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“The Greatest”—*The Interview*

A No-Holds-Barred Interview
With Shana Feste, Writer and Director
Interviewed by Susan Whitmore,
griefHaven Founder/President & Erika’s Mom



To Our Dear Friends,

Do you believe it’s possible to do a movie about the death of a child and have it be a great movie that is accurate, hopeful, educational, **and** meaningful for everyone? The answer is, “Yes, now it is, because it’s been done.” And *that* movie is called “The Greatest,” available on DVD.

As Shana, Brian (Shana’s husband), Wendell (my husband), and I sat down together in March to break bread (well, more like egg whites and hash browns) and discuss the making, directing, and producing of this incredible movie, it quickly became obvious that the next two hours were going to be very special indeed. That is because of a rare woman, Shana Feste, who, with her tenacity, gifted writing ability, passion for her subject, personal life experiences, and fierce commitment to giving grief a voice, indelibly placed the journey of a family who loses a child onto the screen for all to see. You will laugh, learn, cry, embrace your loved ones, and walk away knowing that you have just been gently rocked in the arms of hope. Shana got it right, folks. And she considers this movie her gift to all who have walked a thousand miles in those grief shoes. This is a gift you will want to open slowly so you can fully appreciate it.

My words are in green; Shana’s in black. So print this out, sit in your most comfortable chair, and begin unwrapping.

Well let’s start out with this. I did a tremendous amount of research and think I read probably every review and comment on the internet about your movie, “The Greatest.” Of course, that was after having gone to

the screening with our *griefHaven* Board members, so I already knew how remarkable, accurate, moving, and special it was. Although some reviews talked about the movie being too this or not enough that, the overwhelming majority “got it” and showered you, your writing, and your directing, as well as all of the actors, with accolades. I’ll just read a couple representative quotes that are indicative of reviews I read about how beautiful and meaningful “The Greatest” is.

What begins as an extreme portrait in grief develops into a moving account of a family coming to terms with loss. The film then focuses on the discovery within the household: how the parents live on after the death of a child; how the girlfriend faces the future as a single mother with a set of grandparents for her child that she barely knows; how Allen and Grace find each other again after years of inattention to their marriage. Yet The Greatest is a movie that manages to make real that sense of absence that an untimely death creates. Bennett is still a huge presence in the lives of all of these characters—and eventually they must discover that, to keep those memories alive, they must come together. What they share ultimately is greater than the barriers they feel—but only if they find a way to pool the memories, rather than hoard them.

Sarandon is like a raw nerve onscreen, her antennae on heightened alert for anything that might hit her wrong or trigger her sense of loss. Brosnan is equally good as the husband who holds his grief at arm’s length in order to provide strength for his family. Mulligan, by con-



Susan
and
Shana

trast, is understandably distant, yet she finds a sense of calm that has nothing to do with trying to achieve control. That, ultimately, is what The Greatest is about: accepting the fact that you have little control of the world and letting life go on anyway. Feste has written a smart, finely wrought tale. The Greatest is engaging to watch. As Feste made her way to the stage [at Sundance] after the final credit rolled, row by

row, the audience stood and gave her a standing ovation. The difficulty of affecting a contemporary audience demonstrates how much respect a work like The Greatest engenders. It is an enormously moving, intelligent exploration of pain and grieving; a film that will touch you and stay with you. This is an ensemble film that is the debut of Shana Feste, a particularly talented young filmmaker. This is one of the standout works of this Festival, and it is as fine a debut as we can present. This was a brilliant film. It was psychologically sound and the performances were perfect. If this film had more publicity around it, the public would spread the news, and, by word of mouth, it would be a hit. I hope it gets the attention it deserves, because it is a refreshingly great film.

So, did you always want to be a writer?

I don't know how I could not be a writer. It feels like something I need to do, even though the process is always painful for me. Writing "The Greatest" was a very painful process. I kind of fall in love with the characters I write, and I want to make sure they are taken care of.

You wrote the screenplay and you directed it. What attracted you to taking the risk of doing such an honest story about the death of a child? Most people don't take risks like that.

I think it was all of the personal stories from parents that I had read about that really intrigued me about the grieving process, and I wanted to write roles that I thought actors would really respond to and want to play. Grief is a human emotion that takes you to so many different places and that, I feel, also includes some really beautiful places, so it would give actors the chance to play unique, honest roles.

Also, I told you earlier that my Father lost a son before I was born. I am 34 years old, and in all that time, he told me about my brother only one time while we were driving in the car to Texas. He said, "You would have had a brother," and he told me how he died, when he died, and that was all he ever said to me about it. Sometimes you write something, and you don't know why you are writing about it until after you have made the movie. I was watching the movie in Sundance, and I said, "I think I figured out why I made this movie. I think I made this movie so I could actually talk about grief." Because it's a way for me to understand my Father and understand how it changed his life.

Was it cathartic for you, too? How did it affect you and your life now?

It was cathartic because I felt as if I could understand my Father a lot more, and I have a lot more empathy for his experience and learned there is no right way or wrong to grieve, because everyone grieves so differently. The way he chose to grieve was his way of grieving, and I could never judge that. It helped me understand my Father better.

I'm wondering if you had known what you know now if you would have done things differently in your relationship with him—that maybe you might have said, "Tell me about my brother."

