In Loving Memory

By LAUREL BUSBY, News Editor

With paper and crayons, the parents drew pictures of their grief. Wendell Whitmore sketched his faded profile inside a teardrop. He told the other grieving parents, “Your whole life is in one big teardrop, and you’re seeing everything through that.”

His wife, Susan, drew a smiling, blue-eyed bee representing Erika—her “sugar bee.” The bee is flying through a rain of tears, but in the drawing, she’s happy because “she’s free and not in pain any more.”

Last spring, the Whitmores watched their only child die at 31 of a rare sinus cancer. At their Palisades home, “Erika took her last breath while she was looking at me,” her mother said. Watching her die “was the hardest thing I ever had to do.”

The resulting grief from losing Erika has been extraordinarily painful. However, within that grief, Susan found an idea that would bring at least a little meaning to the tragedy. She decided to make a video that would aid other parents with their grief. Erika’s best friend Elle Travis-Peterson, a filmmaker, joined the project as the director, and actress Naomi Watts offered to be the host. A number of parents and grieving experts volunteered to help, including Kehillat Israel’s Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben and “Chicken Soup for the Soul” creator Jack Canfield. In recent weeks, the participants were videotaped at various locations, including the Whitmores’ home and Kehillat Israel.

Former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan and his ex-wife Genie Riordan Mulé spoke separately about losing two of their five children more than 20 years ago. Mark Klaas, whose daughter Polly was murdered a decade ago, called the pain of losing a child the “palliative care of the soul.”

The video, “Portraits of Grief: Badges of Courage,” will be released later this year. It will include interviews with grieving parents from all walks of life, including those from the present-day and those from the past. The video will also feature a documentary on the Whitmores’ grief journey. In memory of Erika, Susan Whitmore is forming a non-profit corporation, the Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, that will provide a video for free to any grieving parent who needs support.

The video will also help friends and family members learn how they can help. For example, many people don’t comprehend how long and extensive this particular grieving process is, so they make hurtful comments.
The result of grief from losing Erika has been extraordinarily painful. However, within that grief, Susan found an idea that would bring at least a little meaning to the tragedy. She decided to make a video that would aid other parents with their grief. Erika’s best friend Ellie Travis-Peterson, a filmmaker, joined the project as the director, and actress Naomi Watts offered to be the host. A number of parents and grieving volunteers posed for the recording, including Kehillat Israel’s Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben and “Chicken Soup for the Soul” creator Jack Canfield. In recent weeks, the participants were videotaped at various locations, including the Whitmores’ home and Kehillat Israel. Former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan and his ex-wife Genie Riordan Mulé spoke separately about losing two of their five children more than 20 years ago. Mark Klaas, whose daughter Polly was murdered a decade ago, shared his feelings. Actress Misty Rowe talked about her son Paul DePaiva, who was stillborn, while Gilda Mantellcarmo told of the intense pain of losing her son Eric to suicide.

The parents described reactions that included incessant crying, vivid anger, which often feels so intense that it is difficult to believe that anyone can live through it, and the feeling that to laugh would be a betrayal of a dead child’s memory. Joani Davis detailed a year of daily visits to the cemetery after her son Donnell was killed in a home invasion robbery. “A part of my heart is dead,” she said. “It’ll never come back. It’s just gone.” Seven years later, Davis still visits Donnell’s grave each week.

Anne Roberts, who lost her 6-year-old son Mitchell to Burkitt’s lymphoma, told the group, “It changes your life in every way possible. It changes your very molecules. I walked into the abyss. I contemplated suicide. I wasn’t afraid to die.” However, eight years have passed since Mitchell’s death, and happiness did return to Roberts. “I have a happy life now,” she said, still tearful from describing Mitchell’s death. Her husband Wayne Neiman, spontaneously overcome by his grief, said, “I’m falling apart saying how well I’m doing. It’s the worst thing in the world to lose a child, but you go on and you don’t just go on, you can have happy times.”

Those happy times are one of the reasons the parents have gathered. They want to help other parents in the throes of new loss understand that the pain will not always be overwhelming. The number of “good days” will eventually outweigh the number of “bad days.” In the fall, an edited video, “Portraits of Grief: Badges of Courage,” will be completed. A longer documentary will follow. In memory of Erika, Susan Whitmore is forming a non-profit corporation, the Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, that will provide a video for free to any grieving parent who needs support.

