

# THE PARENT

# Journey

a *Grief Haven* newsletter for bereaved parents and those who support them

july-sept 2011

## a message to bereaved grandparents

by margaret h. gerner, m.s.w., bereaved mother and grandmother

I sat with a young bereaved mother who was pouring out her pain and utter desolation to me. She was angry and hurt that those around her couldn't understand what was wrong with her. After all, they said, it had been eight months since her two-year-old son had died—



Margaret Gerner

she should be better by now. To her, they implied she was wallowing in her grief and not trying to "get over it." Between sobs she said, "Even my mother and father now seem to avoid me. They don't even mention

Tommy's name, and they change the subject when I talk about him. That hurts so much."

As I listened, I remembered how much I had wanted my parents' help when my son died, though they lived 600 miles from me. I also thought, "How effective would I be in helping my own grieving daughter today if I hadn't lost my son 13 years ago and didn't fully KNOW what she was going through?" I saw how this young mother before me desperately needed her parents. I could also understand how frustrated and helpless those parents must feel—how painful it must be for them. If only they knew how important they could be in helping their daughter and how

they, of all people, were needed by her. This was an opportunity for them to add a profound, lasting element to their relationship with their child.

I wanted to tell them how very much she simply needed them to listen to her talk about her child and her pain. I wanted them to listen to her pour out her agony without one word from them of how she should or should not feel.

The subject of death and grief is uncomfortable for all of us. We will accept anyone's discussion of happy things, but we shy away from talk of grief and death. One of the reasons for this is that, in some way, it makes us aware of our own death and mortality. For those of us who are older, this is even more true. We need to recognize how this unconscious fear might be one of the reasons we avoid discussing our own grandchild's death.

Grandparents who have not lost a child cannot know the depth of grief their child is experiencing. We may have lost parents or spouses, but the intensity of parental grief is so much greater. We talk of how we felt when our parents or spouses died and say we know



where hope resides

I'm glad to be sharing this *Parent Journey* with you. We often hear from parents that one of the most difficult aspects of losing a child is the lack of support from family members, and this subject is consistently discussed within our support group meetings, private counseling sessions, and emails. So we bring Margaret Gerner's important message to grandparents. Margaret shares her wisdom from two perspectives: both a grieving parent and a grieving grandparent. She provides us with specific "how to" tools so grandparents will know what to do in order to support their bereaved child. Please read and forward her message of love and hope to everyone you feel will benefit from it.

Two months ago, I conducted an interview with Charlene Stigting-Doud, Victim Advocate for HEARTS, an initiative of the National Safety Council which advocates for teen driver safety and supports bereaved families. We feel the HEART information is so important that we will include it in our October edition of the *Sibling Voice* newsletter as well.

For many of you who have dealt with addiction yourself or know someone who has, Amy Lee Coy's book, *From Death Do I Part: How I Freed Myself From Addiction*, will be a unique approach to healing and understanding addiction. Amy's book has received widespread acclaim. She shares how she was able to heal herself and why other more conventional approaches, such as AA, did not work for her.

We know you will appreciate the beautiful poem by Mary Friedel-Hunt. And for those looking for a more faith-based step-by-step guidebook that deals with the grieving process, you will want to read the article about Paulina Jaramillo's workbook, *Life Interrupted*.

**MUST READ:** Wow! You will definitely want to read the *Sibling Voice*, and don't miss Amanda Geisinger's beautiful poem and stories.

We are always here for you and holding you in our hearts.

~ Susan Whitmore  
founder & president



how it feels. We do NOT know how it feels if we ourselves have not lost a child. We are most helpful if we admit this to our child.

To be a helpful parent to our grieving child, we need to educate ourselves regarding what our child is actually experiencing. After all, when the children were growing up, we read *Baby and Child Care* by Benjamin Spock or Haim Ginott's book, *Between Parent and Child*. Why not now read educational books on grief and, specifically, about the death of a child? The top books that I recommend are *The Bereaved Parent* by Harriet Schiff, *The Worst Loss* by Barbara Rosoff, and Earl Grollman's *Living When A Loved One Has Died*. We need to know what the symptoms of parental grief are so that we, ourselves, are reassured that our child is not emotionally disturbed, and so we know what we can do to be of support at this tragic time of our child's life.

