

where brothers and sisters are heard

THE SIBLING



VOICE

january - march 2011

josh's light still shines

by jennifer atkins

On September 29, 2006, when I was 28 years old, the person I was, the family I had, and the life I knew changed forever in one split second. My younger brother, Josh, was killed in a motorcycle accident when a woman turned in front of him killing him instantly right in front of my other brother, Jarrod. Jarrod called me from the scene. I didn't believe what he told me. I drove the whole way to the scene "knowing" I'd be able to help Josh, just like I always did when he needed me. Unfortunately, this time I couldn't help. I arrived to find Josh lying on the road covered with a blanket... and to find that my worst nightmare was true—Josh, my beloved brother, had died.

I couldn't cry at first because I was in complete shock, but once the tears started to flow, they continued non-stop for years. My tears were rarely seen by others.

After the funeral, and for about the first week or so, people would acknowledge my loss. But another process was taking place at the same time, and that is that I was pretty much shamed into silence. I got a lot of, "How's your mom?" and "You need to take care of your parents" type of comments. I wanted to scream, "How's my mom? Well, she's devastated, BUT SO IS MY DAD AND SO IS JARROD AND SO AM I!" I would stand there when person after person would

tell me that I needed to take care of my parents, and I would think, "How can I take care of them when I'm completely broken myself?" The pressure was enormous. It

would have been so much better if people had just acknowledged each of our separate losses for what they were and not put pressure on any one of us.

As hard as comments like those and others are, such as "He's in a better place," they are better than no comments or mention of Josh at all. Some people think it is best to just ignore you. Walking into our hometown stores and seeing people I know look the other way and avoid me is such a strange and lonely

feeling. I felt like I had done something wrong or like they were afraid they might "catch" some of my bad luck. People often think that saying something is also "reminding" me of my loss, yet they don't realize that they can't remind me of it—I remember it every day. Instead of avoiding me, it would have been nice for people to just say hello or ask how I was doing or just give a hug or share a moment. I would have cherished that. Instead, I was often isolated even more. But I realize now as I'm four years into this journey that people don't do or say these things to intentionally hurt me more. I might have done the same thing myself in the past, because before this happened to our



Josh, Jennifer's brother, died in 2006

THE SIBLING Voice is here and they are being heard

In the chaos and pain of a child's death, the focus is generally on the parents. Yet, there is someone else deeply impacted by that death and often forgotten, and that is the sibling.

Regardless of the age, a sibling who loses a brother or sister is deeply impacted by the death of that sibling. Their pain, sorrow, confusion, and helplessness is just as real as the adults and must not be overlooked. So we decided it was time to give them their own voice—their own newsletter—*The Sibling Voice*.

Here, siblings of all ages share their stories of life, love, loss, and change, while honoring their beloved brothers and sisters. Here, parents and others who want to know what they are going through and how to support them can become better educated. And here other siblings will find their haven of hope.

Thank you to all of the beautiful siblings who have shared their voices with us in this first newsletter. We honor your journey, your sibling, and your voice.

Siblings: We need you to share your stories, poems, photos, drawings, etc. Help us educate everyone so we can better love you, support you, and help you make your difficult journey alongside us.