It's still a scary thing to even talk about with my Father. Even after he saw this movie at Sundance! I made this movie about the grieving process and a family, and I thought maybe this was going to be a good opener for us to have some more candid discussions. Even when I brought it up *after* he had seen the movie, my heart was beating really fast, and I still felt it was this thing we could not talk about yet—that he still wasn't ready to talk about it, so I have to respect that.

What about your Mom?

It was a different mother. They got divorced shortly after. My Father comes from a family of three sons. His youngest brother is a multiple Ph.D. scientist, his older brother is a multiple Ph.D./OB-GYN, and my Father has made a very different life choice. A lot of that happened *after* his son died. It definitely dictated who he was and who he was going to be in this world, and I think he's been running from that for a long time. He's struggled with the law, he's

struggled with maintaining personal relationships, and it's deeply affected who he became after he lost Mark, my brother.

To write a script and direct it takes a strong desire, so you were clearly very motivated to write on such a very serious subject. What was it like for you when you were writing the script?

Writing the script was very emotional. Brian knows this. He would come home from work, and my eyes would be red because I had been crying all day because I was reading so many books about personal stories and listening to Gloria's [*Open to Hope*] radio show religiously. Also, when you are writing something like this, you have to put yourself in the character's mind. In order to do that honestly, which I felt there was no other way to do it than that, I had to **be** Grace [the mother, played by Susan Sarandon], and I had to **be** Allen [the father, played by Pierce Brosnan], and I had to try to understand what it would be like to lose a child, although I would never, ever, ever be able to literally understand that pain and what that would be like. But I had to try and go to those places. It was a very emotional four or five months writing the script on my own, bonding with all of these really great



people who are telling their stories about losing their children, and feeling like I was almost co-writing with them because they were giving me so much.

I remember listening to one of Gloria's shows, and there was a therapist on the show who said, "Something that might be good could be ringing a bell when you miss your child." I thought, "That's really interesting—a bell." Then I thought, "Okay, if I were a mother, and I had just lost my son, and my husband gave me a bell and said, 'Here, ring this bell whenever you miss our son,' I would want to say, 'Blank you!' and I would ring that bell all of the time." So I thought, "What **would** I do if I had that bell? But then what would the bell mean later? Maybe it is a beautiful thing and maybe there would be a point where I would want to ring it later. Maybe that would be a healthy thing in our family." Those were all of my thoughts and why I put the bell in the movie. So I really did feel as if I were co-writing with families, and reading all of these books and personal testimonials really inspired me. But it was a really painful process writing the script.

And how did it affect your husband, Brian?

[Nervous laughter] He's so sympathetic; he's so empathetic. He was completely supportive, and when he'd come home after I had been crying all day, he would read something I wrote and say, "It's really beautiful." He was completely supportive the entire way through this process. At Sundance, when we screened my movie for the first time, Brian was sitting next to me, and I was shaking and so nervous the whole time. I looked over at him, and he was shaking because he was crying so hard the whole time.

Has it affected your thinking about whether you want to have children or not?

Yes. Sometimes I get really scared that the reason I was so attracted to this material was because I was somehow preparing myself for something that might happen to me later. It's such an irrational fear, I know, but I was scared of that. I was thinking, "Is the reason I did this whole process so that

if I lose a child I'll think, 'Thank God I made this film?' or am I somehow letting this into my life in a certain way . . . you know . . . [tears up]?" That's just a fear that you have. Rationally, I don't think that's true at all. Also, it just terrifies me because I know that there is nothing that is worse. I've just seen this pain, and I know that there is nothing that would ever hurt more.

It's the one thing that you never want to go through. And when you are in it, you really want out. It's hard to teach yourself to be in it until it releases naturally and not fight it—it's hard to impart that to parents. And it's especially hard to get others who are around the parents to understand that—those who think they know where someone should be or how they should be, but can't possibly understand it if they haven't lost a child. So they make it worse by trying to get the person to stop crying, or telling them it's time to move on, or informing them that they should be better by now, or suggesting that they get busy and control their emotions, or judging anything about their grief journey based on the length of time. They don't know, and it would be great if they either educated themselves so they could be more supportive or just accepted that the parents are doing what they need to do, regardless of how many years have gone by. It's natural, organic, and necessary, but it sucks.

Wendell: That kind of irrational fear is not unusual. A lot of people don't want to be around bereaved parents. It's almost like unconsciously they are thinking parents have something that is contagious. That makes the journey so much lonelier and harder. Parents have been left behind by their child who has died, and then abandoned on so many levels by family members and friends, too.

Susan: Yes, it's bad enough to lose your child, but to then also lose your loved ones because they judge you or reject you in some way is so God-awful. You find yourself wondering, "Why can't they just love us? Why can't they just do what we ask? It's such a small thing in the bigger context of us just trying to go on in life." [Shakes her head] Whew! It's just beyond description.

Can you talk a little about your vision when you were writing this script? What did you want to impart to people about grief, the death of a child, resiliency, and so on?