We need to know there is no timetable for grief. We should be careful of our expectations of how our child "should be doing" at this time. In the early months of grief our bereaved children may appear to be doing well. Then, at four to six months they seem to "fall apart." It is reassuring to know that this is normal. In the early months our children do fairly well because they have not yet accepted the full reality of their child's death. It isn't until the parents integrate that reality that real grief begins. This is the most painful and the longest part of the grief process. Paradoxically, this is the time we may be expecting them to "get better," and when they get worse, we can't understand it, and we fear for their sanity. Also, at this time others turn away from them because they can't understand, think they should be doing better, or are simply uncomfortable. This is the time our children need us the most. How desolate they must feel if the two people they could always rely on, Mom and Dad, are now not there for them in the way they need.

Grieving is not done on a consistently upward path. We may talk to our children on a good day and rejoice that they are finally improving, only to find they have taken several steps backward when we next see them. We need to realize that the normal process of grief is a constant ebb and flow of terrible and not so terrible days. Even though our bereaved children seem to revert to more painful grief at times, they are not going back to where they started. They do, however, need your extra support and understanding on the bad days.

We must allow our children to grieve in their own way, according to their own personality. Some of our children are more verbal in expressing their emotions. Others may keep it all inside of themselves until something causes it to come out in a torrent. We accepted their personality differences from the time they were little children. We must accept them now.



Margaret's son, Arthur, died at age six, and her granddaughter, Emily, died at age three.



“Grieving is not done on a consistently upward path. We may talk to our children on a good day and rejoice that they are finally improving, only to find they have taken several steps backward when we next see them. We need to realize that the normal process of grief is a constant ebb and flow of terrible and not so terrible days. Even though our bereaved children seem to revert to more painful grief at times, they are not going back to where they started.”

Some of us, for whatever reason, are not able to be of help to our children. Maybe we simply cannot face our children in their misery, especially when we, too, are grieving the loss of our grandchild. It may be more pain than we, ourselves, can take. Some of us cannot accept the fact that to grieve openly and with others is the "right" way to do it. For some of us, our own personalities will not allow us to express our emotions or tolerate such expression in others. As hard as it may be to admit, in these cases we can at least be helpful to our children by openly and honestly telling them that we cannot help. As cruel as this may seem, letting them know of our inability to help saves them from the repeated disappointment of our backing away from them when they come to us.

Our grieving children need us. When our children hurt, we hurt. It has been said that a grief shared is a grief halved. But, no! We cannot take half of our child's suffering, as much as we may like to do so. Yet having personally experienced not having my grief needs met by my parents when my own child died, I know that we, as grandparents, can sure make it a lot easier. Over the years of rearing our children, we suffer many times for them or because of them. Now we are being asked to do it again. It was not easy then, and it will not be easy now. But because we love our children, we can do it.

Margaret Gerner is a bereaved parent whose son, Arthur, died at the age of six. She became a bereaved grandparent when her three-year-old granddaughter, Emily, died in 1982.

# new support group starting

griefHaven is starting a new support group for those whose children died two to three years ago and who would like to connect with a once-a-month group of other parents in a similar time period of grief. The meetings will be the second Wednesday of every month in Pacific Palisades (CA) from 7:15 to 9:15 P.M.

If interested, please call

**310-459-1789**

or email us at

**hope@griefHaven.org**



# HEARTS network: a voice for victims, a forum for survivors, and a catalyst for greater teen driver safety

by susan whitmore; interview with charlene sligting-doud,  
victim advocate

*The griefHaven phone rang, and I answered it. "Good afternoon, griefHaven—this is Susan Whitmore." On the other end was a lovely female voice inquiring about griefHaven, stating she had been led to us by a mother who had recently lost a child. She said her name was Charlene Sligting-Doud, and she was calling from the HEARTS Network. She was very excited to find griefHaven, as she was in need of a resource she could tell bereaved parents about when a child dies in a car crash.*

*Charlene and I talked for a long time, sharing about our organizations and what we provide to others. I told Charlene my story about Erika and how griefHaven got started, and she shared her story about HEARTS and how she ended up being the Victim Advocate in charge of HEARTS. Now we were both excited! Our connection meant that a greater number of people would know of both our organizations!*

*What follows is my meaningful interview with Charlene Sligting-Doud. If you have questions, or need more information, feel free to contact Charlene directly or email us at [hope@griefHaven.org](mailto:hope@griefHaven.org).*

**SUSAN:** What does the acronym HEARTS stand for?

**CHARLENE:** HEARTS stands for Honoring Everyone Affected, Rallying the Survivors. That's what we are doing with this Network.