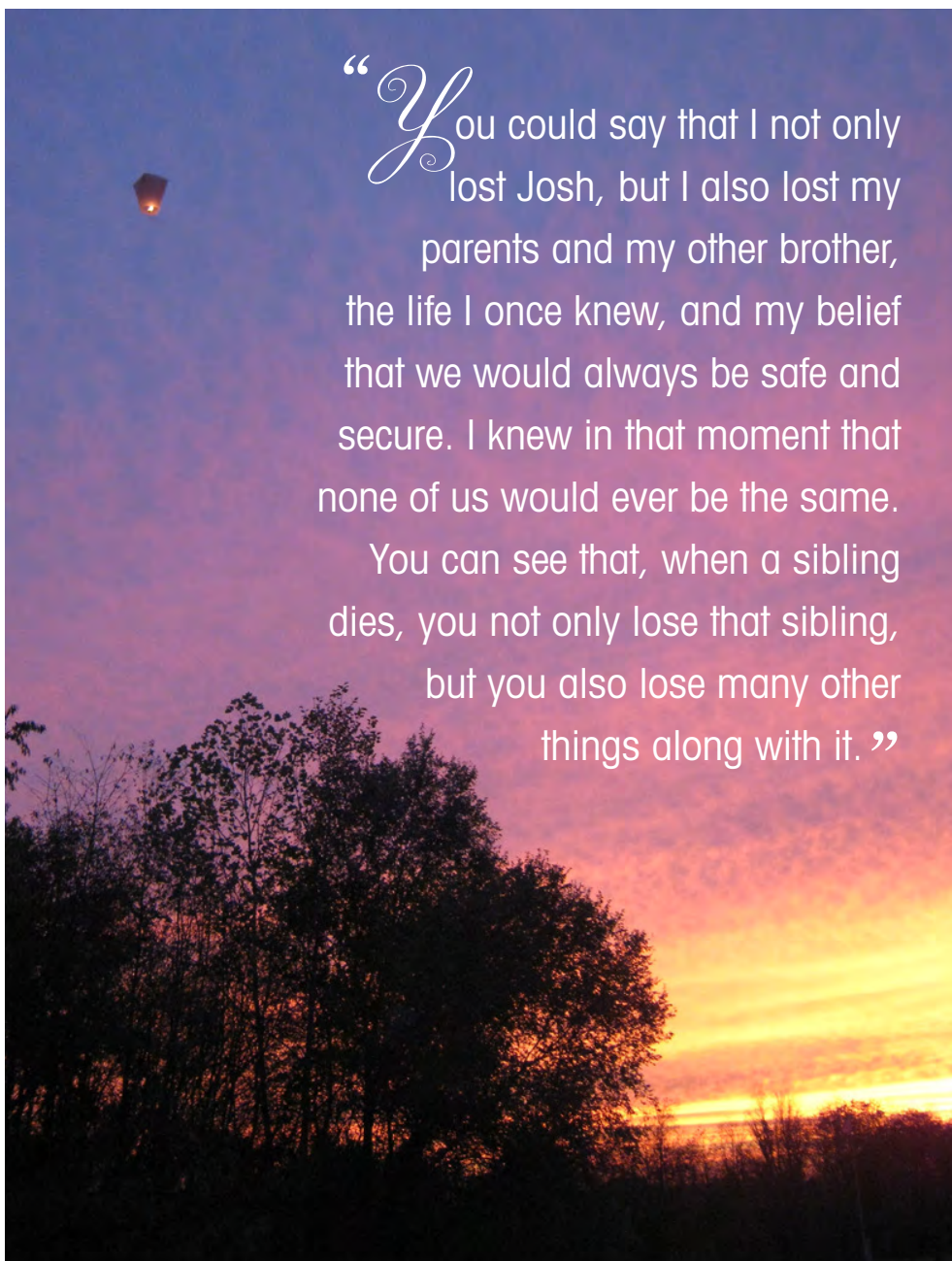
~ Susan Whitmore
founder & president



family, I could have never imagined what it would have been like to lose one of my brothers. Even now that it has happened, it is almost impossible to put into words the depth of grief, sorrow, and pain.

About the pain. The emotional pain is overwhelming and exhausting. The physical pain my heart was in hurt so badly that it scared me. Some of my family and friends disappeared, and my parents forgot about my brother and me at times because of their own overwhelming grief. It was hard for me to share any of those feelings with anyone because I felt crazy for feeling the things I did. No one told me that my feelings were normal and that there was such a thing as sibling grief, and everyone acted as if I hadn't lost anything. Well, on September 29, 2006, I DID lose something—I lost my brother, my lifelong friend, the person that knew more about me than anyone. Josh was the person who told me his secrets and came to me for advice; the person who I planned a future for our parents with; the uncle to my children; the friend to my husband; the life of the party. I also lost my peace of mind. I'm afraid to lose my other brother now and terrified to lose one of my children, for the only thing worse than losing a sibling would be to lose one of my children. I couldn't bare seeing my other child go through this pain of being a grieving sibling.

My parents and Jarrod had a horrible time as well. My mother was so distraught over Josh's death that she ended up in the hospital. The doctors said she had a broken heart. Everything in my family was changing, and changing so fast. None of us knew what was happening to us. At first, my parents were blessed with great support immediately following the accident. Their neighbors were extremely helpful, and friends were very supportive. They received piles of loving cards every day, and people brought meals regularly. I'm grateful they had all of that. Yet, because Jarrod and I had our own families and no longer lived at home, we weren't there to partake of that support, and we received essentially none of that—no outside support to speak of. Jarrod and I were struggling and in terrible pain as we tried to make sense of what had happened. I would have gladly continued to feel left out if everyone had continued to at least be there for our parents; unfortunately, and much sooner than you would think, everyone moved on and pretty much stopped the support. They felt that our family should be fine now—over it by now. For me and my family, it was a whole new heartbreak, because



“You could say that I not only lost Josh, but I also lost my parents and my other brother, the life I once knew, and my belief that we would always be safe and secure. I knew in that moment that none of us would ever be the same. You can see that, when a sibling dies, you not only lose that sibling, but you also lose many other things along with it.”