One kind of common thread when doing my research was parents who said, "How am I even going to survive this day?" and then seeing the benefit of groups for newly-bereaved parents. It's just seeing all of the faces that are there and that they survived and that they *can* survive each day. I would think that that would be the hardest thing, just picturing yourself being there the next day and the next. So I wanted to tell a story about a family who survived this, and not that they have a happy, shiny bow on them, and they are all fixed or healed or any of that, but that they are still in pain, and they will be in pain for the rest of their lives, and this experience has changed all of them. They are there in their lives, present for each other, and they have survived this and are going to be there the next day and the next and the next *with* each other. I wanted to show a family that came together instead of dissolving.

Which is the way it mostly is—coming together. It's a myth that most families or marriages break up and dissolve after the death of a child. No one can figure out exactly how that myth got started, but it's absolutely untrue. Most families go on to be stronger and more loving than before. To what degree depends on how they deal with the pain, what they do as a family, etc. They need help, I know that for sure. People who try to do it alone—yikes. I can tell you in my own marriage that our love has a depth to it that happened very quickly after Erika died, especially once we started allowing the other person to grieve his or her own way and started educating ourselves about what was happening to us. This experience led us to places that were dark and desperate and

also beautiful and wondrous, and will for the rest of our lives. It hasn't been easy, and it will always be our lifelong challenge to live a meaningful life without Erika. We know that life will never be the way it was without Erika here, and we also know that doesn't mean that life will be bad. We make choices and work hard to make it as good as we can, as do so many other couples and families.

Okay, next question. You've already talked about your Dad and how that impacted your experience of writing this script. But what other things did you bring to the film that impacted your decisions?

My experience as a nanny helped in writing this film, because my main job, other than what I'm doing now, has been working as a nanny for the last ten years. When I was actually writing this story, I was taking care of a three-month-old baby. I would bring my journal to work and write scenes for the movie as I held her on my lap while she would take naps. Holding her and feeling this incredible amount of love for her and the pain of thinking what would happen if anything ever happened to her were very moving for me. In fact, I named the little girl in the movie Ruby because her name was Ruby and because she was a very important part of me writing this script. She was my little muse.

Brian: The fascinating part for me was that almost everybody involved in this film has lost someone. The producer lost a brother, the guy who is releasing the movie lost a son, and Pierce had the experience of losing his wife. I was fascinated by this because it's not talked about a lot, and it was amazing to see how many people who were intimately involved in the making of this movie had also lost someone.

It's all around us, isn't it? What I say about *griefHaven* is that we need to give grief a voice. That is why we call it "grief" and "haven"—"where hope resides." That is why we are hoping your movie will be widely watched, because it really could make a difference in people being more open about their grief and also help those around bereaved parents be more understanding, patient, and better able to support them.

I work-shopped this movie in a directing class I had taken, so every Tuesday night we would do a new scene from the movie so I could start honing my skills as a filmmaker and working with actors. It was always such a surprise to me when people would come up to me afterward in the class and say, "Oh, well, you wouldn't have known this, but I lost a brother when I was 15 years old." And I would say, "No, I've known you for three years, and I didn't know that. How could I not have known that about you after three years?"

It was only after I had written the script, and we had done it in class, that they felt safe enough to approach me and say, "This is something you didn't know about me, but . . ." It always surprises me when I learn things about people they had never told me before. I was shocked to see how many people I know intimately who are grieving.

That's why we have the grief pin. We are one of the only countries who doesn't have some traditional way of showing that we are grieving. And grieving is as normal of a reaction to loss as coughing is to something in your throat. If someone is happy and crying, no one says they shouldn't cry, but when someone is crying sad tears, they say, "Oh, don't cry."

You shared with me while we were eating that you fought to get this movie made. You told me that you were actually thinking about shooting this for bereaved parents. What was the fight about?

What we were just talking about—that people would say, "This is such a downer, so why would we want to see something about grieving parents?" When we were first marketing the movie, they said, "Stay away from grief. Say this is a love story between two young kids. Don't use the word grief

when talking about this movie, and don't say you were inspired by the movie 'Ordinary People' and that you liked that movie. We have to disassociate ourselves with the grieving process and let people know that that isn't what this movie is about." I said, "It IS what this movie is about. This is the story I wrote, and it IS about grieving parents. I think it's a beautiful journey, and I don't think it's a bummer to watch." Of course it's going to be sad, but I didn't write it to be a bummer to watch—I wrote it to show hope! So THAT was the fight.

You see, it's hard to get movies green-lighted that are about heavy, emotional journeys. People want to go to the movies to be entertained. It's a lot easier to get a horror movie made than this movie. What's really interesting is that some of the critics who have seen "The Greatest" have said that this movie has already been made before. They say, "We've already seen a movie about grief. They did it with 'Ordinary People'." Yet there are hundreds of movies about bank robberies, hundreds of movies about serial killers, and a hundred more movies that could be made about grief! I could write seven other movies just with the research I did. There are several other stories I could tell. There is such a resistance about this subject. I am sure you guys encounter this, and I am encountering it in the cinema world.

And I would suggest that it hasn't ever been done as accurately and completely as you did it. The other movies don't take it the whole way. They are not thorough and do not show the entire journey to hope nor redemption as part of the grieving process. I really think that is something unique that you have done for the first time. As a grieving mother, I have been on this journey a long time, and I have seen those movies they are referring to. I can tell you that "The Greatest" has never been done before.