**SUSAN:** What is the HEARTS Network?

**CHARLENE:** HEARTS is an initiative of the National Safety Council, a nonprofit organization that saves lives by preventing injuries and deaths at work, in homes and communities, and on the roads through leadership, research, education, and advocacy. The HEARTS Network is a community of individuals and families whose lives have been forever changed by motor vehicle crashes involving teen drivers. HEARTS provides a



U.S. Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood and Charlene Sligting-Doud, Victim Advocate at the National Safety Council and manager of the HEARTS Network

voice for victims, a forum for survivors, and a way to work toward greater teen driver safety. The Network connects and engages people who have been affected by crashes and want to help prevent future losses.

**SUSAN:** Why is there a need for the HEARTS Network?

**CHARLENE:** According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2009, crashes involving teen drivers killed more than 5,600 people. Those who died included young drivers, their passengers, occupants of other vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Youths aged 15 to 20 represented only six percent of licensed drivers in 2007, yet 19 percent of motor vehicle fatalities in the U.S. that year involved these young drivers.

**SUSAN:** Though statistics help in understanding the need, they don't really do much for a grieving parent or family member. So how does HEARTS help there?

**CHARLENE:** Exactly. Statistics don't express what the families behind the numbers are dealing with. Through the HEARTS Network, the National Safety Council is sharing the stories behind the statistics to raise awareness,

change behaviors, and make our roadways safer.

**SUSAN:** What is involved in bringing those changes to fruition?

**CHARLENE:** Behavior change requires three components to come together: (1) logic, (2) environment, and (3) heart.

First, logic is presenting the statistics about crashes involving teen drivers. For instance, Graduated Driver Licensing, a licensing system proven successful at reducing teen crashes, is logical for it gives new drivers gradual exposure to driving challenges.

Second, environment is the social norms and beliefs that surround teen driver safety. Environmental factors that influence teen driver safety include inexperience, distraction, peer pressure, and a tendency to underestimate risk.

Third, heart is what the HEARTS Network is all about: healing and fulfilling the heart through sharing and meaningful action. What happens to these families as a result of the crash? They wake up knowing their loved one is gone forever. And that's where we step in, helping them with a way to share their pain with others so that we can change the way we educate teen drivers.

**SUSAN:** As part of the HEARTS Network, what can people expect?

**CHARLENE:** Every story reinforces the need for immediate change. Individually and collectively, these stories can help teens, parents, communities, and key decision makers understand the need to improve teen driver safety.

**SUSAN:** How does HEARTS help victims and their loved ones?

**CHARLENE:** Victims and their families can engage with us in whatever way is meaningful and comfortable for them. There are no set expectations for being a part of HEARTS. When someone reaches out to HEARTS, they can choose if they want their story to be shared publicly or privately, either of which can be of great benefit to those who are grieving. HEARTS can also be helpful in connecting families who have experienced similar tragedies.

For those wishing to be more



involved, there are opportunities to educate communities and key decision makers about the lifelong impact these tragedies have on families, giving a more human dimension to research and statistics. There are also opportunities to advocate for local initiatives, mobilizing communities to help keep teens and others safe on our nation's roadways.

It is each individual's choice to determine how he or she wants to be involved in HEARTS—from sharing a story privately or publicly, to serving as a local or national spokesperson on the issue of teen driving, to writing decision makers or speaking to the media. There are lots of opportunities to get involved at any level.

