

THE PARENT

Journey

january - march 2012

a griefHaven newsletter for grieving parents and those who support them

how to get the support you need

by sue rankin

Having a support system is a crucial part of the healing pathway after the death of someone we love, and that system looks different for different individuals. For some, it is a ready-made network of friends and family who are there at the drop of a hat to provide love and care. For others, it is one or two close friends who have walked a similar path. And some must construct their own support system from the ground up because their primary source of support is gone.

No matter where a person's support system comes from or who is a part of it, that system must be unobstructed and safe for the griever to do the work that comes with the death of a loved one.

In his book, *Understanding Your Grief*, Alan Wolfelt defines safe support as support that comes from those who are "truly empathetic helpers." He states that they are individuals who have a desire to understand you and your unique thoughts and feelings about your loss. He states we need people who are willing to be involved in our pain and suffering without feeling the need to "take it away from us." It is not easy to see another person in the depths of pain and not

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where hope resides

Dear griefHaven Parents,

As we begin another year together, we are looking forward to sharing with you all that we have planned for 2012.

We parents regularly talk about the type of support we want and need, and yet it is so often hard to come by. Sue Rankin's article on creating the type of support you need is quite insightful and helpful.



We are also covering a subject briefly in this newsletter that we have never covered before, yet it is a subject of great importance and one that has an indelibly impactful effect on our lives: creating a headstone or monument for our children. In this newsletter, Harriet Zaretsky and Harriet Reiter share their experiences with you. They also share the contact information of the companies they painstakingly found that worked closely with them to create their special monuments.

Please continue to send us your articles for future newsletters, book recommendations, and overall suggestions.

*~ Susan Whitmore
founder & president*

act on the urge to take it away or to somehow soften it. Unfortunately, even though a person may feel they are helping when they do so, the opposite is often the case. The grieving person may feel that such actions actually minimize the magnitude and impact of what the griever is feeling, oftentimes leaving the griever feeling misunderstood, inept, unheard, and unsupported.

Here are some suggestions for you as the griever when you are approached by someone who is trying to support you but is falling short of what you are truly needing. The first thing is for you to identify whether or not that person can actually give you what you need. We all have strengths in different areas, so you will be adjusting your support needs according to what each person can and will deliver. Some people are not capable of sitting with someone who is in intense emotional pain, even though they have a hard time admitting it. If you realize that person is not the one who is going to be able to give you the specific type of support you are needing, you have a decision to make. You may find what is best for you is to let go of that person as a source for that specific type of support, and change your expectations of how that person will support you. For example, you



might be expecting a good friend to be the one to listen to you talk about the sorrow you are feeling over the death of your child or sibling when, in fact, that friend has always been the one who planned the “great escapes” throughout your friendship. In that case, adjusting your expectations could mean that you call upon that friend when you feel the need to just get out of the house and *not* when you need a listener. Then you would find that person who is your “go to” friend when you need someone to listen—someone who allows you to just be yourself and talk about what you are experiencing and feeling.

When you have assessed the type of support your friend can give you, the next step is to lovingly communicate to this person what it is that you need and how they can best meet that need. We are all unique beings who live lives of very different experiences and who view those experiences from very different perspectives. So if you were with your empathetic friend who was the good listener, you could gently suggest that what you need from her is an ear to listen without giving any advice, without telling you how to change what you are feeling, and by just letting you talk. Then, you would ask your friend if that sounds like something she

“It takes more courage to ask for support than it does to try and go it alone.”

would be willing to do. If she can't, let her know it's okay because you know there are other ways she supports you.

Sometimes people say, “But I don't always know what I need,” and this is, of course, common when in great pain and sorrow. In those cases, you usually know what hasn't helped, so this would be a good time to talk about what isn't working, which may then lead to some clarity about what you do need.

Identifying the “safe support” people in your life while grieving is an important part of helping yourself on this journey. Remember that allowing others *in* is not a sign of weakness, but a sign of strength. It takes more courage to ask for support than it does to go it alone. You are worth the loving, caring support you ask for!

Sue Rankin is the Bereavement Program Coordinator, DeKalb, Il. County Hospice, www.dekalbcountyhospice.org.

