



where brothers and sisters are heard
THE SIBLING

VOICE

january - march 2012

when suicide rocks your world

griefHaven thanks SiblingSurvivors.com and Michelle Linn-Gust for the beautiful sibling support website and for giving us permission to reprint this important and meaningful article

Dear Siblings,

A subject that is often considered taboo in society is that of a person who ends his or her own life. We all need love and support when we are grieving over the death of someone we love, regardless of how that person died, yet when the death is by suicide, that love and support becomes even more difficult to come by because of the judgments made by others. Unfortunately, the end result is that the very people left behind to pick up the pieces and rebuild life are often denied the very love and support they deserve and need because of those judgments.

We will talk about this subject together over a series of newsletters, hoping that those of you on this grief journey will find new resources, as well as websites, that will help you as you continue your life without your sibling. The first in a series of articles we will share with you is from Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D., a woman whose sister died by suicide. Michelle went forward in life and created many resources for siblings who find themselves on the same journey she found herself on, i.e., the educational, emotional, and psychological love and support she and all siblings deserve. Her books are truly inspirational.

Love,
Susan Whitmore, Founder & President

continued on page 2

Dear griefHaven
Siblings,

We begin yet another year together, and we are looking forward to sharing all that we have planned for you in 2012.

This quarterly Sibling Voice newsletter deals with the subject of losing a sibling by suicide. Because of societal judgments directed at those who end their own lives, as well as the lack of understanding of the sibling grief process, siblings whose brothers and sisters die by suicide are often denied the love, hope, and support they not only need, but that is fundamental in helping them as they, too, start figuring out how to live without their siblings.

Regardless of how someone feels about this subject, the truth is that those who are left behind are grappling with the exact same sorrows, questions, and hopelessness as anyone else whose sibling died for any other reason. We hope that you will forward this newsletter to any and everyone you feel will benefit from it.

Please continue to send us your articles, sibling questions, and any other recommendations you have.

We are always here for you.

~ Susan Whitmore
founder & president



As sibling survivors, you are often called the “forgotten mourners.” When your sibling dies, you, no matter your age, are considered secondary mourners, meaning that your sibling’s parents, spouse and children are considered more bereaved than you. If you are a sibling still living at home, you might also “lose” your parents for some time as they grieve the death of your sibling. Parents can become so engrossed in their grief that they forget their living children still need reassurance they are loved and wanted. And when a sibling dies by suicide, the surviving siblings’ roles in the family are altered. If that is you, you might feel the need to parent your parents or protect them from anything else bad happening. The opposite could also happen where your parents try to shield you from anything bad happening, afraid of losing you, too.

People often forget the importance of siblings in our lives. Listed below are some characteristics of the sibling bond:

- It’s the longest relationship we’ll have in our lives. We are typically only a few years apart when one is born and we become aware of each other’s presence. We usually know our siblings longer than our parents, spouses, and children.
- We witness more life events and life changes with our siblings than anyone else.
- We share a sense of genetics, sense of family, belonging, and culture.
- Our siblings teach us how to function in society and communicate with others.
- The time spent together in our early years is greater than with our parents.

It’s estimated that 80 percent of children in the United States and Europe grow up with

siblings. By approximating 1.85 children in each U.S. household (using U.S. Census statistics) and 31,000 deaths by suicide (per year), then 24,800 people become sibling survivors of suicide yearly. That means, in the past 25 years, at least 620,000 Americans became sibling survivors of suicide.

Below is information based on the age of siblings when their brothers or sisters died.

CHILDHOOD: Much of children’s reactions to a sibling suicide will relate to their view of death. Some people believe children don’t grieve. That’s not true, as children have shorter attention spans, so their grief will also appear in brief periods. The grief might also manifest itself as physical pain (stomachaches, headaches, etc.) because children have underdeveloped coping skills and might not know how to express their feelings.

ADOLESCENCE: At this time, the siblings are trying to find their role in society. Each day when they look in the mirror, they aren’t sure who they see because they are changing so rapidly. They believe they are immortal because they don’t face much death at this age. Also, adolescents are trying to separate themselves from their families, but the suicide death will throw a loop in that. They will struggle with pulling away and still wanting to be hugged by their parents. At school, they might deny their grief feelings because it’s easier to fit in that way.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD: During our early twenties to mid-forties, we continue to set our identities and carve out our lives and careers. We have lots of hope, and if we lose

our sibling at this time, we learn the hard way that life does not hold unlimited promises. We also experience anger that our sibling is not there for important life events like graduations, marriages, and the births of our children.

