

Director Roko Belic Speaks at Fundraiser for GriefHaven

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Friends of griefHaven, a newly organized support group for Pacific Palisades-based griefHaven, hosted its first fundraiser on October 8 at the Luxe Hotel in Brentwood.

The "Live Your Best Life"-themed luncheon featured Roko Belic, an Academy-Award nominated director, who spoke about his journey of making the documentary film, "Happy."

The film, which has received numerous awards at film festivals, examines what makes people happy. Belic acknowledged that it might appear unsuitable to be speaking about happiness to a group focused on helping bereaved families. However, he moved the crowd as he showed a clip of his film and explained how everyone can live a happier life.

Belic presented cutting-edge science that gives a deeper understanding of this emotion. Citing the Dalai Lama, the director said, "The strongest predictor of a person's happiness is if there is someone you love and someone who loves you." He added that doing something that is meaningful can greatly enhance a person's happiness.

GriefHaven, founded by Palisadian Susan Whitmore in 2003, has become a nationally known nonprofit organization dedicated to providing an online, comprehensive one-stop resource where parents and family members who are grieving the death of a child can regularly visit and privately find strength, love, education and hope.

Whitmore started her organization after the death of her only child, Erika Whitmore Godwin, from a rare sinus cancer. Her attempt to find support and deal with her loss was a painstaking process as she discovered that the array of support services she needed to endure the path before her were either scattered in myriad places or didn't exist at all. She saw a need for a service where, in the comfort and privacy of their homes, grieving family members could, at any time, receive support and resources. And so, the Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, known as griefHaven, was born.

Each year in the United States, more than 53,000 children ages 0-19 and another 94,000 children ages 20-39 die in car accidents, from drowning, suicide, murder, birth defects, devastating illnesses, diseases and other causes, leaving families shattered.

Since 2003, Whitmore, now a certified grief specialist, has been a one-woman show, managing everything from editing newsletters and providing grief groups to conducting national speaking engagements. The number of people seeking griefHaven's assistance grew so large



GriefHaven founder Susan Whitmore and Roko Belic, director of the movie "Happy," at a fundraiser sponsored by Friends of griefHaven.

Photo: Robin Aronson

that a year ago Susan quit her job as a law office administrator to manage griefHaven fulltime—even though she does not pay herself a salary.

Friends of griefHaven started with a core group of Whitmore's Palisadian friends, some of whom had also experienced a great loss in their lives. Sitting around her kitchen table, they talked about griefHaven's incredible work and wondered aloud how they might support their friend's organization.

The Friends now aid griefHaven's mission and vision through both financial contributions and hands-on assistance. Financial contributions help fund general operations and a substantial array of programs needed to help grieving families—such as one-on-one grief counseling, individualized "Packets of Hope," diverse resources within the griefHaven Web site, grief support groups and workshops, parent and sibling newsletters, educational speaking engagements and workshops for professional caregivers, and the widely acclaimed documentary, "Portraits of Hope."

To join Friends, e-mail hope@griefhaven.org or call (310) 459-1789. Visit: griefhaven.org.