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my incredible son

by harriet zaretsky

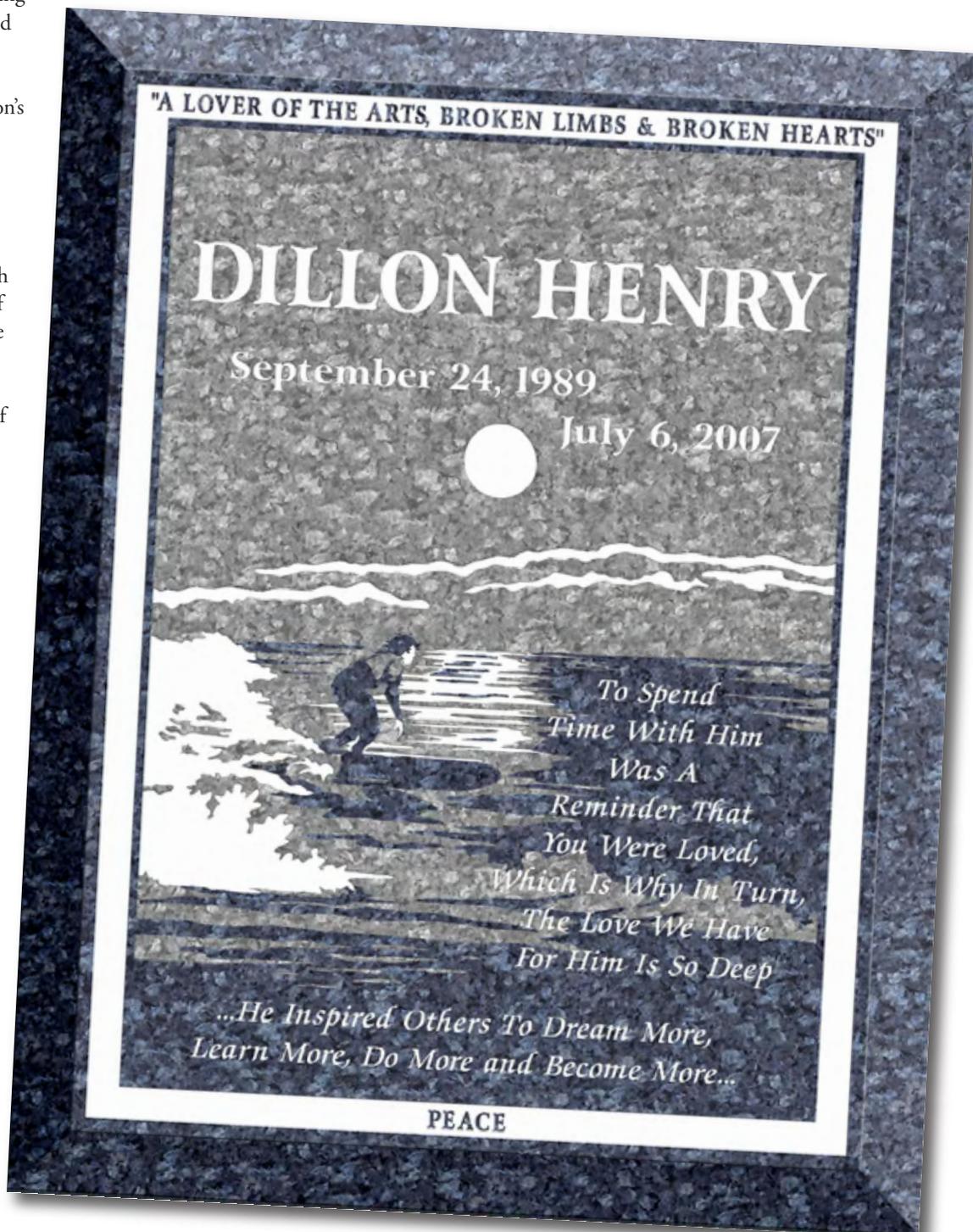
My incredible son, Dillon Henry, was suddenly taken from us in a car accident. We received a call from the coroner's office at 6:00 A.M. and our minds and bodies went numb. It made no sense, yet there we were, a family of four suddenly turned into a dazed and unbalanced family of three. As the mom who always took care of everything, the moment I received that phone call I turned into a total "incompetent," wondering if I would ever return to that focused and capable mom again.

