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'Matches' ignites interest in lawyer's back-story

By **CYNTHIA LESCALEET**
Updated: 11.18.09

In a roomful of successful philanthropic-minded professional women last week, attorney Carla Powers Herron shared gripping life experiences from an oppressed upbringing few who meet or know her would suspect she endured.

During her childhood, the River Oaks resident's impoverished family was part of the Radio Church of God, an East Texas cult with worldwide reach via broadcasting.

How she survived abuse, broke free at age 17 and, ultimately, became one of the nation's outstanding corporate litigators is the riveting tale told in her recently released memoir, "Matches in the Gas Tank: Trial by Fire in the Armstrong Cult."

Herron said she hopes others caught in stunted life situations might also find resilience within — or assistance elsewhere.

The book's vivid and provocative title came from an incident with the family car, she said.

Her story unfolds in print much as cult indoctrination might, she said.

"I wrote the book for me. I published for others," she said at a recent private book event to which she invited Women's Initiative members of the United Way of Greater Houston.

Its members are accomplished community-minded executives who leverage their skills, relationships and resources as philanthropic leaders. Last year, for example, the 597 members contributed a total of \$3.5 million through personal gifts to United Way of Greater Houston.

Herron is on the Women's Initiative's steering committee. She said her adult life has been spent in a world her younger self did not know even existed.

She called her personal story both unique and common. While the cult is her unusual perspective, her story encompasses dysfunctional family issues affecting others today and relates how the persistence of poverty, isolation and poor education feeds oppression, shame and danger, she said.

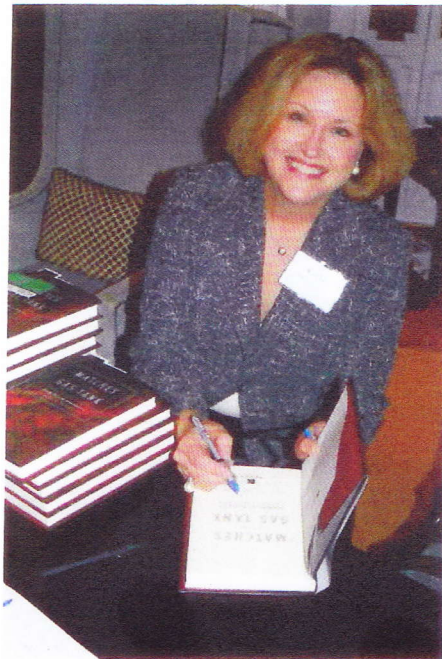
In Herron's case, these limiting, even debilitating conditions ultimately fueled her ambition to succeed.

Among the accomplishments on her resume: she finished Baylor Law School and passed the bar at 22. She was also the first female partner in a 100-lawyer Houston firm at 28. For 15 years she tried cases, was an adjunct professor at the University of Houston Law Center, wrote articles and gave speeches. In 2000, she joined a multinational energy company and became its worldwide head of litigation.

Success, however, didn't make her happy, she said. Writing the book, a private exercise she began a decade ago, was cathartic.

Herron was candid about how delving into the world she left behind long ago was "a scary thing to do" yet brought her courage.

About five years ago, she first spoke publicly about her experiences and found it a powerful salve.



Attorney and author Carla Powers Herron of River Oaks.

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She determined some good might come to others as well as herself by telling the story.

"My life was incredibly screwed up, and it's OK," she said.

Herron's book, penned under the name Carla Powers, was in part "a quest to understand why he (her father) joined — and why on earth my mother went along with it," she said.

Had her mother had access to services through United Way agencies, "our lives would have been immeasurably different," she said, urging the 70 or so Women's Initiative members gathered for her presentation to reflect upon the impact of their United Way support.

The Initiative makes it possible for "women and children living 'those' lives to get out of this cycle created by family violence," she said.

As the author ended her presentation, Sue Payne, the Women's Initiative chairwoman, said what many with the organization had noted about the speaker: "It is unique to have a member with such a story."

Among those in attendance was United Way of Greater Houston's president and CEO Anna Babin.

"By sharing her amazing story of resilience, Carla gives others the courage to overcome their own difficult situations and rebuild their lives," she said in an e-mail response to follow-up questions.

"For those struggling with rebuilding their lives, United Way is there with support services that individuals and families need to recover from the most difficult circumstances and grow stronger."

For excerpts of Herron's book, which is available at River Oaks Bookstore as well as in the Texas authors section of Barnes & Noble Booksellers, visit www.matchesinthegastank.com.

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