**SUSAN:** How can someone learn more about the HEARTS Network?

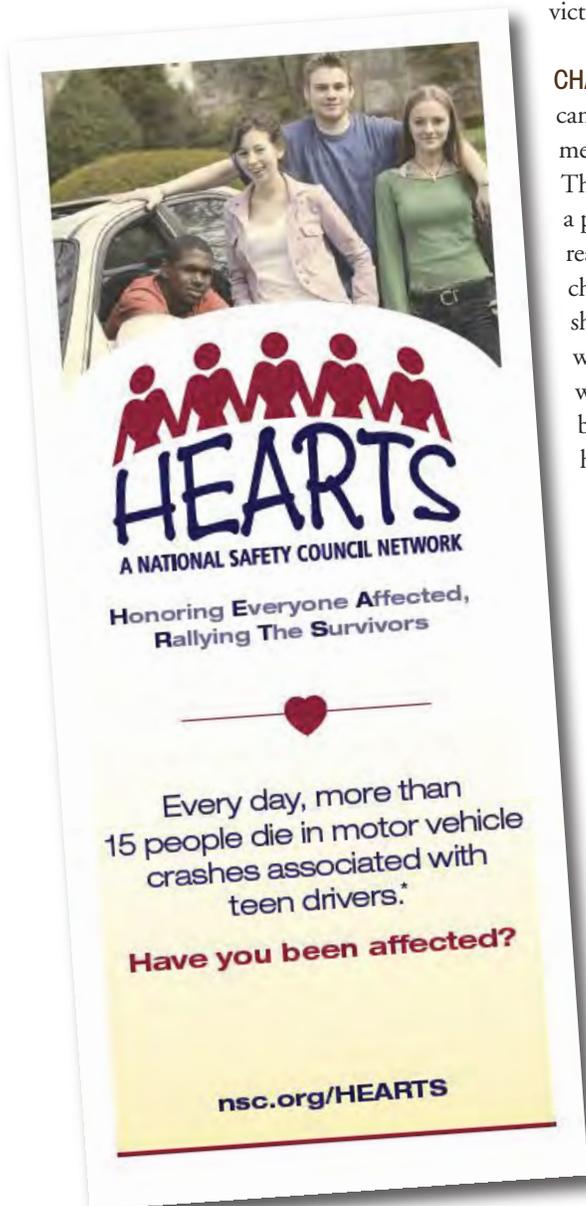
**CHARLENE:** You may visit [nsc.org/HEARTS](http://nsc.org/HEARTS), email [HEARTS@nsc.org](mailto:HEARTS@nsc.org), or call (800) 621-7615. HEARTS wants to help everyone affected and give survivors the tools they need to heal.

“Through the HEARTS Network,

the National Safety Council is sharing the stories

behind the statistics to raise awareness, change behaviors,

and make our roadways safer.”



# the empty chair by mary friedel-hunt

It's a 24 year habit.  
So every morning when I awaken,  
I look across the bed  
To see if you are there.  
And if you aren't,  
I look out at your chair  
knowing you will be there,  
that you have gotten up before me  
and are quietly sitting in your chair  
meditating, being still, reading your Bible ...  
waiting for me to awaken.

Oh, you would have made the coffee  
silently so as not to disturb my sleep.  
(I never knew how you did that so quietly)  
But you wanted hot coffee ready  
when I woke up.  
That brought you joy.  
Loving me brought you such joy.

But that chair is empty now.  
Every morning when I awaken  
it is always empty.  
And every morning when I awaken  
I am shocked ... and tears fall  
and another day stands in front of me  
like a Mt. Everest I must climb  
alone.

How do I believe my own eyes?  
Of course, I can,  
and so I say to myself that  
it must be Sunday and you have driven  
to the gas station  
to get my Sunday paper.  
You knew I loved my Sunday paper,  
and having it on my chair  
when I awoke  
made you smile ... and me laugh.

And then, wide awake,  
the dread hits ...  
just the way it did the day after you died.  
It hits hard and deep, again and again.

You will never sit in that chair again.  
Never silently make coffee for us.  
Never sneak out to get me a Sunday paper.  
This can't be true, my love.  
You just can't be gone.  
(But that chair is empty.)  
It has been empty for almost ten months now.  
And I, too, am empty.  
A hole exists inside of me.  
No one can see it, but it is always there.  
No matter where I am,  
no matter what I am doing,  
no matter who I am with.  
Oh, they think it is mostly gone now.  
Little do they know  
(unless they are one of us).  
But I know  
and you know  
it will never go away.