One of the tasks I knew I would have to perform was to create my son's memorial stone. And, honestly, I would not have let anyone else take over that caring and loving duty. As the traditional one-year mark approached, I was not even close to being ready to design and place such a permanent marker on the grave of my child. As I marched through the pain and grief of the second year, that responsibility weighed heavily on me. Yet, I could not bring myself to deal with the emotional reality. I felt as if not putting the stone up might also mean that it wasn't true that Dillon was gone. During that time, we decided to launch the Dillon Henry Foundation (read about the foundation below).

As time moved onward, I began to feel like a failure for not getting the stone handled, since someone as remarkable as Dillon deserved something that would grace the place where he lie for all eternity. As we approached the four-year mark, I began to search the Internet for a company that would help me create a unique, special, and original stone. After extensive searching on the Internet, I found a company that was not only able to work with me to create exactly what I wanted, but who would also deliver it on time for our four-year memorial on July 6, 2011.

The process of searching for just the right company to create Dillon's headstone allowed me

"The process of searching for just the right company to create Dillon's headstone allowed me to put all of the things on the stone that Dillon loved and felt passionate about.."



to put all of the things on the stone that Dillon loved and felt passionate about. The end result is a stone that is truly a piece of art and that exhibits Dillon's love of life, surfing, and writing. The stone includes those appropriate words that portray Dillon's way of embracing and living life with compassion and kindness. He was and will always be an example to be followed by us all.

As we gathered on July 6, 2011, the unveiling of this special stone, although sad and challenging, was also deeply meaningful, genuine, and moving. As we sang one of Dillon's favorite songs, we stood together in memory and shared stories of the amazing people the Dillon Henry Foundation had been able to help in his honor.

When I visit the cemetery now, I clean the beautiful blue granite and feel I have taken care of something I never thought I would have to, but was able to do by doing it in my own time and with all the love I have to give my incredible son.

If you are interested in contacting the company who made this amazing headstone, please visit: www.quiringmonuments.com



Every year Dillon's friends gather at the beach to surf in honor of Dillon

About the Dillon Henry Foundation

The Dillon Henry Foundation was created to honor a son, brother, and friend who left us before his 18th birthday. In the past four years, the Foundation has accomplished so much and helped tens of thousands of people around the world.

Following the passions that Dillon had while alive, we have:

- built a clinic in Darfur serving 43,000 people
- put nine youth centers in African refugee camps serving children
- provided 40 college scholarships to economically disadvantaged students
- provided foster children with much needed supplies and services, and
- created an endowment for interns to work summers on the environment and ocean preservation

Our current projects include a joint effort to build a Rape & Crisis Clinic in the Congo and a Dormitory as part of a community built for troubled teenage girls in Jaffa, Israel.

All of these efforts have kept us moving forward, and all these acts of kindness that have helped to improve the lives of those who have received them have taken place because Dillon Henry lived. To learn more about the Dillon Henry Foundation, visit www.dillonlist.org



Harriet and Dillon

a monument for marissa

by harriet reiter

On May 1, 2007, my world changed forever. My daughter Marissa called to tell me that her doctor just informed her that she had cancer. This was the day before her 38th birthday. For those of you who have experienced a similar situation, you know the utter shock and devastation that permeated every fiber of my being. Twenty-five months later, on May 31, 2009, Marissa passed over. The journey of those prior 25 months from New York to Los Angeles and then to Mexico is another telling. This article is about the delicate obligation of creating and choosing Marissa's monument. It is also about the beautiful and meaningful process of creating what we feel is a piece of art that will honor Marissa.

On May 14, my son Jon and I went to the cemetery to select the plots. At the time, I thought I was simply doing the prudent thing, because even though Marissa was in ICU, I expected a miracle to happen and that my daughter would open her eyes and say... I am fine. Jon and I walked the cemetery and then reached a spot that felt right; it was in front of three tall, regal palm trees. You see, when Marissa returned to Los Angeles after having lived in Israel and New

York for over 15 years, she was constantly amazed and delighted by palm trees. She would often say things like, "I took those trees for granted when I was living here before." That stood foremost in my mind as we stood in the spot that held three palm trees.

A Jewish burial must occur within 24 hours

I knew that it was time
for me to face the
challenge and agony
of designing a
monument for Marissa."



