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FOR INTERVIEWS, EXCERPTS, AND AUTHOR-PENNEED ARTICLES CONTACT:

Lorna Garano

lornagarano@gmail.com

510-759-6655

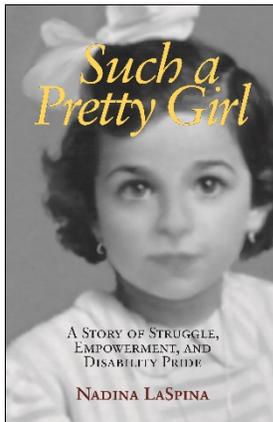
SUCH A PRETTY GIRL

A Story of Struggle, Empowerment, and Disability Pride

In her poignant and gripping memoir, leading disability rights activist Nadina LaSpina shares her unforgettable story and reveals how the disability rights movement changed the course of history.

“From the first vivid chapter set in Sicily to her gutsy activism in the U.S., LaSpina’s triumphant memoir of a richly lived life held me rapt.”

—Alix Kates Shulman



“Such a pretty girl.” It was a refrain Nadina LaSpina heard frequently in her native Sicily. What was sometimes added and always implied was that it’s a shame that she’s disabled. Contracting polio as a baby, LaSpina was the frequent target of pity by those who dismissed her and her life as hopeless. Arriving in the U.S. at thirteen, she spent most of her adolescence in hospitals in a fruitless and painful quest for a cure, which made her feel that her body no longer belonged to her. Against the political tumult of the Sixties, LaSpina rebelled both personally and politically. She refused to accept both the limitations placed on her by others and the dominant narrative surrounding disability. She also took to the streets with the then fledgling

disability rights movement that has changed both law and perception in the U.S. As an activist, LaSpina has been arrested numerous times and she was an important figure in some key struggles, including those that led to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. **SUCH A PRETTY GIRL: A STORY OF STRUGGLE, EMPOWERMENT, AND DISABILITY PRIDE** (New Village Press, July 2019) is at once a story of an activist, a disabled woman in an ableist world, an immigrant, and a feminist.

LaSpina is available for interview. She can also write an original piece for your publication or provide an excerpt from her memoir. Here is just some of what she can discuss:

- Pity is one of the most hurtful things she’s had to contend with in her life.
- We have to stop assuming that to be disabled is to be miserable; her life shows that disabled people can live rich, fun, and satisfying lives.

SUCH A PRETTY GIRL: A STORY OF STRUGGLE, EMPOWERMENT, AND DISABILITY PRIDE
Nadina LaSpina | July 2019 | 352 pages | ISBN: 978-1-61332-099-0 | Paperback | \$19.95 | 5 ½ x 8 ½

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- The disability rights movement awakened her to the realization that the problem was not her disability but the way she was treated because of it. She found her voice, her purpose, and even the love of her life in the movement.
- Everyday attitudinal ableism: How she has had to deal with everything from strangers making the sign of the cross when walking past her to professional mentors who doubted her ability to teach because of her disability to being called “inspirational” for going about her life.
- Systemic ableism is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society and in our entire sociopolitical system.
- The dream of a cure can be misguided and can keep disabled people from achieving their full potential and leading fulfilling lives. LaSpina came to reject the idea of a cure and to embrace the idea of living a good life with her disability.
- The under-recognized problem of sexual abuse against disabled women: LaSpina was molested and assaulted in a hospital, and later considered an easy target by men, especially some who fetishized disabled women.
- What it is like to live as a disabled woman in a society with ableist beauty standards and how she finally came to not only accept her body, but see it as beautiful.
- The patriarchal assumption that because she was disabled she could never fulfill the ultimate duty of a woman by becoming a wife and mother affected her and led to a feminist awakening.
- She and other disabled women had to fight to claim a satisfying sexual life.
- The complicated issues—one of them being the hot-button topic of the right to die—that bring her and others in the disability rights movement into conflict with feminists and progressives.
- The vibrant world of disability culture and art that was nurtured by the disability rights movement and continues to flourish.
- The struggle continues for disability rights, how the movement has changed, where she believes it needs to go, and what Ali Stroker’s recent Tony win tells us about the progress that has been made.

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- The importance of activism—being out in the streets, demonstrating and getting arrested.
- She balanced the joy of finding and building community with other disabled people with the wish to fit in and be part of the nondisabled world, and how she navigates the two terrains.
- She experienced the thrill of rock n’ roll, putting on makeup, and intimate friendships with other disabled children in the hospital, after long feeling as if no other kid was like her and that she would be friendless for life.
- The importance for LaSpina of a “sisterhood” of disabled women, and the crucial role of mentorship—how she was the recipient of it from early activists and later took younger women under her wing.
- LaSpina’s connection with Italy, her home country, and her participation in a most daring disability rights protest there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karen Rubin. © Karen Rubin/news-photos-features.com

Nadina LaSpina is a prominent activist in the disability rights movement and has been arrested countless times for civil disobedience. You can find her in the streets with Disabled In Action, ADAPT, the Disability Caucus, and other groups. After teaching Italian for many years, LaSpina created and taught courses in Disability Studies at The New School. She lives in New York City.