You know, "Ordinary People" was about a family falling apart, and the mother blames her other child for the death of her son. That's such a teensy percentage of people who have lost a child who act like that. And there was no redemption or hope left in that movie by the time it ended. It was pain, pain, pain the whole way and then, boom! the end—roll the credits. Also, with the movie "21 Grams," as I was working with Naomi Watts on playing her role as Cristina, they didn't want us to talk about how Cristina loses her entire family in a freak car accident. They didn't want the public to think that the movie was about the death of a child because they were afraid no one would go to see it, even though Cristina losing her entire family was the pivotal point of the movie and why everything else happened. Just another example of what you are talking about.

So what did it take? How did you finally get somebody to make the movie?

It was Pierce Brosnan who read the script and said, "I love this role, and I want to play this man. This is incredibly truthful, he goes on this emotional journey, I believe in it, and I want to take this risk." And it was a big risk for him to do that with a first-time filmmaker. Pierce doesn't have to work with a first-time filmmaker. Pierce Brosnan can work with Oscar-nominated filmmakers. But this story was really important to him. Once you get an actor like Pierce, it becomes commercially viable. It got the movie made.

Now I love Pierce more than I did before, which was quite a lot. I know he produced the film through his company Irish Dream Time. I read that, when Pierce first read the script, he threw it under the bed and said, "I don't want to go there. I don't want to dig into the sense memory of losing a son." I remember reading about Pierce's son and the terrible accident that almost took his life, so I can understand his reluctance. I read that, after the script stayed under the bed for a while, Beau St. Claire, his production partner, suggested he read the script again, and that is what he did, then deciding that the story had to be told. I read that Pierce said, "My expectations were to make something that

was a study in grief—that would have some cathartic healing power and be entertaining as well." Well, you sure did all of that! So you must have been so excited when you found out that Pierce was in. God! So excited.

How did you choose your cast?

I knew Pierce had never played a role like this before, and I felt that he's always been such an under-utilized actor. I knew that he could handle this role based on his personal experiences, that he's incredibly talented, and that he has this right blend of masculinity and vulnerability, so I knew he would be perfect to play Allen, the father.

And Susan—I could not believe that we got Susan Sarandon. It was absolutely amazing. That role was cast so perfectly for her. She was amazing. She really wanted to work with Pierce. They had never worked together before, so that was a great partnership.

And with Carey Mulligan's role, we literally saw almost every young actress in Hollywood, and they all wanted this role. It was right after "Juno" had come out. So we auditioned so many girls for this role. No one knew who Carey Mulligan was then, as it was before "An Education." She was just a name on our casting sheet. When she read with me for the first time, I knew there was something very special about her because she did her homework, and she found the subtext in the role, which a lot of American actresses wouldn't have found, since they often think that preparing for a role is just memorizing lines and doing the audition. Carey had really done her homework.



Eventually, the part of Rose that Carey ended up playing came down to two actresses: Carey was one of them, and we were going back and forth because we were all in love with Carey, but there was this other young actress we had all fallen in love with as well. I had a dinner party with 12 of my good friends, some of whom are in the industry, some not. I said, "I want everyone to watch these two auditions, and no one say anything. Put the name of the person you think should play the role, and put it into this hat. That is how I'm going to cast this role." So we watched Carey's audition, and we watched the other audition, and no one talked. When it was done, everyone wrote a name and put their choices into the hat. I took the hat, and I read the names one by one—there were 12 people for Carey Mulligan. Hands down, everyone fell in love with her. There is something very relatable and honest about her. She really understood this role.

And then she got Oscar-nominated for her role in "An Education." Your timing couldn't have been better. Is she British?

Yes, she is. And Aaron Johnson who plays Bennett Brewer, the son who dies, is British as well, so he was doing an American accent, too. He is having a moment as well. He's about to come out in a movie with Nicolas Cage called "Kick Ass," and he played John Lennon in "Nowhere Boy."

And then there is Johnny Simmons (Ryan Brewer, Bennett's brother). He's just starting out in his career. We had cast the role and were just about to make an offer to someone that day when someone's agent called and said, "Wait, there's one DVD to see. This guy is on location, he read the script and put himself on tape, so could you just watch this before you make any decisions?" We watched it, and I said, "Wait a minute! Don't make the other offer." We cast Johnny based on that tape he sent in while shooting in Can-

ada.

So many siblings are going to get so much out of watching his role. Johnny Simmons, as the grieving brother, was wonderful. Just fantastic! How did the actors prepare to play their roles?

Everybody was different. Johnny lost maybe 10 or 15 pounds for the role because he wanted to go method and experience what it would be like to have such a significant loss and how that would change his body and the way he would look. When I saw him when we were about to shoot in New York, I said, "Johnny, what happened to you?" He was pale and thin, and it had taken its toll on his body.

Then there was Susan Sarandon, who has such an incredible mind to dig from. I mean that well within her is extremely empathetic. She is so in tune with the pain of other people that I feel like that is all she needs, as she is inspired by the other people around her.

With Pierce, a lot of his preparation was already done because of his own life experiences, which he used in this role.