Marissa and her family (husband: Alan, children: Moshe Chaim, Avi and Chano Tova)

of the soul's transition. Thirty days later, as is custom, Jon and I visited the cemetery for the first time, and I was struck by how barren and lacking in natural beauty Marissa's plot was. For the first several months, I couldn't even think about the monument. When I passed the 11-month threshold, I wasn't even near having a completed monument. I was now hoping for January 2011. That didn't happen either. It did happen on the second anniversary of Marissa's passing.

Over many months, sometimes Gila, one of Marissa's best friends, accompanied me to the cemetery. While there, we would walk around, exploring the different monuments. I found the contrast between the really old stones of perhaps 75 to 100 years ago interesting when compared to the newer stones. I found monuments of little children, perhaps from the 1918 flu epidemic, and a section of soldiers who were killed in World War II. The more I explored the various stones the more I realized that there were stones that were literally pieces of ART. Then I knew that it was time for me to face the challenge and agony of designing a monument for Marissa

Creating Marissa's monument was a labor of love and an artistic expression of that love. Instinctively I chose the dark gray granite, but took longer to stylize the color of the lettering. I was told by the artist that I should do the lettering in black, but I saw too much harshness in black, so I chose a deep shade of gray. Earlier I had happened upon a most lovely 100-year-

old stone whose flor-de-lis pattern characterized my daughter's gentle, feminine style, so I shared photos of it with the artist.

Finally, the call came from the cemetery informing me that the monument was waiting for my approval. Jon and I arrived at the cemetery and, when asked about the design of the monument, the Rabbi said tactfully that the monument was "unusual." I was mortified-it was all wrong. The artist had not copied the design nor correctly interpreted the drawing. But I told myself that there were no mistakes. In fact, the shock of the monument not being correct distracted me from actually seeing my daughter's name there and the devastating impact that it would have had on my senses. In a way, the fact that the mistakes were so outrageous spared me.

We began the process all over again. Again I walked the cemetery to find an example of exactly what I wanted. And again I found myself amongst the artful works of 100 years ago. I was hoping that the artistry from that time could be replicated, since stone work in those days was done by hand, and today it is done by machine.

This time Gila and I scrutinized each new rendering, as her artistic eye was sometimes keener than mine. We both got down to details that most people might not have bothered with, such as the curls, the swerves, and the proportion of the delicate flowers within the scrolled silhouette of the stone. I sometimes drove an hour to the artist's office just so I

could make sure everything was being done correctly. At times, in order to get what I wanted, I had to be more forceful with her. There were times when I wanted to scream, "This is my daughter's monument!" Every detail had to be just right for me to establish this everlasting earthly memorial to my darling daughter—the way she would have wanted it, the way her children would be comforted by it, and the way others would be inspired by it. It took several months to perfect the wording on the actual monument. There were quotes, phrases, thoughts, prayers, words, and artwork, and they all needed to flow together into a meaningful message. I noticed that my artistic perception changed. Each viewing made me more of an artist and less of an observer.

The longer I contemplated the intricate poetic message that would communicate my beloved Marissa's essence, the more the monument became an almost spiritual expression of the daughter I so admired and loved. The monument is for those who come to visit. I inscribed on the base, "We miss you Mommy" from her precious children. Alan, her husband, Gila, and I put it all together--the text and script--in a flowing accolade that we all agreed on.

I think back to that original monument, and I am grateful it was incorrect. The new process that followed of creating Marissa's monument was one that was deeply meaningful. The sides of the monument started to look like rolled Torah Scrolls, and the top a canopy or crown. Even the granite's imperfections were meant to be there as a sign that nothing is perfect, except G-d.

On the upper face of the monument embracing Marissa's Hebrew name is a Torah Scroll. The Torah Scroll was representative of Marissa's lifecycle, as she passed on the holiday of the Giving of the Torah, Shavuot, as were her Bat Mitzvah and her major cancer surgery.

I decided that I wanted a bench to match the monument. I went online and found a shape that had meaning for me. It was a kidney-shaped bench. I chose it because, through the cancer ordeal, one of Marissa's kidneys had failed and she had the use of only one kidney. I wanted her to have another kidney, ergo the shape of the bench. I had Marissa's names carved on the top of the bench, separated by a curve...Marissa, Mommy, Miriam. The granite for the bench matched the granite of the monument.