Tomorrow I will awaken  
and once again  
habit, hope—  
will drive me to look at that chair.  
And though I know tonight  
that it will once again be empty,  
I will see you there  
smiling at me,  
blue eyes twinkling with joy  
because I am awake

and we can have  
a simple cup of coffee together,  
plan our day,  
talk about our dreams,  
hug each other tightly,  
and know that we will somehow always  
be together ...  
even though that chair  
... your chair,  
is empty.

And each morning  
I will feel tears on my cheeks,  
feel that awful dread,  
that tells me again and again  
that you are gone.

And those tears will flow  
(I know they will)  
until my chair, too,  
is empty.



# from death do i part: how i freed myself from addiction

by amy lee coy; book review by wendell whitmore

an amazing story of healing, inspiration, and hope

You may be surprised that griefHaven is recommending a book about one person's struggles with addiction, hopelessness, and feelings of failure. Yet, be patient with us because, as you read on, you will understand why you may, indeed, want to read this book.

After receiving this book, we, too, wondered how it might apply to our bereaved parents and siblings, other than those who have lost beloved children to the overwhelming powers of addiction. Upon reading this book, we quickly learned that Amy Lee Coy's story has absolutely everything to do with all our stories of loss and grief. So often, cross-over experiences take place with life's great struggles and tragedies, and Amy's story is one that crosses sweetly and gently onto the path of grief, loss, and hopelessness, and then back to the discovery of life's beauty and goodness.

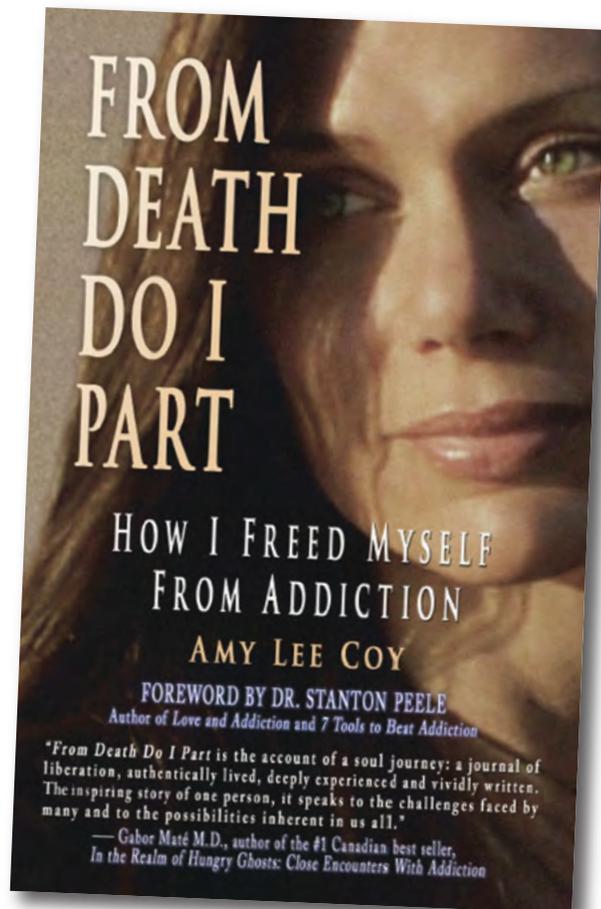
Is this book for you? We believe *From Death Do I Part* is for everyone. One board member told us that she began reading the book on Friday night and could not put it

“*S*adly, we parents too often continue to hold ourselves somehow accountable for our child's death, even though we know we did all we could given our understanding at the time.”

down until she finished it the next morning. Obviously, Amy's book is an invaluable resource for those struggling with addiction. And it is equally invaluable for parents and siblings whose family member died from substance abuse and who need a deeper understanding and release from the guilt of the “what ifs.” But, beyond that, *From Death Do I Part* offers hope and inspiration to anyone lost in deep feelings of how “bad” life can be. That, of course, should just about cover all of us. And though Amy's wisdom in this book is timeless, her delivery of it is very “now.”