With regard to Carey's role as Rose, how did you decide to add this quirkiness of who she is and the unusual life she leads in the midst of all of this fuzziness that the Brewer family was experiencing? I mean here comes this little bright light of a girl who is very quirky. Where did that come from?

I think she is little bit like me. I wrote a lot from my heart, and she's probably more like me than all of the other characters. I spent some time going to some support group meetings before I did the film, and I was always surprised at how much laughter there was in those meetings. People would tell funny stories about their kids, and I remember at my first meeting I was thinking, "Oh gosh, I am going to be crying during the entire meeting. I don't know how I'm going to do this. It's going to be so emotional." And I **was** crying, and it **was** emotional, but I was also laughing through a lot of it right along with the parents. I loved hearing the stories and seeing peoples' faces light up when they were talking about their children or their siblings, so I wanted to include that as part of the experience, because I know when I'm the most sad, I laugh through hard times. That's one thing my Dad taught me to do—that even in adversity, you are still finding the humor, you still have to let yourself have that in life, and I wanted to let **that** into this film.

You know, that is just how our lives are. As bereaved parents, we don't sit around all of the time sobbing and being sad. Well, in the beginning we do, but eventually that changes. So it reflected real life that way. How did the relationship between you and the actors change and evolve as you were filming this deep, heartfelt movie?

I think it was that there was this trust between us that started to happen, and that was really important because the actors were making themselves so vulnerable, and they were going to such dark places within themselves that we really needed to trust each other. Toward the end they were so "in" the story that I didn't really have to direct anymore. Sometimes before a take, I would just touch Pierce and say, "Okay, are you ready?" And we would share a touch, and he would say, "I'm ready." We developed something akin to shorthand in our communication. It was as if I were saying, "This set is a safe place; it's safe for you to feel whatever you are feeling." And that was the key to setting the tone and getting the performances—making sure that everybody felt safe and that they could trust me. I was also very honest and vocal about why I was making this film and how important it was to me. I didn't hide any of my emotions.

I am a very emotional person, and one of the things that sometimes happens to directors when they are directing a film is that they feel they need to be more stoic, more jaded, and not let things affect them as much as they really do. They think they have to toughen up, especially if they are female directors. *That* is so not me! I told them how important the making of this film was

to me and my emotional connection to the story and to the characters. I told them, "I'll be crying a lot, and you'll be crying a lot, and that's okay, so let's take this journey together." I think that made a difference.

And look what you did by doing it so honestly and so bravely, because it's a scary place to go when you don't have to. As bereaved parents, we've been forced there, but you are all choosing to go there, and what you've done—and please don't you or any of you in this film or on this set ever forget this—what you've done is, in your own way, helped and supported so many people. You have no idea the impact this will have forever upon grieving parents, grieving siblings, and family and friends who want to support grieving families. Your impact will be far-reaching and endless. You are giving people permission to make grief okay. You are teaching people who don't know what to say or do what works and doesn't work. You are showing those who distance themselves from us that we need them—not just immediately after the death that got us here—but for the rest of our lives.

We would love to never hear another story about people abandoning parents because they lost a child. It's so unfair. The journey is painful enough without that happening, too. So that's what you've done, Shana, by following your heart and not backing down from the truth. You've given us hope and support and a forum where we can, from now on, say, "Hey! Watch this movie, and it will help you *and* me."



And what was it that inspired you to have Allen go along with Rose to the party and elsewhere?

I just felt like that was the thing within his character that he needed. He needed someone like Rose at that moment in his life. I also thought it would

be a very interesting dynamic because there was nothing sexual about it. It was just an unlikely friendship that happened when he needed it the most. He didn't realize how much he needed it until Rose came into his life and started talking about his son. That was the one person he wanted to talk about—his son. You could say that Rose was the gift that I gave Allen.

That's beautiful. Can you tell us some of the funny moments while making the film?

Everybody got along really well and everyone supported each other while making this movie. We were like our own little family, and we became each other's support system through this experience. I'm trying to think about the times when we were really laughing, because I feel like the process would be very much like our lives. You are immersed in grief, but you have these moments where somebody in a support group will say something to somebody else, and they all just start cracking up.

Brian: I will say that Johnny was just like a total ray of light throughout the whole thing, and he kept everybody in really high spirits. There were his reactions and interactions that kept people laughing at times.

Shana: There were the pressures and realities of doing a movie like this independently, like when Pierce threw Susan in the ocean. We could only do that scene one time because we didn't have time to dry Susan off, change her clothes, and have them do it all over again. So we said, "Okay, this is going to be our one chance to get this shot." You know, he had to run with her in his arms in a desperate moment and throw her into the ocean, and we were all crossing our fingers.



Or that car accident. We got that car on eBay for \$3,000. We had four cameras set up, and we knew we could only do it once. In Indy filmmaking, you cross your fingers a lot and hope everything goes according to plan. Luckily, it did. And that car accident was another really scary thing no one was prepared for. The whole time we were talking about that scene that we would have to shoot where Bennett would actually die. Shooting that car accident was very emotional for people on the set. We were all saying, "We are just doing this stunt. This is the car crash."

We had our stunt drivers and the dummies in the car. But when that crash actually happened . . . it took our breath away. Once it happened, it was really silent on the set and more emotional than we had prepared for.

