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E-Haven Email (from griefHaven)

Where Hope Resides

E-HAVEN EMAIL November 2006

Thanksgiving Is Here Again?

I've been struggling with this E-Haven. That's why it's taken so long to get it out to you. I have this deep desire to say something just right to you that represents what's in my heart, but I have written and erased and rewritten this section of the November E-Haven so many times. I just can't get what's in my heart out in just the right way. Everyone knows I've never been short for words, but sometimes it requires not just "any" words but special ones.

The holidays have always been a marker of time for me. In the days when Erika was a part of the family events, spreading the joy and excitement she felt surrounding Thanksgiving and Christmas, I began to get excited starting right around October, and that lasted all of the way through New Year's. Part of that excitement was sharing such joyful times with Erika. I couldn't wait. When she died, I thought I would never, ever enjoy another holiday, especially Thanksgiving and Christmas. And starting around October, what used to be that time of excitement quickly turned into that time of dread. "What can I do to simply endure these next few months?" What a sudden change that was. And we broke tradition, trying many different approaches to find what would basically "hurt the least." But sometimes we don't realize how far we've come.

This week, I met four dear friends for dinner—all women who have also lost a child and around the same time Erika died. We talked about what we would be doing for the upcoming holidays. As each one shared, I was struck by one amazing thing: how far we had come over the years. I remembered the first year when we all talked about how we were leaving town, avoiding family gatherings, or treating the day like any other day—anything to avoid the pain of that holiday without our beautiful children. This year was different. This year, each of us was doing something around Thanksgiving that we had previously taken great pains to avoid those many years ago, and that included me.

I'll tell you what I'm doing this year because I'm thinking that my story of growth might give you hope for your own future holidays. Because this year Wendell and I agreed to do something I swore I would never, ever do again once Erika died. We are spending a traditional Thanksgiving holiday at my parents' house. Yep! Never say never.

You see, throughout my life, everyone came to my parent's house for Thanksgiving dinner. It was the place to be. The house was

full of people, food, laughter, and lots of memories (and way too many dishes). And it was Erika's wish every year. "Oh, Nanny, have everyone come to your house and make Thanksgiving dinner." And Nanny would. Then my dad died and uncles and aunts followed . . . and then Erika. That was it for me. Yet this year I am actually looking forward to the gathering with my crazy, dysfunctional family. I think one of the reasons is that my family no longer



avoids talking about Erika or sits dumfounded when I cry. That's because I've helped them over these years know how to support me and what I need. And they "get it." "Talk about her, or I won't be able to be around you because it will be too painful." It worked. They just didn't know what to do, and now they do. And that makes me able to try it this year. So try and help those who aren't supporting you in the way you need. Teach them how to support you. If you find yourself avoiding your family mainly because they upset you because they shut down when you speak of him or her or they say the wrong things, try letting them know what you need. Perhaps it will also work for you.

And those words I told you about earlier that were sitting in my heart wanting to get out. I think they are really very simple, and I was just complicating matters too much. I want to impart to you how much I care about you and let you know that the holidays are easier for me now than they were. Not easy, but easier. The first couple of Thanksgivings and Christmases were just horrific. But now, with lots of tears, and years, and hard work, and new memories, and teaching my family what I need, it's gotten lighter. I want you to know that, to hold onto that, as you get

closer to next week. If it's your first Thanksgiving without your child, it will most likely be very hard. Do what you think you can handle and what is best for you and your family. We recommend planning what you will do ahead of time so you aren't surprised by what might come along. But know that, as the years move forward, you will most likely be able to come back around and do those things you never thought you would do again. And on this Thanksgiving day, 2006, I am thankful for each and every one of you in my life. Perhaps you can think of one thing you are thankful for, too.

Portraits of Hope

We are about two to three weeks away from having *Portraits of Hope* completed and ready for distribution. Can you believe it? This is a project that has been three years in the making, and a lot of blood, sweat, and tears has gone into making it a reality. *Portraits of Hope* is a remarkable journey into the lives of parents just like each of you. I can't wait for you to meet them and let them share their stories of how they have rebuilt their lives. An email will go out to each of you when the video is ready.



Staff at Tu Nudito

Speaking Engagement Tu Nudito Tucson, Arizona

I had the amazing opportunity to be a guest speaker and share *Portraits of Hope* with two audiences in Tucson, Arizona where I attended a conference for Tu Nudito (you can read more details about it on our website). I shared the video in a room with about 50 people, including parents who had lost a child, friends who wanted to know how to support someone who had lost a child, hospice workers, medical doctors, therapists, clergy, school teachers and principals, and specialists in other fields who are impacted by the death of a child.

As I opened my talk, we discussed various issues surrounding the deaths of children and the difficulties surrounding this type of loss. Then we had the wonderful experience of watching *Portraits of Hope* on a full-size screen that almost filled the entire wall! It was a sight to

behold, watching the beauty of our video in such "huge" living color. As I sat in the back of the room, a remarkable thing happened: I noticed people were taking notes. And I knew—I knew that we had accomplished what we set out to do, and that was to give parents hope and educate the general public regarding the real truth about losing a child and how people can support us throughout the years.

Our New Look

Deb Lundgren, our website genius, and I have been working for the last few months on a new look for our website, and we are just about ready to show it to you. It will be much easier to navigate around in, and you will see many new items, including music you can click onto and hear, television shows we've been on that you can watch, radio shows you can listen to, and much more. By request, we've also added a second Memory Page that is for those loved ones who have died other than a child, such as spouse, parent, or sibling. Of course, our memory page for our beloved children continues to grow, and we are amazed at the creativity put into each page. What a wonderful tribute to your child, especially when you consider the tens of thousands of people who are visiting our website every day.



Parents Holiday Bill of Rights

As we did last year, the next page includes your *Bill of Rights*. Print it out and put it on your refrigerator, share it with others, post it near your desk, or keep it nearby whenever you need a reminder.



A Life Lesson From Geese



When a goose gets sick, wounded or shot down, two geese drop out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it dies or is able to fly again. Then, they launch out with another formation or

catch up with the flock.

Together we continue to walk this journey side-by-side. Even though this can feel at times like a very lonely process, we will not let one another be alone. We are all in this together for a lifetime.

To you and yours, may you have Peace of Heart this Thanksgiving.

With big hugs,
Erika's Mom

Susan



Parents' Holiday Bill of Rights



YOU have the right this holiday season to

- say, “TIME OUT!” anytime you need to;
- talk about him or her during conversations;
- tell the truth when people ask, “How are you?”
(You have the right to tell them how you really feel.);
- have some “bah, humbug” days;
- do things differently;
- change your mind;
- be where you want and need to be;
- allow yourself to have some fun!
- change directions in mid-stream;
- cry
- laugh
- cry and laugh at the same time;
- remove yourself from whatever you are doing if it gets too difficult;
- do something for someone else (reaching out to others can be comforting);
- have rest, peace, and solitude;
- do it all differently again next year.