MIDDLE ADULTHOOD: In our mid-forties to fifties, our sacrifices become rewards as we slow down to enjoy what we have worked hard for. If our sibling dies by suicide, we might start questioning our definition of happiness and wondering if we completed what we really wanted out of life. At this time, our parents might die. If we also lose our sibling to suicide and there were unresolved issues (like disagreeing over the care of a now deceased parent, etc.), we will have to find a way to work through them alone.

LATE ADULTHOOD: After we reach our sixties, our sibling might be the only family member who is still alive and with whom we can share memories of early life. If we lose our sibling to suicide, it will either enhance the feeling that our time to die is coming or we might not grieve because we believe we are going to die soon, too.

Typically, as a grieving sibling, you will carry this loss throughout your life. You will want a way to memorialize your sibling. People never get over a death; rather, it becomes a part of us and we take it with us throughout our lives. Some ways we can remember our siblings include involvement in the Lifekeeper Faces of Suicide quilts, writing about our loved one, or getting involved with suicide prevention. There are many possibilities and each of us will come up with what we want to do when we are ready.

About Michelle Linn-Gust

Michelle Linn-Gust’s life plans took an unexpected turn when her younger sister Denise died by suicide just two weeks before her eighteenth birthday. Denise’s death led Michelle to rethink the direction of her life when she was just twenty-one. After completing college, she worked on two manuscripts; one as yet unfinished and the other for sibling survivors of suicide, which would become her first book, *Do They Have Bad Days in Heaven? Surviving the Suicide Loss of a Sibling*.

In 2008 Michelle completed her doctorate in family studies, writing her dissertation about how people use a dog to cope with loss. Her book *Ginger’s Gift: Hope and Healing through Dog Companionship*, published in 2007, was a personal story related to her dissertation research.

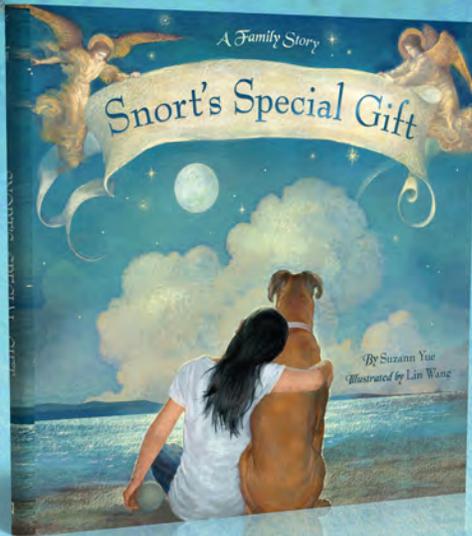
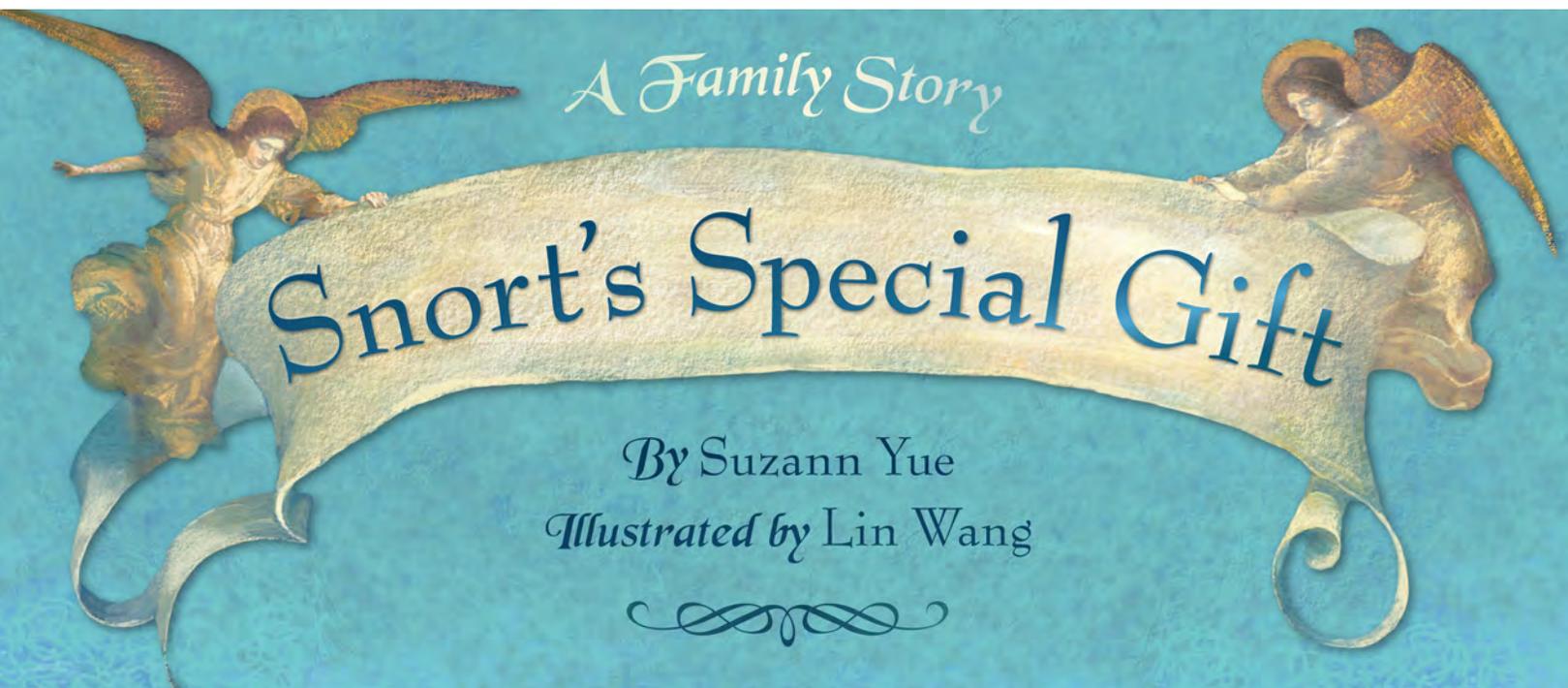
Several suicide loss books would follow: *Rocky Roads: The Journeys of Families through Suicide Grief*, *A Winding Road: A Handbook for those Supporting the Suicide Bereaved* (co-authored with John Peters), and an edited book, *Seeking Hope: Stories of the Suicide Bereaved*, with Julie Cerel.