Jennifer's family celebrates Josh's birthday and anniversary of his death with yearly balloon releases

it was just the beginning of this horrific journey we were on. It was also hard for me because I knew that my parents would be feeling that sense of abandonment that Jarrod and I had already been feeling, and that hurt even more.

The people my parents used to be changed forever when Josh died. The person that Jarrod was before Josh died changed forever, and the person I was also changed forever. In fact, we are still changing and learning how to incorporate Josh's death into our lives and will be for the rest of our lives. You could say that I not only lost Josh, but I also lost my parents and my other brother, the life I once knew, and my belief that we would always be safe and secure. I knew in that moment that none of us would ever be the same. You can

see that, when a sibling dies, you not only lose that sibling, but you also lose many other things along with it.

I put up a good front and was silent about my grief. By doing that, everyone thought I was “so strong” and started putting all their little problems on me. This only caused me to feel extremely irritated and even more hurt. Once you have lost a sibling, life's little complaints that would have once mattered become trivial in light of what you are dealing with, so everyone putting their problems on me was difficult. They just weren't important anymore. This put life into a whole new perspective.

My friends tried to help. When I would tell them that I wanted to “live life to the fullest,” the way I knew Josh would have wanted me

to, they would take me out. They also tried to hush me when I “wanted” and needed to cry, and they pushed away the people that came to me to reminisce about Josh and ask about my family so that I didn’t have to be reminded. That only frustrated me more, because all I wanted to do was talk about him and remember him, but I never said anything. My friends were trying to do what they thought was best for me, and, in their defense, I should have told them what I wanted and needed. One thing I would recommend to other siblings is for them to let their friends know what they want and don’t want.

Staying busy seemed to help. I’d do anything to stay busy. I did everything I could with my kids and husband, worked two jobs, cleaned everything in sight, and just plain wore myself out. If I were busy, I wasn’t left sitting to think of Josh dying.

My employer and co-workers were fantastic. At my job they gave me the time to read, listen to music, and research a lot about sibling grief while at my computer, and that helped me through this. I know now that everything I feel is a part of my “new

“*F*our years later, my life is happier. I experience real joy and love. My parents, brother, and I celebrate Josh’s life with balloon releases on his birthday and anniversary. We keep his memory alive by talking about him, volunteering, and carrying him in our hearts every day. We have come together as a family and will always be each others’ biggest supporters...”

normal.” I still don’t like it, but at least I know I’m not crazy.

There’s a fine line you walk when you’re going through all of this. I could have definitely just sat and done nothing, since that’s what I felt like doing—basically, just wait out my life until I could join Josh again. But then I would think, “What if Josh asked me what I’ve been up to since he’s been gone?” and I would answer, “You can’t break his heart by letting him know you did nothing.”

I have to remind myself of that question all of the time to get me back on track when I am struggling.

I’ve decided to figure out who I am now. I use lessons Josh left for us to help with that. I know I’ll never know why this happened to our family, but I don’t want anyone else to feel like they have to go through it alone like I did. In fact, a group of siblings from our area started a support group where we meet and tell our stories and share our feelings and problems. I didn’t have anywhere like that to go when Josh first died, and I think that you need to tell your story to come to a different place in the loss—not to “get over it,” because we all know you don’t get over it, but you can learn to live with it in a positive way and in a way that would make our siblings proud.

To other siblings and families reading this, I have several suggestions. I recommend that you either find or start your own support group so you, as a bereaved sibling, have a place where you can share with others like you. It does make a huge difference. We’re all learning to travel this journey through grief and would not intentionally hurt others in our family who are already hurting so much, so I recommend that siblings, parents, and other family members be supportive and patient with each other. If you don’t have some kind of celebration on your sibling’s special dates, such as birthdays or the holidays, I would suggest you consider doing something to honor your sibling and keep his memory alive. Last, your brother or sister will always be your brother or sister, so talk about him, remember him, share his life with others, and celebrate all that he brought to your life.

