty laundry.

After my first book was published, Mom attended many of my book signings. I think she thought it was her duty as my mother. She sat in the corner as I read chapter segments and shared my story. Occasionally, I'd glance at her and catch a tear in the corner of her eye. After, as I signed books, she chatted with those in attendance; she never spoke, however, about the accident. If asked a question, her retort would be, "I don't remember." Mom's life certainly was impacted by my trauma. How could it not? A three-year-old daughter in the hospital, enduring immense physical pain, slip-sliding between life and death. Somehow, she mined the strength to get through it and then perhaps, she stuffed the experience in a box and shoved it in a very dark, very deep closet.

During my hospital stay, I endured numerous treatments. Receiving plasma intravenously was fairly easy. Wound debridement, not so much. Nurses would come into my room and perform a non-surgical method to remove dead and unhealthy skin that formed over my healing skin. Dead tissue is much too eager to foster bacteria growth that can cause infection and also slow the growth of healthy skin. Thus, it must be removed. The treatment at the time used acids, mainly pyruvic and phosphoric acids, to remove this tissue. Fortunately, this approach was abandoned in the 1970s and replaced by early surgical and non-surgical debridement that often involves

general or local anesthesia. I never had one drop of anesthesia during debridement. I only knew excruciating pain. Perhaps it would've helped me psychologically to understand that the burning pain was helping me heal, but no one bothered to explain that to me or my parents.

As my recovery continued, I also had radiation treatments that reduced burn scars. The practitioners at the time, however, didn't realize the importance of protecting a patient's reproductive organs, so I was never able to carry a pregnancy to term. Unfortunately, other therapies used today, like physical and occupational therapy, were not prescribed for burn patients. These therapies help stretch the skin as it heals and help it retain elasticity. In my case, my skin often bled because it couldn't adequately stretch.

One afternoon upon returning to the hospital, my mom heard me crying from down the hall. She quickened her steps and walked into my room to see a nurse hitting me. Mom demanded to know what was going on. The nurse said, "I can't get her to stop crying!" My mom told me she picked me up to cradle me and when I calmed down, she reported the incident to the nurse manager. She never saw that nurse again and could not confirm if the woman was fired or transferred. That scene also stuck with Mom for the remainder of her life.

During my hospitalization, my aunt, a teenager at the time, recalls visiting along with her parents, my grandparents. She told me that seeing me lying in bed wrapped like a mummy with only my face and legs showing still affects her today, into her

80's. To this day, because of the sounds, smells and sights of that day, she avoids hospitals at all costs. Little did my grandparents know that visit would traumatize their daughter for the rest of her life.

Over time, my raised and red scars became less angry, but they remained permanent scars on my body and in my thoughts. During the two years following my accident, I became afraid of everything! I didn't know who or what might make things hurt, even when people meant to help me.

I remember one day around the time I was six and my sister was three, my mom thought we had the mumps. Our same pediatrician came to our house to check on us. Doctors still made house calls then. I was so afraid that he might do something that would hurt, that when the doorbell rang, I hid behind the curtains in the living room, thinking he and my mom wouldn't find me. Our clever dog, Brandy, pulled back the curtains and gave me away, just like Toto revealing the Wizard of Oz. The doctor not only diagnosed my sister and me with the mumps, but Brandy as well. I can still picture Brandy with a bandana wrapped around her chin, holding pain-relieving ice in place.

At the time of the accident, and for years after, there was no one for my parents to talk with because there were no support groups, and no organizations to help with the financial assistance. And, to complicate matters, they didn't have health insurance. It took my dad over three years to pay off the eighteen-hundred-dollar hospital bill, paying fifteen dollars per week, and working two, sometimes three jobs simultaneously.

Let me give you a frame of reference. It was 1956, and most households, including ours, didn't have health insurance coverage. It was common for only one parent in a two-parent household to work. The minimum wage was one dollar per hour. A loaf of bread was eighteen cents; a gallon of milk was ninety-seven cents. Fifteen dollars per week was a financial stretch!

