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Video By Grieving Parents, 'Portraits of Hope,' Screened

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After numerous setbacks, including footage hijacking and an emotional lawsuit, Susan Whitmore was finally able to bring to fruition the labor of three years. Her video about grieving parents, entitled "Portraits of Hope," was screened for the first time at Gladstone's restaurant on September 23, in the company of the parents who had lost their children and were featured on tape.

Whitmore began the video in 2003, soon after her 31-year-old daughter, Erika Whitmore Godwin, died of a rare form of sinus cancer. For Susan, the project was cathartic, as she could use her own pain and grief to help others go through similar experiences.

When Whitmore and her husband decided to produce a video about parental grief, a friend of Erika's volunteered to both direct and edit the video. Unfortunately, in 2004, the friend refused to return the footage. Susan, her husband Wendell, and many of the video participants were forced to sue the volunteer to get the footage returned.

"This was the one project that I dedicated to Erika," said Susan. "So it was like losing her all over again."

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben of Kehillat Israel, a close friend of the Whitmores, was witness to Susan's double sorrows.

"It was tragic for Susan," he said. "She had to relive the trauma and grief of losing Erika."

After almost a year in court, the plaintiffs finally received the footage and were able to get the project back on track.

"It was a lot of hard work," said Wade Turnbull, who joined with Credence Sol to take on the case as pro bono work for their law firm, Liner Yankelevitz Sunshine & Regenstreif. "There were a lot of obstacles, but we put our heart and soul into it, and we got it done."

Wendell Whitmore had not seen the video prior to the September 23 screening, but he had watched the entire process of its production.

"This whole project has been such an epic struggle," he said. "Susan was going through such staggering, bone-crushing grief, and then she got her tapes



Parents featured in the new video, "Portraits of Hope," include (left to right), Graham and Jennifer Woolf, Marc and Violet Klaas, Wayne Neiman, Anne Roberts, Corinne Gustafson (back), Gilda Martindelcampo (front), Wendell Whitmore, Genie Riordan Mulé, Michael Andrews, Misty Rowe and Susan Whitmore.

Photo: Amber Held

stolen. But she has persevered and overcome daunting obstacles...it's a miracle."

Everyone involved felt the pain of losing the footage, even those who had not themselves lost a child. Said Mike Anderson, who edited the video post-lawsuit: "It was a long hard road and I had to share their grief. But as an editor, I tried to take their vision and execute it, and hopefully that's how it turns out. I'm proud and hopefully everyone else feels the same."

During the dinner hour at Gladstone's, the dining room was filled with an atmosphere of happy excitement. The joy and laughter contrasted with what one might expect from a roomful of people who had lost a child. It seemed like the video united everyone behind a common heartache and a common goal.

"This was the first time since Erika died that I really felt joy and excitement," Susan Whitmore admitted. "After she died, holidays lost all meaning for me, but this was like Christmas morning. I think everyone else in the room felt the same as well, because the anticipation was so thick you could cut it with a knife."

This anticipation was fulfilled, as the hour-long video received a standing ovation at its conclusion. Viewers were crying, both out of happiness and sadness.

"Everyone felt incredibly proud that they were contributing to society to help others who would go through this grief, knowing that there's hope," Susan said. "But they were also honoring their children." The video ended with a montage of photos of all the children at different stages of their lives, set to an original version of Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven."

An accompanying slide show featured "A Heartbeat Away," by Scott Johnson, who arranged photos of each child to correspond to the pertinent lyrics of the song.

Susan has big plans for this video, as well as for The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, which she created. The Foundation publishes a newsletter and maintains a Web site (www.griefHaven.org), where parents can honor their children and access links to support groups and organizations, message boards, books, music, stories and poetry. Through the Foundation, which is supported entirely by donations, Susan and others involved hope to distribute the video to a wider audience.

"We'd like to tell someone who is in intense grief that it's not the end of the world," Wendell Whitmore said. "So that parents have something to cling onto, so that they don't feel isolated, alone, and hopeless."

Rabbi Reuben suggested that the video be used by the military, as a tool to help parents whose children are killed in action. "This has the potential to transform people's lives," he said.

"[The military] could leave these parents with something to grasp onto," Susan agreed.

Already, Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara plans to obtain copies of the video to give to all families when a child dies, a policy the Whitmores hope will be adopted by other hospitals nationwide.

To further spread the word, Susan speaks at lectures and events, conducts workshops and appears on radio and television. Yesterday, she traveled to Arizona to conduct a workshop and participate on a panel with grief specialists and parents at Tu Nidito, a non-profit organization for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families.

Unfortunately, said Susan, griefHaven's limited funds makes wide distribution difficult.

"We're looking for someone to underwrite the costs of duplication, stamping, and mailing of the video," Susan said. "We'd like to be able to give people copies for free, but we need someone to earmark donations specifically for this project."

Contact: The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation at 459-1789.