Four years later, my life is happier. I experience real joy and love. My parents,



Josh’s family, 2005 (l to r): Josh, Kevin (our dad), Dave, Jen, Hailee (my daughter/Josh’s niece) myself and Jarrod.

brother, and I celebrate Josh’s life with balloon releases on his birthday and anniversary. We keep his memory alive by talking about him, volunteering, and carrying him in our hearts every day. We have come together as a family and will always be each others’ biggest supporters, which is especially important since so many others have pretty much forgotten about us and assume that we have moved on and are doing fine. But that isn’t the way the experience of losing a sibling works. Like with parents, this is a lifelong journey for me. I miss Josh terribly and think about him every day. I wonder what life would be like today if he had lived, and I often wonder what he would like look. I miss the uncle he was to my children and am sad that they will grow up without him here in their lives. I know my parents and Jarrod still grieve, too. We do talk about it, and we are all learning to incorporate this in our lives each and every day. It takes time, and it’s really hard work. The support that others give and then take away so quickly left us feeling isolated and alone.

To other family members and friends. This is a lifelong journey. No one ever gets over the death of their child or sibling. They only learn to eventually live with it. That takes years of hard work. Everyone works very hard to learn how to be happy again in life without their loved one. So if you know someone whose child or sibling has died, know that time doesn’t heal their wounds, but your love, talking to them about their child or sibling, asking how they are doing, being patient with them, educating yourself so you understand that what they are doing and saying is normal, and staying a part of their lives is what helps them heal the huge hole left in their hearts and lives. 🌸

remembering Jackson Senator



"Jackson"
by Sarah Senator, at age 5
Jackson was my heart.
Jackson was brave.
When Jackson did something
wrong he stood up proud and
said I am sorry.
Jackson was a very nice boy.
Jackson was tall.
Jackson was 8 years old.
Jackson was my brother.
I love Jackson.



Jackson and Sarah
illustrated by Sarah

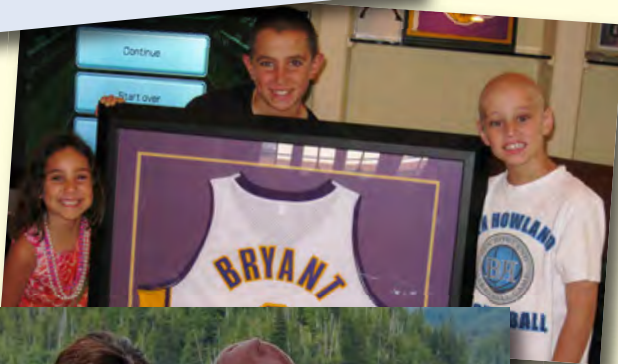
"Jackson"

by Zachary Senator, at age 10

I remember Jackson's heart as warm as the hot blazing sun. His big white teeth stretching into a big smile would light up the whole room and brighten everybody's day. I will never forget how much fun we had at Lakers games and how Jackson's eyelids would get so heavy he could barely keep awake. I still smile when I think about coming home from basketball and hearing that Jackson had broken another one of his bones. I was so happy when I taught Jackson how to throw and catch a football and shoot a basketball. Also, I taught him how to hit and throw a baseball. I loved walking to town or a friend's house and us two acting like big shots. I loved seeing him at school with a big smile on his face.

One of my favorite memories is waking up really early in Cabo San Lucas to get a beach spot for the day. We would play baseball, football, tag or dig a hole until our parents came down to the beach spot. I will always miss wakeboarding and water skiing with Jackson and how we would bike around by ourselves at Montecito Sequoia. I will never forget jumping in the snow with no clothes on in Mammoth, and telling our friends that we weren't cold.

I always get a nervous feeling when I think about Jackson pressing the emergency button on the cruise to Alaska, and how embarrassed I felt when crew members came in to see if everything was okay. I will always remember seeing him in the hospital and no matter how sick he was we would still play around. Even when we would fight or get mad at each other we always loved each other. I will remember him my entire life and there will always be a place for him in my heart.



Sarah, Zachary
and Jackson



The Senator family: (clockwise) mom, Beth; dad, Stuart; Zachary, Sarah and Jackson

my sister, my life

by heather desurvire

When I look back on my first memories of childhood, I remember only a few things: my dad showing me a fire truck drive by our house, and my older sister, Joellyn, making me cry. She would tickle me so badly on the bottom of my feet that I transmuted my ticklishness into feeling nothing. That way, I thought, she couldn't get to me. But she'd always find a way, which characterizes my relationship with her—she pretty much had total control over my emotions. If she disapproved of me, I'd feel horrible, and when she approved of me, I was the most joyous person around. Joellyn was only four years older than I, but when we were ages four through sixteen, it was as if she was in a different generation.

I admired and looked up to my sister as we were growing up. She was charismatic, beautiful, and had so many cool friends. Her boyfriends were always the most popular, handsome, and smart. I was like her servant and just happy to be a part of her world. As an eight-year-old, I thought, "When I'm 12, my life will be like hers." When I hit 12 and that

"I had extreme grief and sorrow over losing my sister, but no one else realized that, not even me. And once Joellyn died, I then felt tremendous pressure to be 'everything' to my parents, which is a huge burden for any sibling to carry."

was not the case, I thought, "Maybe when I'm 13 I'll be like her," until I hit 16 and realized that my life would never be like Joellyn's.