As burns heal, the scars itch. Not only when I returned home from the hospital did the itch drive me crazy, but it continued for years. I rubbed them, especially at night with my soft, stuffed tiger in one or both hands, trying to quiet the itch so I could sleep. Poor Tigger! He'd get bloody and was in and out of the washer and dryer as often as I would let him go. Most times my mom had to sneak him away after I fell asleep. Eventually Tigger got so blood- stained, the washing machine could no longer clean him, so he had to be thrown out. Many mornings I remembered waking up drenched in bloody pajamas and sheets. I wore white tank tops under my blouses and sweaters to keep my scars not only from being irritated, but to help contain the itch. Sometimes, though, the tank tops would get bloody. Still, I wore them for years, even while wearing a bra because they protected my right breast from the bra, which cut across the scars and caused irritation.

As I got older, I continued to feel shy, self-conscious, and different. My physical scars aren't supposed to be in direct sunlight, so as a teenager, I wasn't able to wear bikinis like the other girls my age. I only shopped for bathing suits with my

mom. I had no choice but to search for uncool, one-piece bathing suits, which was not easy in the late 1960's. I felt as uncool as my swimsuits.

Clothes shopping in general was a challenge. I had to avoid fashionable blouses made of cotton, especially those that needed ironing, because the fabric was stiff or rough and irritated the thick scars covering my right breast and chest. When shopping with a friend, I never tried anything on if it meant taking off my shirt. I was not comfortable in my own skin. I kept my scars invisible. Not even my closest friends saw them. I still had not told anyone about the accident. To this day, I rarely try on clothing in front of others. I retreat to the bathroom, coming out to model fully dressed.

I was self-conscious, even at home. There were days I looked at myself in the mirror and cried, though come to think of it, sheets frequently covered my mirrors. Not only would no one else see me, I wouldn't have the constant reminder of my disfigurement.



## About the Author

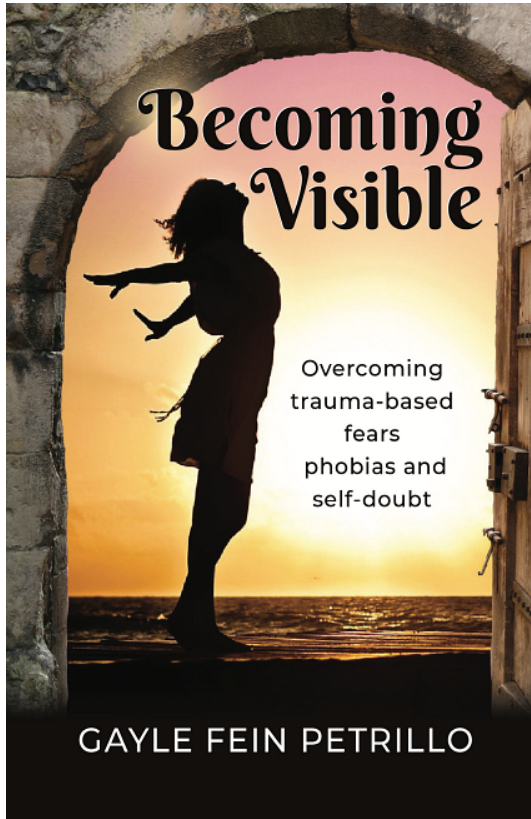
Burned by scalding coffee as a toddler, Gayle Fein Petrillo endured life-long physical and emotional scars. She recounts her journey in her first book *The Accident* and its Spanish counterpart, *El Accidente*, written for children and teens and released in 2021.

Following a healthcare career spanning thirty-five years, Gayle launched First Impressions, an image consulting firm because, “We never get a second opportunity to make that all important first impression.”

Gayle donates time to chambers of commerce and charities, including the Arizona Burn Foundation and American Red Cross. A frequent speaker, she has presented at Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, AAUW, Tucson Young Professionals, Business Network International, book clubs and business luncheons. She has appeared on multiple podcasts.

Born and raised in Albany, New York, Gayle and her husband, Al, live in Tucson, AZ.

To connect with Gayle or schedule her for  
an event or book club,  
please visit [www.firstimpressions1.com](http://www.firstimpressions1.com).



*Burned by hot liquid as a toddler, Gayle stood in the shadows most of her life, not wanting to be visible. With the support of family, friends and mentors, she overcame fears, phobias, body image and self-doubt and now stands tall.*

**Becoming Visible:**  
**Overcoming Trauma-Based Fears, Phobias and Self-Doubt**  
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