

The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation

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Where Hope Resides™

E-Haven™ March 2008

Hope & Endurance What Children Need

By Steven Kalas

In this March 2008 E-Haven, guest writer Steven Kalas answers a sister's question about the death of a child and how to support surviving children.



Your recent column, "Grieving Parents Need to Show Kids Optimistic Side," hit home. In fact, it almost seemed tailor-made for my own family right now. My sister recently became pregnant again, and the pregnancy failed. The loss for my sister was overwhelming, immobilizing. And my niece, of course, feels sad and helpless seeing her mom so distraught. Is there anything else you can say to my sister and my niece as they go through this?



I don't write the headlines for my columns [i.e., that parents need to show kids the optimistic side of grieving]. Strictly speaking, it's not "optimism" that grieving parents do well to model for their children. Optimism is not always appropriate. What I think children are looking for from their parents during a time of tragedy or loss is a model for hope and endurance.

Hope is not "everything is going to be

fine." Because some things are never going to be fine. Hope is more like a deep commitment to the idea that life is essentially good and no tragedy has the power **ultimately** to rob life of its goodness.

Endurance is the word I use for not giving up. Or, as my spiritual director is fond of saying, "Steven, you only have one job: Keep showing up."

To endure means not allowing any loss to convince us to "mail in" the rest of



our lives, to spend our days with an entitled chip on our shoulder. Cynical inertia does not become any human being, no matter how profound the loss that seems to justify it. I understand cynical inertia for a while, but I could never justify it as a committed world view. And it's a terrible message for the children we are charged to rear up.

The words I offer grieving parents are something like this:

Your heart is broken. It affects the way you sleep, eat and think. In a perfect world, you could take the next six months off, and the rest of us would just take over. I know it's unfair, but you have a job to do while you're grieving. You're still a mother/father. Your job is to teach your children about grief. How grieving well brings healing. How pain and tears don't kill you; rather, they expand you. Make you more.

Children respond to their parents' grief differently at different ages. Toddlers and early elementary-age children tend to be some combination of inquisitive, curious and anxious about their parents' sadness. They will stare. They will ask, "Why are you crying?" They will say, "Don't cry." They will crawl into our laps and physically rub the tears off our face. Pet us.

The balancing act is to be present and faithful to the reality of your own sadness while simultaneously narrating, explaining and soothing your anxious child. It can sound like this:

- "Mommy is really sad right now."
- "I'll be OK, I just have to get the tears out."
- "Tears are really important."
- "I'm going to be OK. I just have to be sad for a while."
- "When you love somebody, sometimes you have to cry."

Older children also have anxiety about their parents' grief, but express it differently. Sometimes they will "adultify" themselves, becoming serious and hyper-responsible. Sometimes they will act out, becoming cross and irritable, even contemptuous of the grieving parent. Sometimes they will withdraw into themselves. Stoic silence.

The language changes, but the message is the same. Mom/Dad is sad. Mom/Dad is going to be OK. Life is good. I won't give

up.

Some grief takes us to places primitive and primordial. Beyond mere tears and heartache. Some grief journeys make us suck carpet, thrash and wail. Yeah, if it's humanly possible to do this when your minor children aren't at home, that's a good thing. I'm not saying you've permanently



damaged or traumatized your children if they have witnessed such a tableau, but I would think it important then for your children to have the opportunity to debrief the experience with a trusted adult or a professional in family therapy.

In the specific case of a 12-year-old, a two- to three-session intervention by a competent therapist could be ever-so-useful. Your sister and niece could learn to "normalize" the intimate human experience of grief—to embrace the experience with intention and the hope of healing.

Your niece is right. She is, in large part, helpless. Love regularly renders us helpless—but not hopeless.

Steve Kalas is a behavioral health consultant and counselor at Clear View Counseling and Wellness Center in Las Vegas. His columns appear on Tuesdays and Sundays. Questions for his "Asking Human Matters" column or comments can be e-mailed to skalas@reviewjournal.com.



Support Group Meetings Have Begun



griefHaven's support group meetings began in February, and we wanted to make sure you know we are here for you in every possible way.

Our meetings are held every other Wednesday night. *Kehillat Synagogue* in Pacific Palisades, California, has generously donated its gorgeous, healing, and beautiful space to hold our meetings.

For additional information, please contact us at 310-459-1789 or email us at hope@griefHaven.org.

A griefHaven Article Reaches Over 100,000

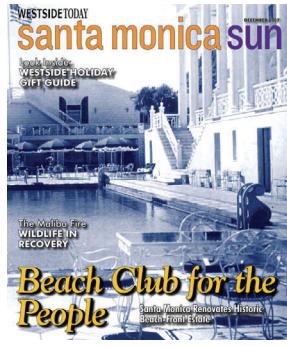
by Susan Whitmore, Erika's Mom

Hi, everyone. One of the challenges I have as founder and president of *The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation* and *griefHaven* is finding avenues to get the word out that we are here for anyone who needs us. It would be magical if there were a universal "bullhorn" that I could just put to my mouth and yell, "*griefHaven* is here for you! You are not alone!" But, alas, that is not possible. So I reach out regularly to the next best type of bullhorn—the media.

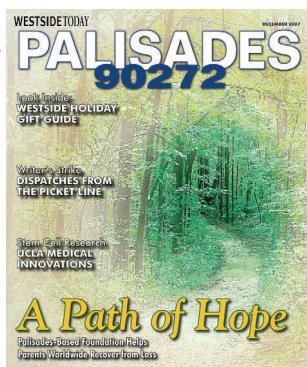
I work consistently to get articles written, to have radio shows include us as a guest or talk about us, to become a guest on television shows, and to be a part of special events, including workshops and speaking engagements. All so we can let others know we are here.