There are those moments in parents' and siblings' lives that come out of nowhere. You just don't expect them—just some little moment you aren't expecting. Like when I was driving down Sunset a month ago, and the song "Grease" came on the radio. That was one of Erika's favorite movies. She loved all of the music, and, whenever that song would come on, she would get really silly and start acting like Olivia Newton John. So as soon as that song came on the radio, like Pavlov's dog, I immediately saw Erika dancing around, acting silly, singing away, and I just burst into tears. There I was on a beautiful California day, just driving along, having a good day, and it assaulted me. It sounds like you guys, in the midst of making this movie, actually lived our lives in so many ways that you didn't even realize.

You are probably right. As we are telling these stories in the making of the movie, we are hit with these moments we never saw coming. Moments you don't understand because you were just fine two seconds before.

Yes. That's exactly what our lives are like. We eventually get to the point where we just say, "Here it comes again." That's what you had—a lot of those "moments." In a beautiful way, you created, like you said, a family environment with the cast and crew—you were all doing it together.

What was Susan Sarandon's motivation for taking the role of Grace, the grieving mother, besides the fact that she wanted to work with Pierce?

She talked a lot about the obsessive relationship she ended up having with Jordan (played by Michael Shannon)—the truck driver who hit Bennett's car. That was something she had never seen done in a film before. She found that to be a new approach and an interesting quality for a character.

Also, I think Grace is not always the most likeable character because, as a grieving mother, she does things that aren't very nice sometimes. Susan and I felt so much love for Grace that Grace could have set someone on fire and we would not have judged her or stopped loving her. Susan just responded to the honesty of this woman who wasn't struggling to be likeable—just trying to get through another day without her son. It was mainly what she was feeling that mattered—a mother whose son had just died in a car accident. How would a mother react? Would she be the same as she was before? No, of course not. So I think that was what attracted her.

I related to her the most, though I didn't express my pain the same way. Those scenes where Allen and Grace would wake up every morning, and Allen would get up, shower, go through the routine of life like a robot, but Grace would wake up, take a second to realize where she was, and then start sobbing—that is exactly what every morning was like for Wendell and me, and it was like that for a very long time. I think I am a nice person, yet, after Erika died—I mean, there is something that comes out of you, and you are just angry, confused, hurt, in pain, and so much more. And you are angry that people don't understand,

and you don't how to get them to understand, and you are not only in pain, but frustrated with no way out! And you are mad that you are forced on this journey that you know is going to change your life forever, so you are just mad and sad and a mess. Grace was like the "everyman," but actually the "everywoman" representing every mother whose child dies.

Were there any particular scenes in the movie that were particularly special for you that you would like to mention?

Yes. The limo ride back from the funeral, as it ended up, was something I never expected would be in the movie. If you listen to the shot—they took my voice out of course—but I was talking through the entire shot giving directions. I thought I was going to use that shot for five or ten seconds only. As I watched that shot in its entirety, I thought, "Wow! Pierce is doing some really interesting work here." And the whole time Pierce was thinking, "Why is this taking so long? Is she going to call cut?" And he's trying to sustain the shot and not understanding why I'm not calling cut. But while I was watching the shot, I was thinking, "Wow, this really sets up the dynamic of this family and the disconnect in a really beautiful way." So, I think the shot was over two minutes. When I presented the rough cut to my team, they said, "Oh, Shana, people are going to walk out of the theaters. They are going to be so bored. You cannot hold the shot for that long; you have to trim it." And it's one of those things that, as a first-time filmmaker, you feel you need to listen to people who have more experience than you. Sometimes you just choose not to fight battles you normally would because you think, "Well, this person has 20 years' experience making movies, so I should probably listen to him," and in this case, everybody around me was telling me to trim that shot. They were saying it shouldn't be as long as it was and asking me if I was going to play credits over it or what. I said, "No, I'm not going to play anything over it. I'm just going to hold on the shot." It was one of the times where I listened to my heart and fought that battle and fought to keep that shot in the movie when a lot of people really did not want me to do it at all. And I'm glad I did.

Aha! It is THE scene that everyone from our Board who previewed "The Greatest" liked the most. The whole group who saw it—all of them—totally related to that shot. And those of our people on the Board who haven't lost a child but who have been on the journey with us commented on what a brilliant shot it was. It's so great that you kept it in! Thanks for fighting for it. Is there another one?

That was my major battle. Then, some people felt that the ending of the movie was too happy, too hopeful.

Are you kidding me? What did they want? I mean this is what we parents do. It's reality. We get up, we go through life, and we keep the hope alive. That is what the ending showed—a family with hope, a family that you felt would make it with their love intact. Only those who were looking for a downer drama would suggest that the end of that movie was too happy. As Pierce said, a real study in grief is what you intended to impart, and what you portray is the reality of how it is well into the first year after a child dies—sometimes there are stories and laughter and moments of peace. And that is the truth of the grief journey. A parent or sibling could not survive this journey without some peace, moments we refer to as having greater "peace of heart." And, for most, the journey does lead to new lives with love, hope, and joy.