Michelle continues to travel the world, inspiring people to find hope and healing in the face of loss and change that we all travel through in life. She is the president of the American Association of Suicidology.



recommended read

Snort is a beautifully written story for children and adults of every age who experience the loss of a beloved pet. Although our general focus is on sibling loss, we would not pass up this opportunity for you and your family to enjoy the wonderful story about Snort and his family. This book makes a wonderful gift. –Susan Whitmore



Savy is worried. Her dog, Snort, is very sick, and Savy's parents say that Snort needs to leave them and go to heaven. But who will play with Snort if she leaves Savy and her family? And what will Savy do without her best friend?

In *Snort's Special Gift*, Savy and her family explore different ways to grieve for and remember a beloved pet. This healing story addresses feelings of loss in gentle and supportive ways as the family shares happy memories and creates a beautiful celebration of Snort's life. And in the end, Savy discovers that Snort has more special gifts to share with her ...



Suzann Yue currently lives in Medina, Minnesota with her two adopted children and husband. After growing up in a farming community in Illinois, she moved to the Twin Cities to start a martial arts career. Suzann won eight world karate championship titles, and developed a karate school specializing in training children with attention deficit disorders. She received a Community Service Award from Park Nicollet Medical Foundation for her work. When Suzann is not busy being a mom, she loves coaching, photography, writing books and yoga. She's currently working on the next book in the *Savy and Sunne* series. For more information, please visit www.suzannyue.com.



Lin Wang loved to draw and paint as a young child. Lin started her art training at a very early age, attending the prestigious Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in China. Lin also studied oil painting and received a Master of Fine Arts in illustration from Savannah College of Art and Design. She has illustrated numerous books for children. Lin lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband and children. For more information www.linstudio.com.

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

missing my sister

by belinda stotler

This poem is something that came to me about six months after my sister's sudden death. My sister died from a blood clot that formed after she had surgery. The poem tells my journey through grief—from the initial disbelief to the final acceptance. There is not a day that goes by that I don't miss my best friend.

One morning I found you in eternal sleep;
I tried to wake you as I began to weep,
But all my pleas you could not hear;
Oh if I could have only kept you near,
Away from the voices of those who went before,
Who beckoned you to come to that distant shore.

I find it so very hard to believe
That you have gone and I must grieve;
I call out your name—you answer not,
And I look for you in every familiar spot.
Everything seems so strange and surreal,
I ask everyday is it a dream or real?

Where are the soft brown eyes of affection?
Where is the laughter and talk of childhood reflection?
Where is the loving care when I was sick or sad?
Where is the generous soul for which I was glad?
Where is the forgiving and understanding heart?
Where are the bonds that were there from the start?

I miss all the little ways you showed you cared,
For there were so many good moments we shared;
Looking back on my life's assorted scenes,
I realized you taught me what love truly means;
You were my trusted confidante and best friend,
On whose loving support I could always depend.