Last September, I contacted Katie Grim, a writer for Westside Today, a publishing organization that produces six monthly magazines: *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Malibu Beach*, *Santa Monica Sun*, *Bel-Air View*, *Brentwood News*, and *Palisades 90272*. I suggested they do a piece on our fund-raising dinner, but they didn't have space right then.

In November, Katie contacted me and said they wanted to do a story in their December issue. That was very exciting because it meant people



would hear about us during the holidays—one of the hardest times of year for grieving families. Katie filled me with joy when she said, ". . . AND we have decided that this piece will be the feature article." That meant that our article would be published in all SIX magazines



and on the cover of the Palisades issue! AND that meant many more people would read about us, as the magazine's printed circulation is 51,000, and their readership is 128,000!

So, a magnificently written article by Katie Grim appeared in all of the pic-

tured magazines you see here. And you can read the article in full on the next page. Though it's a small dent in the larger scheme, it is fantastic coverage that reached the hearts of many.

If you have any media contacts, please let us know so we may continue to spread the word that we are here for anyone who

needs us. That includes radio, television, news, magazines, speaking events, and any other type of media you know of.

I regularly receive beautiful letters from many of you telling how *griefHaven* has been your lifeline as you walk this path of rebuilding

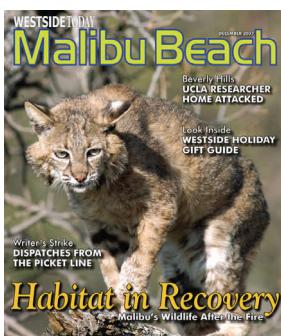
your lives without your child. I am so grateful to be a part of that journey. And I regularly think about all of those "out there" who need us and still haven't heard about us. Together let's continue to spread the word of hope, love, and support to all of those in need, letting them know that they are not alone, that *griefHaven* is here, and that the support they need is just a heartbeat away.

**We are dedicated
to you and your journey.**



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Palisades — A Haven of Hope

A Palisades Foundation Reaches Out to Grieving Parents

By KATIE GRIM

It takes a strong will to transform the all-consuming grief of losing a child into hope. Palisades resident Susan Whitmore, who lost her only child, Erika, to a rare form of sinus cancer in 2002, did just that when she founded The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, which would go on to help parents from around the world grieving the loss of a child.

In the years following her daughter's death, Susan Whitmore was inconsolable. She recalls crying every day, all day and everywhere. At one of her lowest points she even left her alarm off at night, hoping that someone would break into her house and put an end to her suffering.

Whitmore, who was a single mother for the first nine years of Erika's life, says they were more like soul mates than mother and daughter. When Erika died at the age of 31, Whitmore suddenly found that, after pouring out so much love to her daughter for so many years, she had an enormous amount of excess love and she didn't know what to do with it.

Whitmore ended up channeling this

decided to create a place, a "grief haven," where grieving parents could go to receive support and hope from others who had also lost a child and would understand their pain.

At the time, she wasn't sure what form the foundation would take, but knew she wanted to make a video. What resulted was "Portraits of Hope," which includes interviews with parents who have lost a child and are in all different stages of the grief process, some having lost a child only six months before and others many years before.

The video shows grieving parents that others before them have made it through. "The thing that's so beautiful," Whitmore says, "is that they [parents] go through their first year, their second year, their third year, and pretty soon they're way ahead on that path. And they're looking behind them at the new people coming up and they're taking their hand and reaching back to those people and saying, 'Come with me. I'll show you. I've done it too.'"

Today, the Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation provides support to families in 11 countries. Its Web site offers

a wide range of resources and support, including information about therapists and support groups, recommended books and music, message boards in several languages, memory pages for each child, as well as the "Portraits of Hope" video. The foundation also provides quarterly newsletters and monthly emails and, starting early next year, will be holding support group meetings at Kehilat Synagogue in Pacific Palisades.

Whitmore wants to make sure that the foundation provides a wide array of tools and support because she says that everyone grieves differently, and what is helpful to one person is not always helpful to another. She also emphasizes that grieving the loss of a child is a life-long process; one that isn't linear, but rather involves

many ups and downs. "You have to create a lot of new memories over a long period of time without that child," she explains, "so that you can rebuild your life."

Whitmore does most of the work for the foundation in a small corner of her house, where press and awards for the foundation are proudly displayed on the wall alongside photos of Erika.

It is from here that she sends out packages of support materials and responds personally to incoming emails, selflessly lending her compassion to families around the world. Her hope is that the foundation will eventually have enough funding to open a fully operational center where grieving parents can go for therapy and support.

The foundation's emblem is an upside-down heart, representing a heart in grief, nested against a right-side-up heart. Whitmore created this image to convey to parents in grief that with love and hope they can turn their hearts around again, and live happy and fulfilling lives. "You're never going to have your normal life back," she says, "but it doesn't mean it won't be a good life. It will be a different life, a new life."



Erika Whitmore Godwin

Recommended Books

The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation recommends the following books to grieving parents.

"The Worst Loss"
by Barbara D. Rosof

"Finding Hope When a Child Dies"
by Sukie Miller and Doris Ober

"Seven Choices: Finding Daylight After Loss Shatters Your World"
by Elizabeth Harper Neeld

"Necessary Losses"
by Judith Viorst

"Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul"
by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen

"Everything Happens for a Reason"
by Suzane Northrop

"The Fall of Freddie the Leaf"
by Leo Buscaglia

"Soul in Grief"
by Robert Romanyshyn



Tammy Pescatelli and Susan Whitmore at a fundraising gala for the foundation earlier this year.

love into the foundation. "It dawned on me at some point," she recalls, "in the depths of my pain, that there were millions of people all over the world feeling what I was feeling right then." Knowing she had to help, Whitmore

For more information,
please visit www.griefhaven.org