Wendell: There are these wonderful, artistic "bookends" in the film from the family's total disconnect and despair in the funeral car ride at the beginning of the movie (a ride from death) to, near the end, the car ride to the hospital (a ride to a new life) when the family is completely connected and hopeful and sharing. That kind of movement and change happens in real life. That's our lives. That's so important for newly bereaved parents to know that they are going somewhere on this grief journey. This is the important truth that

has been missing from previous movies dealing with loss and grief.

Wendell: If you watch our "Portraits of Hope" DVD, you see the same thing. It's intense at the beginning, just like it really is for parents. Parents start out describing the death of their child and what happened to them and then all of the things that are difficult and painful as they begin the process of living life without their child. Then, they all move through that to something that is hopeful and redemptive. "Portraits of Hope" is the real journey of real parents, and "The Greatest" portrays the complete truth of that journey for the first time in film.

You know, I loved the way we knew how long the family had been grieving by seeing how far along Rose was in her pregnancy. That was brilliant. Because if she weren't pregnant, I would have kept wondering, "How long has it been now since their son died?" I would have thought, when he brought the housekeeper in to clean up the house, "Oh no! He brought the housekeeper in too soon. She can't touch anything yet." But, because of Rose's pregnancy, I could see that maybe it was time to clean the house.



What were your biggest surprises? I mean, maybe one of your biggest surprises was when Pierce said okay. He got the money together, right?

I think that he was one of the biggest surprises. When John Bailey, who was our cinematographer, and also the person

who filmed the movies "Ordinary People," "The Big Chill," and some of the best character-driven dramas of the late 70s and early 80s—when he read the script, he didn't want to shoot the movie; rather, he just wanted to meet me and say, "How did you get people to agree to get this movie made?" He was so surprised that a character-driven drama about grief was getting made that he wanted to meet me to say, "How was that even possible? I wanted to just meet you to say, how is this even possible?" So I guess that was the biggest surprise—that we did get this movie made.

Also, our financier lost a son. I think if it wasn't for him and that connection, he wouldn't have felt that this was a story that was important to tell. So I think a lot of people who had been personally affected came together to make sure this movie happened, because normally it would be a very difficult movie, concept-wise, to get made.

Pierce also said he trusted in the dialogue I had written and that he listened to the words he was saying from the script. That was enough for him.

Wendell: That's an incredible validation of your writing.

Shana: When Pierce says things like that—that he got through a lot of the things he had to go through by focusing on the words he was saying—that is very moving to me.

It's really a gift to be able to take words and string them together in just the right way: this word goes here, and this one goes there . . . To be able to do that to effect a change or impact another person is a gift.

Oh, I'll tell you another surprise I just thought of. In the script, the first 20 minutes were all Bennett and Rose meeting, what they went through, etc. It all happened in the very beginning and wasn't sprinkled throughout the movie at all. It just happened that they met at school, had a conversation, went to the hair salon, dyed his hair, went into the car, and the accident happened. That was the end of their story.

When we were watching the film cut together like that, we realized that it would make a difference to sprinkle Bennett throughout the film because that was the way of keeping his memory alive, but that was *not* how the script was written. It was a major change in the editing room to end up taking the first 20 minutes of the movie, chopping it all up, telling it backward, and sprinkling it throughout the movie. But I felt that it kept his memory alive, and it also showed Rose's journey of trying to keep his memory alive.

Because if you didn't do that, it would have been that he died, that's that, and now everyone goes on without him. But we don't do that. That's what we want to avoid. We want to keep their memories alive, and we go to great lengths to incorporate them and our memories with them into our new lives in the ways that work best for us.

And Bennett *is* the center of their story. I wanted the audience to feel the connection with him and keep him alive throughout the movie. We were all grieving over him, and we were all falling in love with him, too, just like Rose did.

What were the most difficult scenes and why?

One of the most difficult scenes was when Grace confronts Jordan (played by Michael Shannon) in his prison cell after he has come out of his coma. She wants to find out what those moments right after the accident were like for her son.

Mike Shannon is the one who hits the son's car and kills him?

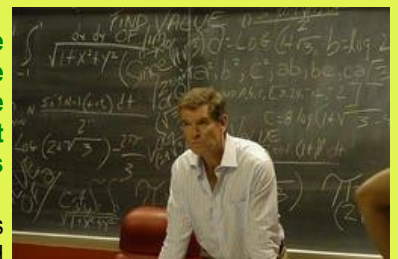
Yes. Mike Shannon was also nominated for an Academy Award for his role in the movie "Revolutionary Road." It was one of the most difficult scenes. Susan and I talked a lot about that scene, and we knew it was going to be one of the toughest days for her. After we shot it, it was so taxing on her, and she put herself so wholeheartedly into it, that she actually got physically sick. We shot with two cameras so we could go for it emotionally over and over again. When you are making a movie, you need to do the scene three or four times and do it over and over again.

Bless her heart. I bet she went home every day and held onto her kids. You said there were a lot of scenes that were edited out?

There was this one scene with Allen. Remember that Allen was a mathematician. So we had this scene where he went out to the accident site to measure the tire marks and try to figure out how many miles per hour Jordan was driving, because he wanted to understand the numbers of it all. That is how it was going to make sense to him.

I know fathers who have done similar things. They go to the accident scene, they look at the skid marks, they try to figure out the angles and the way the cars went. That truly happens.

