

Heart-to-Heart with griefHaven

Fundraiser Celebrates Accomplishments of Locally Based Organization's Difficult Mission



Susan Whitmore



Wendell and Wesley Whitmore

Photos by Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

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There is no way to sugarcoat the difficult work of helping others cope with the loss of a loved one.

Yet the tempo for griefHaven's dinner gala and primary fundraiser, held every other year at Marina del Rey Marriott, remained sanguine and upbeat as entertainers Tye Blue, Emma Hunton, Traci Thoms and Briana Cuoco belted out the songs at the Friends of griefHaven Heart-to-Heart Gala, where Palisadians Gail Schenbaum and Pam Solomon were honored for their contributions to the nonprofit.

Founded in 2003 by Susan Whitmore as a personal enterprise and since expanded to a thriving 501(c)(3) with eight grief groups throughout West Los Angeles, griefHaven was born in Pacific Palisades—more specifically out of Kehillat Israel synagogue—after Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, who was in attendance with KI Cantor Chayim Frenkel, encouraged Whitmore to channel her grief of losing a 32-year-old daughter to eye cancer into something bigger than herself: to help bring solace to others experiencing such wrenching emotional loss and pain.

"She used to be a one-woman show," said griefHaven's Beth Abrams, also from KI's fold, who lost her son Jackson, 8, a decade ago.

Whitmore's enterprise now goes



beyond helping the parents of the deceased, also extending to spouses, siblings and others touched by such sudden and unexpected tragedy, Abrams said.

"There's a huge demand [for] griefHaven [which] has created something where people can support each other," Solomon said.

"It's hard to take advice from someone who has not walked in your shoes," Abrams said, regarding the empathetic work Whitmore is achieving. She added that Whitmore is looking to partner with

UCLA to form a grief camp.

Whitmore could not have done this without colleagues from her community such as Abrams, Solomon and Schenbaum.

"It really does take a village," she told the *Palisadian-Post*. "And I say, the Palisades Village."

From the dais, the nonprofit's founder told 300 attendees gathered on Sunday, Nov. 4, that her work is not depressing but "sacred, meaningful and humble."

As part of griefHaven, Whitmore turned to science to back the notion that survivors of a child death do incur mild to severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Many firefighters, she learned, deal with a version of PTSD, so she turned to Capt. Robert Bates at Los Angeles Fire Department Station 69, who not only shared stories with her, but had suffered a personal loss of his own.

"We lost a granddaughter at 4 months, so this kind of hits home," Bates said, in attendance with wife Patty. "It's a wonderful cause."

Palisadian Brook Dougherty, who founded Young Angels of America, an educational organization teaching entrepreneurship and philanthropy, said, "It's really courageous to take on the needs of people experiencing profound grief. There's so much opportunity for self-harm so for this organization to reach out and offer a rope, [it's] a lifeline."

Throughout the evening, the songs kept coming, as Cuoco seemingly lived up to the title of "Defying Gravity," a selection from Broadway smash "Wicked" she sang to uproarious applause.

GriefHaven paid tribute to Solomon and Schenbaum for their contributions to the cause. Solomon receiving her Heart-to-Heart Award, and Schenbaum, the woman behind the emergency contact app Umergency and "In One Instant" by-teens, for-teens film program to help combat distracted driving, accepting the Peace of Heart Award.

Schenbaum's husband of 29 years, Pacific Palisades-based photographer Eric Lawton, with whom she has two daughters, said that he is very proud of his wife.

Lawton, who contributed the image "Event Horizon #1" to the function's si-

lent auction, said that Schenbaum was a TV producer running three shows when he first met her. Schenbaum is busier today, Lawton observed, than during her showbiz days.

"She is completely devoted to these projects," Lawton said, adding that she is creating light in the face of darkness and "using it to help others. She works tirelessly for this, I'm very proud of her."

Accepting her award, Solomon, who at KI had launched the Tzedakah Teens giving program and, following Rabbi Rueben's urging, went on to help form Friends of griefHaven in 2012, said that seeing videos of couples "sharing their heart-breaking stories of loss" and how griefHaven had helped ease their emotional pain, "I knew on a cellular level that I needed to get involved."

Schenbaum echoed such sentiments, emphasizing the important work griefHaven does.

"A successful life is not avoiding grief; it's learning to live with loss in a meaningful way," Rueben said in a moving video edited together by Columbia College Hollywood student As-trid Cedeno.

A silent auction and a raffle helped bring in much-needed funding to maintain and expand griefHaven's programming. On the spot, the latter live auction, within 10 minutes, raised about \$40,000 in donation commitments inside the banquet room.

With the collective singers delivering their rendition of the uplifting "Seasons of Love" from "Rent" twice before the night's end, it appeared to be the right note to end the evening on: one bursting with optimism, hope, rebirth, and the feeling that life, in all of its complexities, continues to reward moving forward.

"We don't get over losing someone we love, do we?" Whitmore asked rhetorically from the stage. "But we do go on."



Gail Schenbaum



Beth Abrams