

griefHaven
Founder

Susan Whitmore

Celebrated as
‘Hero of the Week’

By LILY TINOCO
Reporter

Palisadian Susan Whitmore was recently selected as KNX News Radio’s Hero of the Week in honor of her yearslong efforts to help grieving individuals through her nonprofit organization griefHaven.

GriefHaven was founded in 2003—one year after Whitmore lost her 32-year-old daughter, Erika, to a rare sinus cancer. Erika, Whitmore’s only child, grew up in Pacific Palisades.

“It was so intense and unrelenting, and I had never experienced anything close to that,” Whitmore said to the *Palisadian-Post*. “I started looking for the type of grief support that I really, really desperately knew that I needed, and I found groups and therapists, but none of it was fulfilling.

“This type of grief affects a whole person, it’s not only emotional and psychological but it’s physical, and I knew that it was changing who I was and ... I needed a specific type of holistic grief support that I couldn’t find.”

Within the year, Whitmore worked with actress Naomi Watts while she was researching for her role as a grieving mother in the film “21 Grams.” As a way to give back, Watts offered to help Whitmore create a documentary for grieving parents, and Whitmore created a website to connect others who lost a child, to create a space where she could bring the practices she sought to others—and griefHaven was born.

“The timing was right and we were meeting a need ... there were millions of people all over the world feeling the same pain and it had such a deep impact on me,” Whitmore recalled.

Whitmore said griefHaven

played a huge role in her own grieving and healing process.

“[GriefHaven] really became a channel for me,” she shared. “There’s a channel of love that goes back and forth between a parent and a child, and it’s a very unique channel that’s just between the two of you. When Erika died, that channel was no longer there. It’s still a channel but it had to change because it was no longer about her physical presence.

“GriefHaven became that physical presence where I could channel all the love and compassion ... that I gave to her, and give it to others. It saved my life in many ways.”

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, griefHaven offered support through the gathering of private groups in the Palisades or with the help of 12 grief experts who were spread out throughout Los Angeles. The organization offers support for all losses: a child, spouse, sibling and more.

“It is with hope that we eventually learn to embrace life again,” according to griefHaven’s website. “Because everyone deals with grief differently, we have created something for everyone: watch, listen, read, share, learn and feel embraced by the love put into this true haven of hope.”

When the novel coronavirus hit, the team quickly pivoted its operations to help individuals via Zoom—extending the current scope of their practice to the world and meeting a new need: grieving individuals who lost a loved one to COVID-19.

“I could never have imagined in a million years ... it never even came into my mind that we were starting something that at some point in my lifetime was going to be so deeply and profoundly needed,” Whitmore said.

“The Zoom meetings have been so rewarding and such a great vehicle for people who ... have nothing to help them through the worst time in their lives.”

Whitmore said griefHaven has also extended its services to hospitals like Providence Saint John’s Health Center, providing grief and trauma support to nurses and staff.

“There’s so much post-traumatic stress because of things they’ve seen and experienced that haven’t even really hit them yet,” Whitmore said.

KNX News Radio recognized Whitmore’s efforts and named her Hero of the Week on Thursday, February 4.

“Over the last year, the pandemic has blanketed the Southern California community with grief,” KNX Radio said about Whitmore. “Families have lost loved ones. People have lost jobs. Our KNX Hero of the Week is helping people who are grieving pull through.”

Whitmore said she was in disbelief at the news and thought it was a hoax. After realizing it was true and that she had been nominated, she was honored.

“It’s just a great affirmation that what we’re doing is working and the lives we’re touching, the ripples go out so far and wide, we will never even know how many lives have been touched by the work we do,” she said to the *Post*. “We forget how many people are affected, deeply and profoundly affected, when somebody dies ... it’s really a beautiful and meaningful affirmation that our work is being recognized, that this community and griefHaven-loving-people are making a difference in the whole world.

“It’s really taken the community, a true village, the Palisades, to make griefHaven what it is today.”



Photo by Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer



Susan, Wendell and Erika

Photos courtesy of Susan Whitmore



Susan speaking at a griefHaven fundraiser in 2018



Susan and Erika

For more information or to contribute to griefHaven, visit griefHaven.org or call 310-459-1789.

Wendell and Susan