Amy writes with unusual clarity and candor. In saying that, we are not simply referring to the clarity of her prose and format. We are also referring to the psychologically clean way Amy describes her past troubles and struggles without engaging in blame of any sort, either the “me bad” self-abnegation blame or the “it's their fault” victimhood blame. Such clarity helps us gently enter right into a story where blame never raises its negative head.

The result is a book richly packed with both the wisdom of acceptance and the hope for change, two essential qualities for recovery from loss that are not always found together. But there is more than that. As Amy recounts her struggles and many failings, all of life is affirmed. It isn't that Amy forces an uplifting attitude or is a “sunshine pumper.” Rather, it is that she describes how, at her lowest moment of despair and hopelessness, her concern for others provided her with the “lift” she needed. Because we experience Amy's world so directly, we are able to learn for ourselves the lessons she learns without the need for blame. Sadly, we parents too often continue to hold ourselves somehow accountable for our child's death, even though we know we did all we could given our understanding at the time.



*From Death Do I Part* has thirty-four short chapters, each a pithy, wise reflection. And though each chapter stands alone as a complete reflection, many profound themes applying directly to bereaved parents, siblings or those caring for the bereaved are drawn from the book as a whole. Here are a few of those gems:

**Listen to what the struggling person has to say** about himself and how he understands what is troubling him. This point is too often easily dismissed, even by psychiatrists and professional helpers. Amy counsels that if we listen more actively and openly, it helps the one struggling to tap into their own inner wisdom. This advice applies, of course, to all who care for the bereaved. Wouldn't any of us relish the opportunity, at times, to be more fully heard by others?

**Practice becoming the loving mother or father to that childlike part of you that is suffering.** We have to be willing, when possible, to step into the role of being our own loving parent, nurturing ourselves and encouraging ourselves to heal. Between episodes of high grief, when we sometimes have less pain and more clarity, we can begin to engender patience, caring, and loving guidance within ourselves.

**Cultivate the knowledge that, at the deepest depths of pain, you need not abandon hope.** This understanding can help us continue on, especially when the “approved and official” ways of dealing with a problem do not work. In Amy’s case, it was repeated rehab and AA experiences that did not work. And what generally happens when this standard treatment does not work is that the so-called helpers subtly “blame” the victim for not allowing the treatment to help them. But for some, standard group approaches are not effective, and they instead need something more unique and individual. It is not that they are necessarily refusing to be helped; it is that they are “individual path” people, and the help they are being subjected to is not appropriate for them.

As bereaved parents and siblings, we must keep hope in sight, even in the depths of our pain. And we must feel free to follow our own path of grief, even when that does not match others’ patterns of grief or the expectations of people around us.

**Experiment with alternative ways to heal yourself—do anything and everything that seems intuitive or inspired.** Sweating and trembling on her bedroom floor, seemingly a complete and utter failure in life and close to death, Amy resolved to find an alternative to the therapies, drugs, and treatments she had tried for years without success in order to help herself and others like herself who needed a different way. Our own intuitive wisdom can sometimes be our best resource for progressing and healing.

**When you are ready, find a way to use your experience of suffering to help others.** This key to unlocking meaning from suffering is what makes this book so ultimately uplifting. Amy discovered the great gift that comes from dedicating ourselves to helping others. And helping others does not need to be part of some grand organization or plan. As bereaved parents and siblings, we often

have small, individual opportunities to help others lost in pain and grief. In griefHaven support groups, we all give each other the perfect “pearls of wisdom” we so need. We can take all of our pain and suffering, the totality of our sense of failure, the immensity of our feelings of being lost and broken—we can take all of that experience and use it to help others more easily traverse the difficult, rocky path of grief, to help them know they are not alone nor “crazy” in the depths of their pain, to help them understand that it won’t always be this way and that there is “light” at the end of the tunnel—then we release the great power of hope, and love, and life.