PRAISE

“From the first vivid chapter set in Sicily to her gutsy activism in the U.S., LaSpina’s triumphant memoir of a richly lived life held me rapt.” —**Alix Kates Shulman**

“In this insightful memoir, disability activist LaSpina effortlessly shares how her personal experiences led to her activism, creating a compelling story that is both instructive and moving . . . LaSpina spurns the term *inspirational* because she finds it patronizing. Despite her protestations, LaSpina’s story of determination and hard-won independence is engaging, informative, and ultimately, inarguably, inspiring.” —**Booklist (starred)**

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“From pity to empowerment, a woman who contracted polio as a baby illuminates her personal changes in attitude and accomplishment amid sweeping societal changes in rights for the disabled . . . ‘I was the luckiest woman in the world,’ insists the author in this revelatory and deeply moving memoir that clearly shows how and why she came to feel that way.” —**Kirkus Reviews (starred)**

“A memoir fueled by passion and grounded in history. Nadina LaSpina’s beautifully written narrative reveals a conscientious citizen and an exuberant and vibrant woman. *Such a Pretty Girl* is ultimately a love story.”—**Simi Linton**, author of *My Body Politic*

“A feminist, personal perspective on disability. One of the main themes is the author’s developing ability to claim and enjoy her own beauty and sexuality.” —**Gillian Kendall**, coauthor of *How I Became a Human Being*

SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did you decide to write a memoir?
2. You were born in Sicily, where as a baby you contracted polio. The title of your book, “Such a Pretty Girl,” comes from what people often said to you there. Talk about what this meant.
3. At thirteen you came to the U.S. with your family, primarily so that you could be treated by American doctors. Your father was convinced that they would cure you. Throughout your book you talk about how problematic the focus on a “cure” is, but your father clearly loved you, and his quest for a cure was an expression of that. How did you navigate that emotionally? Why do you think the focus on curing is misguided?
4. When you were in the hospital as a teen you met Audrey, who had spina bifida. The effects of her disability and yours were very similar. You became fast friends and did a lot of the things that teen girls do together. Unfortunately, Audrey died in a tragic way. Can you tell us her story and talk about how it reveals the kind of oppression that disabled people confront?
5. Throughout *Such a Pretty Girl* you return to the theme of pity and how much you resented it. Why?

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6. There were so many assumptions made about you because of your disability, by everyone from your family to your teachers to fellow students to total strangers. Talk about those assumptions and why they are often wrong and need to change.
7. You spent much of your adolescence in the hospital in what sounds like an often torturous and ultimately fruitless attempt to make you walk. The assumption here was that walking should be the overriding goal and whatever medical treatment you had to endure was worth it. You later made the extreme decision to have your legs amputated in order to walk with prostheses. What brought you to this decision? And how did you feel when ultimately you decided to use a wheelchair full-time?
8. You spoke at the Women’s March in New York City and revealed that you had been sexually assaulted in the hospital. You also discuss this in your book. It seems we rarely hear accounts of disabled women being targeted in this way. Why is that and what do you think needs to happen for this issue to become better known?
9. What challenges do disabled women face when trying to experience sexuality on their own terms and create a fulfilling and authentic intimate life?
10. It was in the disability rights movement that you developed your voice and also met the love of your life. How did you get involved in activism?
11. One of the organized groups you belong to—ADAPT—fights to “free people from nursing homes.” In the arrest scene described in your book, you chant “I’d rather go to jail than die in a nursing home.” Why are nursing homes and other institution so bad?
12. How does getting arrested make you feel?
13. Your husband Danny was also disabled. He had multiple sclerosis and, like you, used a wheelchair. The story of your relationship is really moving because it truly seems like you were soul mates. You both wanted to marry long before you did. Why didn’t you and what does this tell us about the economic realities that so many disabled people face?
14. Along with being a disability rights activist you are also a feminist. How do oppressive and patriarchal norms affect disabled women in a unique way and can you give some examples from your life that show this impact?
15. In *Such a Pretty* girl you write about coming to not only accept your body, but see it as beautiful. In a society awash in ableist beauty standards this was a difficult task. How did you change your perception of your body?

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16. How has the disability rights movement changed since you first became involved with it in the Seventies? Where do you think it should go in the future?
17. You maintain ties with your home country of Italy and have worked with the disability rights movement there. Tell us about the camp that was set up on a beach there as a place to build community and cultivate the new disability movement.
18. You taught Italian at New York University and Fordham. Talk about the experience of always being seen as the “disabled teacher.”
19. Before you began teaching your teachers expressed some real doubt about your career path because of your disability. What were their concerns and what do they tell us about how disability is perceived?
20. After teaching Italian for so many years at NYU and at Fordham, you started teaching Disability Studies at the New School. Tell us about that experience.
21. Throughout your book you talk about how you dislike being called “inspirational.” First, tell us why. Second, what would you say to someone who says that they find you inspirational because of how you confronted ableism both personally in a larger political context?
22. You recount a time in your book when Danny was seriously ill and undergoing surgery. As you wait for him you promise God that if he pulls through you and Danny will have more fun. Most people promise to make a sacrifice or live more in accordance with their faith. Why did you promise to have more fun?

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