

Palisades

A Haven of Hope

A Palisades Foundation Reaches Out to Grieving Parents

By KATIE GRIM

It takes a strong will to transform the all-consuming grief of losing a child into hope. Palisades resident Susan Whitmore, who lost her only child, Erika, to a rare form of sinus cancer in 2002, did just that when she founded The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, which would go on to help parents from around the world grieving the loss of a child.

In the years following her daughter's death, Susan Whitmore was inconsolable. She recalls crying every day, all day and everywhere. At one of her lowest points she even left her alarm off at night, hoping that someone would break into her house and put an end to her suffering.

Whitmore, who was a single mother for the first nine years of Erika's life, says they were more like soul mates than mother and daughter. When Erika died at the age of 31, Whitmore suddenly found that, after pouring out so much love to her daughter for so many years, she had an enormous amount of excess love and she didn't know what to do with it.

Whitmore ended up channeling this

decided to create a place, a "grief haven," where grieving parents could go to receive support and hope from others who had also lost a child and would understand their pain.

At the time, she wasn't sure what form the foundation would take, but knew she wanted to make a video. What resulted was "Portraits of Hope," which includes interviews with parents who have lost a child and are in all different stages of the grief process, some having lost a child only six months before and others many years before.

The video shows grieving parents that others before them have made it through. "The thing that's so beautiful," Whitmore says, "is that they [parents] go through their first year, their second year, their third year, and pretty soon they're way ahead on that path. And they're looking behind them at the new people coming up and they're taking their hand and reaching back to those people and saying, 'Come with me. I'll show you. I've done it too.'"

Today, the Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation provides support to families in 11 countries. Its Web site offers a wide range of resources and support, including information about therapists and support groups, recommended books and music, message boards in several languages, memory pages for each child, as well as the "Portraits of Hope" video. The foundation also provides quarterly newsletters and monthly emails and, starting early next year, will be holding support group meetings at Kehillat Synagogue in Pacific Palisades.

Whitmore wants to make sure that the foundation provides a wide array of tools and support because

she says that everyone grieves differently, and what is helpful to one person is not always helpful to another. She also emphasizes that grieving the loss of a child is a life-long process; one that isn't linear, but rather involves

many ups and downs. "You have to create a lot of new memories over a long period of time without that child," she explains, "so that you can rebuild your life."

Whitmore does most of the work for the foundation in a small corner of her house, where press and awards for the foundation are proudly displayed on the wall alongside photos of Erika.

It is from here that she sends out packages of support materials and responds personally to incoming emails, selflessly lending her compassion to families around the world. Her hope is that the foundation will eventually have enough funding to open a fully operational center where grieving parents can go for therapy and support.

The foundation's emblem is an upside-down heart, representing a heart in grief, nestled against a right-side-up heart. Whitmore created this image to convey to parents in grief that with love and hope they can turn their hearts around again, and live happy and fulfilling lives. "You're never going to have your normal life back," she says, "but it doesn't mean it won't be a good life. It will be a different life, a new life."

For more information, please visit www.griefhaven.org



Erika Whitmore Godwin



Tammy Pescatelli and Susan Whitmore at a fundraising gala for the foundation earlier this year

love into the foundation. "It dawned on me at some point," she recalls, "in the depths of my pain, that there were millions of people all over the world feeling what I was feeling right then." Knowing she had to help, Whitmore

Recommended Books

The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation recommends the following books to grieving parents.

"The Worst Loss"
by Barbara D. Rosof

"Finding Hope When a Child Dies"
by Sukie Miller and Doris Ober

"Seven Choices: Finding Daylight After Loss Shatters Your World"
by Elizabeth Harper Neeld

"Necessary Losses"
by Judith Viorst

"Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul"
by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen

"Everything Happens for a Reason"
by Suzane Northrop

"The Fall of Freddie the Leaf"
by Leo Buscaglia

"Soul in Grief"
by Robert Romanyshyn