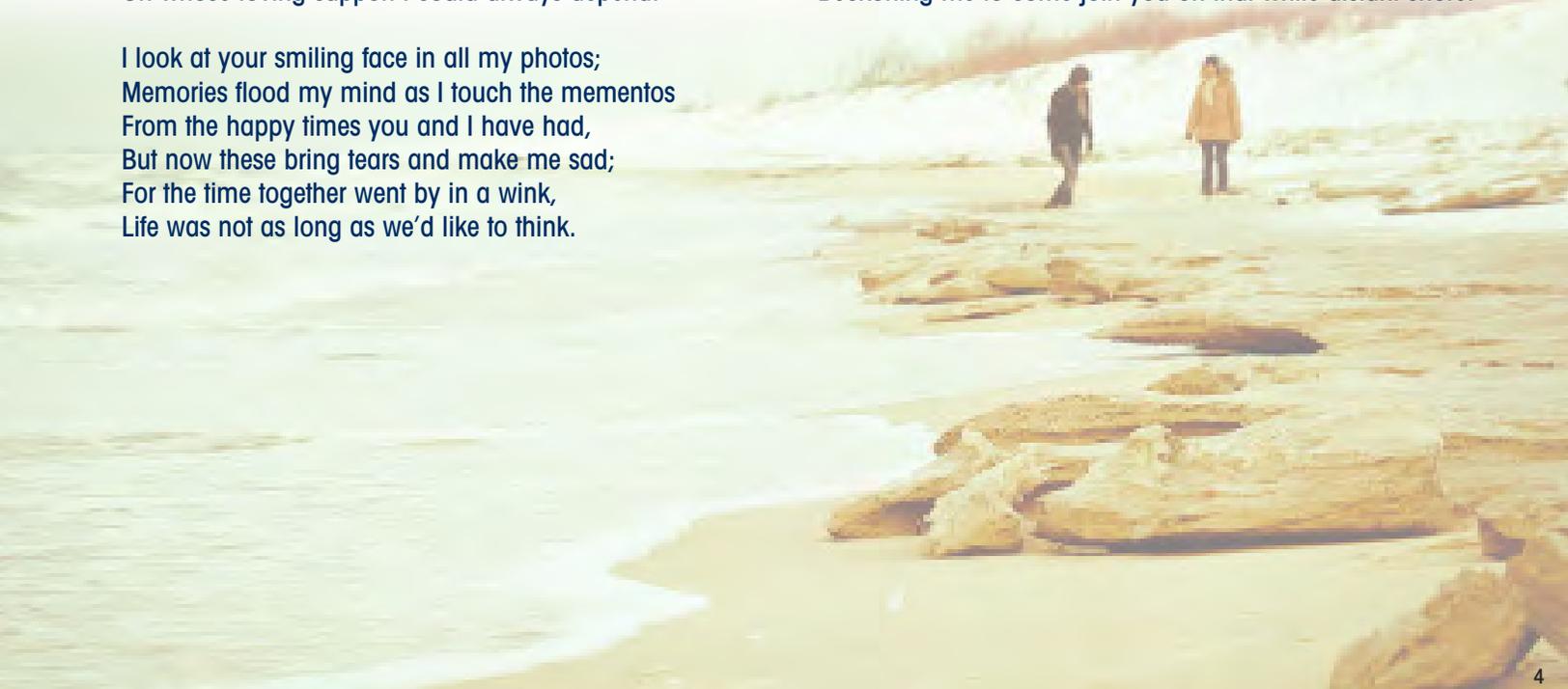
I look at your smiling face in all my photos;
Memories flood my mind as I touch the mementos
From the happy times you and I have had,
But now these bring tears and make me sad;
For the time together went by in a wink,
Life was not as long as we'd like to think.

Sometimes memories bring comfort and make me smile,
But there are times when grief takes over for a while;
Friends offer gentle words and prayers to console,
And tell me what has happened to your loving soul;
Can it be true what they say of time healing grief?
Is it enough when they say death has given you relief?

Can we believe what others say of a better place,
Where our beloved ones rest in God's warm embrace?
I should be happy you're free of pain and sorrow,
And rejoice that you'll always have tomorrow.
How can I then be so heartbroken and selfishly cry,
"Return to me from that peaceful place where you lie!"

Now I look down at your name on a cold hard stone
That says little of the loving light you have shone;
It tells nothing of the wonderful person you were,
And only serves to remind me of the painful loss I endure;
But I know your kind soul wants no tears or pain,
Instead you'd want warm memories and love to remain.

Although I cry and stand grief-stricken by your grave,
I promise not to forget the loving memories you gave;
But still I miss you so very much my sister dear,
And your caring words I once again long to hear;
My heart's only solace is one day I will see you as before,
Beckoning me to come join you on that white distant shore.





griefHaven is now on facebook

Follow us to find out what we are doing, where we will be when, and the exciting and interesting things happening at griefHaven.

PLUS

Share your sibling with the world by adding your sibling's photo.

www.facebook.com/griefHaven