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The first few years are the hardest, the parents said. Chip Durttschi, whose 14-year-old daughter Megan died in a traffic accident, recalled, “I don’t remember a couple of years. My mind shorted out so often… I would walk in my office, shut out and forget why I was there or where I was going.”

His wife, Beth, said that for about four years, she couldn’t “pull up a memory” of her daughter. During the initial haze, she learned to let others help her. Megan died on December 7, and friends bought the Christmas tree for their two sons that year. Friends decorated it and later took it down. “If you don’t have people outside [to help], you feel like you’re going to crumble.”

Many of the parents could no longer stand to celebrate holidays in the traditional manner. For example, Mark Klaas said he and his wife, Eve Nichol, take trips at the holidays. That way, “we don’t have to make anyone else miserable.”

Friends or family members might not always support these changes in holiday tradition. “As much as family love us and friends love us, they can get very pushy,” Susan Whitmore said. “They don’t want things to change, but things have changed.”

People also often stop mentioning the dead child because they say they don’t want to upset the parent. “They can’t upset us,” Whitmore said. “We’re already upset. When you don’t talk about her, you add another layer to my upsetness.”
Riordan on Grief

Former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan and his ex-wife went through the pain of losing a child twice.

In 1978, their son Billy died in a scuba diving accident when he was 21. In 1982, the youngest of their four daughters, Carol, suffered a heart attack after a bout with anorexia. She was 18.

While making a video to help other grieving parents this month, Riordan talked to Palisadian Susan Whitmore in a one-on-one interview about the deaths and how he got through them. Losing a child is "like somebody hitting a sledge hammer over your head," he said. "At first, many times, you'll panic and you'll be in such high grief that you don't think you can stand it."

He learned not to be embarrassed by his emotions, to let himself cry, whenever he needed to, whether at home or in a meeting. In the interview, he suggested to parents, "Let yourself cry as hard as you want. You're crying for these children that you've lost and there's nothing wrong with that."

Later he added, "Don't be afraid to feel sad. Let it be there. Let it be part of you."

Eventually Riordan's crying became a smaller part of his life. "Your memory of your children will be with you every day, but your grief becomes more manageable."

As he talked about losing his children, tears came at times but he also laughed and noted that it's okay to have fun and that laughter is not disrespectful to one's dead children. He told Whitmore that he believes his and other's children are looking down and sharing their support. "They're in a great spot. They're looking down. They're laughing. They're supporting you."

Afterwards, Whitmore, who lost her daughter Erika last year, told Riordan, "You give me hope." He said Erika's probably looking down right now, saying "Give me a glass of wine."

She laughed and said, "You don't know how true that is. Erika loved to party."

"They have cheap wine in heaven," he joked. Whitmore laughed and agreed, "They can turn water into wine, no problem."

Left: At his Brentwood home, former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan enjoys a lighthearted moment before his interview about losing two children. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

Then, there are the folks who have lost a pet or a grandparent, who say they know how the grieving parent feels, when they have no idea how painful the loss is. On the other hand, the clumsiness of some people who offer sympathy was not a bother to some. For example, Genie Riordan Mulé said, "They say the wrong thing, but I know they're trying to help." Chip Durtse at agreed. If people say inappropriate things, "I can live with that. They're trying."

For Mulé, her religious faith has been a big support as she handled the loss of her children. Faith, however, was not a comfort to others. "I don't know what faith is any more," Klaas said. "I don't have faith. I have anger. Faith—it's like grabbing water. It slips through my fingers."

At one gathering, grief counselor Frieda Wasserman offered support. At another, Rabbi Reuben, Rev. James Putney, Dr. Judith Ford and Dr. Roger Dafer provided the perspective of people who spend significant time with the grief-stricken. (Reuben has contributed an essay on grieving that appears on page 3.)

Each of these experts has been an important support for the Whitmores in the year since they lost their daughter. And each of the other parents had found people who helped them as they walked through the pain.

A simple hug or the statement, "I'm sorry for your loss," was frequently comforting. Some supportive people might share a memory of the dead child that the parents had never heard. Loved ones also might gather for a memorial where each person tells a story about the child or writes a message on a balloon that can then be released into the sky.

Because of his daughter's high-profile case, Klaas said he often receives warm comments from strangers either in person or via e-mail. "They acknowledge my loss, her existence, my efforts to keep her memory alive. So many kids go down. We try so hard to make sure there is meaning to it so she's not a statistic. That's why we do things like let the balloons go or stay at the cemetery all night. It keeps us with them."