The morning of the unveiling I arrived at the cemetery early, placed purple flowers in the vase of Marissa's new "home," and covered

"This is my child's worldly address now. Sitting on the bench beneath the majestic palm trees I communicate with her as she does with me—in silence."



Top: Marissa and her daughter with Harriet. Left: Marissa and her two boys. Bottom: Marissa and Alan's engagement photo.



the entire stone with the special fabric of bluish-grey lace I had purchased. It was flowing and beautiful. It was a perfectly crafted memorial to a beautiful, beloved, eternally living soul. To family and friends in attendance, I briefly described my journey of creating the monument, and then removed the veil.

My advice to parents who are the artistic directors and designers of their child's monument is essentially simple: take your time. Walk a cemetery and take pictures for ideas. Put your ideas, impressions, prose or poetry about your loved one on paper and share it with a few close friends who knew and loved your child. For me, the process of sharing it with others became yet another way of loving Marissa.

I visit the cemetery every two weeks. I find peace there. Sitting on the bench beneath the

majestic palm trees, I communicate with her as she does with me—in silence.

The Rabbi has told me that people come into the office to ask about the monument because it's so beautiful. This is my child's worldly address now.

Although there is no picture of Marissa's monument here, please feel free to contact me if you are interested in seeing it or discussing any of the details I have expressed.

» To contact Harriet:
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for a parent on the death of a child

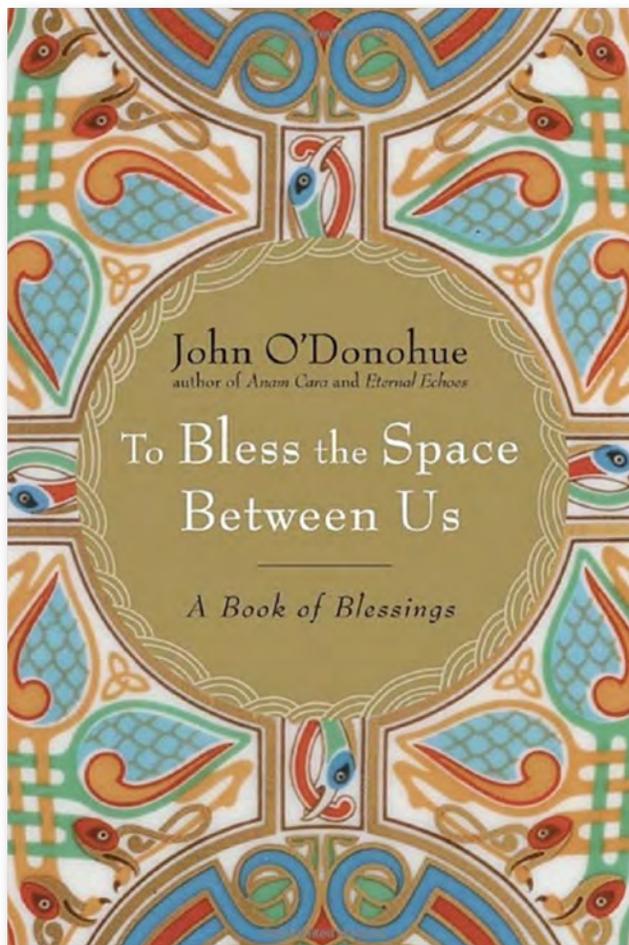
by john o'donohue
from the book *To Bless The Space Between Us*

No one knows the wonder
Your child awoke in you,
Your heart a perfect cradle
To hold its presence.
Inside and outside became one
As new waves of love
Kept surprising your soul.

Now you sit bereft
Inside your nightmare,
Your eyes numbed
By the sight of a grave
No parent should ever see.

You will wear this absence
Like a secret locket,
Always wondering why
Such a new soul
Was taken home too soon.

Let the silent tears flow
And when your eyes clear
Perhaps you will glimpse
How your eternal child
Has become an unseen angel
Who parents your heart
And persuades the moon
To send new gifts ashore.



To order this book, please visit our recommended books page at www.griefHaven.org or order from www.amazon.com.



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