You may order  
*From Death Do I Part* at  
[www.fromdeathdoipart.com](http://www.fromdeathdoipart.com)  
or access the Amazon link  
[http://www.amazon.com/  
gp/product/069200971X](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/069200971X)  
(also available on iPad and Kindle)

a griefHaven good read

## life interrupted

a faith-based guide and workbook by paulina jaramillo

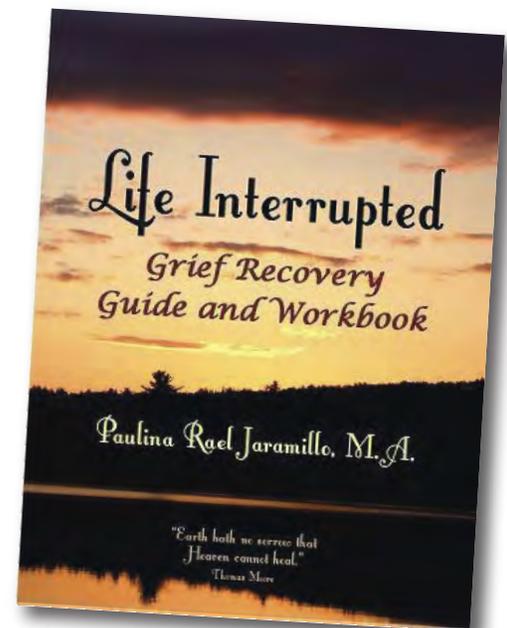
The inspiration for my books came from my personal experience with loss and healing due to the deaths of seven family members—three of them during a 10-month period. The multiple losses that we experienced made me aware of the depth to which grieving can plummet a person and the lack of focused and straight-forward reading material on grief recovery. I also discovered that most books ended at the “letting go” phase. I began writing with two goals in mind—create a book that would allow the reader to interact, and include sections that would provide hope and a sense of continuity.

In 2009, *A Time to Heal: Grief Recovery Guide and Workbook*, was initially published as a set of two books. A year later I combined the set under one cover titled, *Life Interrupted: Grief Recovery Guide and Workbook*. Both of them include ample space for the reader to write down their thoughts and feelings in

reply to prompts, as well as sections entitled “Live In the Present,” “Discover My Passion,” and “Plan For My Future,” all designed to encourage the reader. *Life Interrupted* also contains a section titled “Helping Others” and resource pages.

It is my desire that both books will give readers a private place where they can express their deepest feelings and at the same time find a sense of purpose and direction in their lives.

Paulina has a Master’s Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from California State University, San Bernardino. She has worked with families and youths in various capacities, including crisis intervention and follow through. Her hands-on experience has given her valuable insight into the damaging effects of trauma resulting from loss and the importance of dealing with negative emotions in order to move forward.



To order *Life Interrupted*:  
visit [www.griefHaven.org/  
Resources/Book](http://www.griefHaven.org/Resources/Book)  
or visit [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)

# Hey, parents!

Remember to also read the *Sibling Voice* newsletter so you can better understand what siblings are going through and how you can better support them.

After launching our first *Sibling Voice* in January, we received wonderful comments about a “deeply needed, meaningful, and helpful newsletter.” However, I was surprised when I asked some parents if they had actually read the *Sibling Voice*, and they said, “No. I thought it was just for siblings.”

Both the *Sibling Voice* and the *Parent Journey* are written for everyone, since they are both designed to provide: (1) love, hope, education, and support for siblings and parents; and, (2) education for absolutely everyone else so others will know what siblings and parents go through AND what others can do to be a positive part of the process as the bereaved rebuild their lives.

Educating oneself about grief and all that the

grieving process entails is as important as educating oneself about a newly diagnosed disease. If you or someone you love were recently diagnosed with a disease, the first thing everyone would do is learn everything known about that disease. But the process the bereaved goes through requires equal dedication and education. That is where our newsletters come in. And when dealing with the death of a child or sibling, the education becomes essential, since the journey is so difficult and continues throughout one's lifetime. So, to everyone everywhere, please read all of our newsletters so you, too, may understand and know how to give the love, support, and hope that will truly make a loving and healing difference in the lives of those you care about.



## we would love to hear from you!

Please contact us at griefHaven by email, letter or phone

We would love to hear from parents, siblings, family members, and specialists.

Would you like to contribute to a future newsletter?

Do you have an idea of something griefHaven can do or provide that will help you and others on this grief journey?

Do you know someone who would like to contribute?

Would you just like to share something privately?

**griefHaven**

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*where hope resides*

Remember: we need sibling stories, poetry, artwork, or anything a brother or sister is willing to share. Any age is great!