That was one scene. There was another scene where Grace had



two of her friends over, and one of them had a daughter that was in Bennett's class and was an ex-girlfriend of Bennett's. It is a scene where Grace's friends are very uncomfortable with what she's going through, and all Grace wants to talk about is Bennett and this video of the accident that she tells them she's been watching. They are looking at her like she's insane, and they are telling her that she needs to turn off the video and move on with her life. One of the mothers is *really* uncomfortable and wants to leave immediately.

And there was a scene with Ryan and his friends where his friends are all getting stoned, and he came over there to have a meaningful conversation with them about his brother's death and what he is going through, and they are just being boys and don't know how to act around him anymore. He ends up being really lonely in the scene when he realizes this about his

friends—that they can't be there for him. It was hard to choose what to leave in and take out because the movie was two-and-a-half hours long, and I knew I had to trim some of it.

There was another scene where Ashley, Ryan's girlfriend that he met at the grief group, is at the grief group and tells this made-up story about her sister dying. That scene showed how incredibly lonely she was to have made up a fake story about losing a sister just so she could fit in. That scene actually touched upon something that I felt when I went to some of the support groups where there was such an acceptance of you when you were in that group that you felt like you were a part of something. There is so much love in that room during those meetings that for someone who is really lonely and needs that kind of interaction . . . well, it's like coming into a ready-made family. When I was there in those groups, I felt very loved, safe, and as if I were in a place where there was great solace. So I tried to touch on that type of experience where an outsider might want to be a part of something like that just because of the extra love that you get.

Ummmm. Well that would be the "ideal" way to be in a grief support group—not have the actual loss or pain to have to go through and then just make up a story. If you ask somebody who is in there because they have to be, they would say that they would rather be anywhere else in the world and have their loved one back. So that's the irony in what you did there.

By the way, we are including the edited out scenes in the DVD.

What was it like for you the first time you saw "The Greatest" with an audience?

I was at Sundance and my producer said, "Everybody in this audience is sick or something," because she noticed everyone was sniffing a lot. We were worried because we were sitting in the audience and might all get sick. When the lights came up, everyone was crying. It was pretty amazing. We got a wonderful standing ovation! It was incredibly emotional when I went up on that stage afterward.

What is the most emotional and gratifying for me is when people who have lost someone in their lives tell me that this was accurate and truthful. That is what means the most to me.

Now that you have done this, is there anything you would have done differently?

I'm my own worst critic. Now that we've talked about those deleted scenes, I am thinking, "Ooooh, those were important scenes. Maybe I should have included them in the movie. I should have fought to make it longer," because you really want to capture everyone's experience.

Oh, but you did.

Wendell: I just want you to know that the movie, the way you put it together, is a whole experience. No one ever gets it right the way you did. No one ever has.

What did you learn that might be helpful to people who know someone who has lost a child?

I learned the importance of reaching out to people for help. I learned that people do grieve differently, and when I was looking into Grace's and Allen's marriage, there was no question at any point that they loved each other. I knew they loved each other, and they would survive this, even though there were moments of total disconnect. That disconnect was there because they were constantly in different places in their grief. I wanted to dispel this notion that you have to be grieving *with* somebody and going through the exact same thing with someone, which I think is impossible to do. I hope that people might have some insight into that and not feel that pressure to grieve in the "right" way.

What do you want people to walk away with after having seen "The Greatest?"

I want them to walk away with hope. That is why I wrote this ending. It's a survival story. I want people to walk away feeling hopeful.

And my last question: What are you working on now?

I just finished directing a movie for Sony called "Love Don't Let Me Down" with Gwyenth Paltrow and Tim McGraw about country music, and it's something I'm really proud of.

Okay, is there anything that I didn't ask you?

No. You are the best interview I've ever had. It's the most in-depth and best interview I've ever had.

It's been an honor to meet you, share breakfast with you, and hear these amazing stories about you, your own journey, and how you've taken all of that and turned it into something that will stay alive forever. Thank you for all that you have done for those of us forced upon this lifelong journey of rebuilding our lives without our children and for putting together the movie in such a way as to give information to those around us regarding how they can help. And, if that weren't enough, it's just a wonderful, gem of a movie for anyone to see. Thanks to Beau and Pierce and Mark Urman of Paladin and the financier and everyone! I can only imagine how proud your own parents are of you.

It's been an amazing morning for me, too. To be sitting across from both of you who have lost your beautiful daughter and all that you have done with your lives since her death. To hear you and all those other parents validate the movie means so much to me. My hope is that everyone watching "The Greatest" will walk away with the knowledge that hope is always and forever a part of our lives, no matter how horrible things become.

[Susan, to the waiter] Oh, give us that bill.

Brian: No way. We are paying for this.

Susan: No way! It's our treat. Give me that bill.

[Laughing]

And so it went, my friends, as we found ourselves suddenly thrust back into the everyday realities of life and who would pay the bill. But for two hours prior to that jolt back into life, the four of us took a journey that I know we will never forget, and we will forever be friends, deeply connected by that invisible chord of grief and hope.

Sending you who have read this a huge E-Haven hug. Now GO RENT OR BUY THIS AMAZING MOVIE, "THE GREATEST!" You'll be so glad you did. And tell everyone you know to see it, too.



Cast at Sundance Film Festival