When Joellyn was 18, she came home after traveling to Europe and suddenly seemed to appreciate and love me... without the torture. We had so many wonderful moments in our times together. The most memorable was a

rainy day when we took a walk in our neighborhood, singing movie musicals at the top of our lungs.

Joellyn went back to college, and I missed her terribly. So I was excited when I discovered I was going to visit her at college. I remember we listened to YES's entire album, partied, and toured her school. She spoke of how she wanted to be a rabbi, how she was getting into philosophy classes, and that she was really taken by this one professor. By her second year, when I was 17, Joellyn had decided she wanted to be a lawyer, helping prisoners who were treated unfairly. She became quite involved in a famous court case at that time and was under a great deal of stress. She gained weight, her face broke out, and she started carrying a gun. For a white, Jewish girl, that seemed unfathomable. It was too much for my 17-year-old mind to take in. I thought, "Joellyn, what are you doing?" My hero and idol seemed to be in situations that were far beyond what I could imagine, and it scared me.

When I was 18, I spent the summer in New York, studying acting and theater. I was so excited to be away from home. It was an amazing time—hot, humid, new friends, and new romances. It was while there that the phone call came that would forever change my life—a call from my mother. I didn't hear the details because, after the words "something's happened to Joellyn," I dropped to my knees and couldn't hear anything else. It seemed like the worst nightmare, but I was still awake. I made an unconscious decision then: if Joellyn's life was over, then my life was over.

I dreaded the flight home. I sat next to an older woman, and I rambled to her about what had happened to Joellyn. She listened so caringly, and that really helped me. When I saw my parents I saw the shock they were in, too. We just rocked and cried. It was the worst pain I could ever imagine feeling. My best friend and her mom, who happened to be a grief counselor, came over. They were there with us, and they cried and laughed as we recounted the funny memories we had of my Joellyn. Her laugh was like a seal, so unique and infectious. She was charismatic, charming, very intense, and so loved by so many people. Like she did with me, she could capture your heart and soul.



Heather Desurvire

The unthinkable had happened, and it wasn't just that Joellyn had died, but it was also that Joellyn, my sister and friend, had been murdered. It shouldn't have been in the script of our lives. But it was now. I remember feeling the most pain when telling others about her death, but it was in the telling that I was forced to come to grips with what had happened.

A mere three weeks after my sister's death, it was time for me to go off to college, 700 miles away. At the time, no one, not I nor my parents, thought this was a strange or bad idea. In fact, it seemed like the best thing to do: carry on with life, make new friends, start a new chapter. "Heather will be fine, she's always fine, she's so independent." We didn't fully understand the effects of grief, and everyone's focus was on my parents anyway—how "they" were suffering. It escaped everyone, even me, that "I" was suffering too... enormously and that going off to college was not a good idea.

So I started a new college life. I tried to be normal. I made friends, popped popcorn with the girls in the dorm, took classes, and went to parties. I could kind of forget the tragedy of Joellyn's death during the day, but, at night, when it all came rushing back in, I would cry hysterically. I remember one afternoon I was parking my bike in front of class, and a few girls recognized me. They had been campers at a camp my sister and I loved; her as a counselor, and me a camper. They came up to me excitedly and asked how my sister was. It was a shock for them to learn the truth... and for me to tell it.

It was a surreal life. I felt tainted. If I didn't already feel like a black sheep before, now I fully was. During my first few days of school, people in the dorms would ask me where I was from and if I had any brothers or sisters. At the time, I had no filter, so I told them my sister was murdered a few weeks ago. These



Joellyn and Heather

kids just wanted to get acquainted, have some fun, study, and start college. They didn't want to deal with my drama, so they avoided me. It hurt, and my circle of support was getting smaller, so I quickly learned not to talk about "it." Only my roommate and closest confidantes knew the truth.

Without any help in dealing with my grief and sorrow, I found my own methods, and one of those was controlling my weight. I remember my sister telling me that, during the first year of college, it's common to gain the "Freshman 15," so I became careful of snacking. I always thought I was too fat, even though I was only 110 pounds and 5'7". But if I could control my weight, I could control my emotions. Eating disorders are an attempt to control the pain of one's life, and this was certainly my attempt to control the enormous untapped grief I felt about the loss of Joellyn. I no longer had times where I truly laughed or felt joy. I only found that I could lose myself through dancing. It was all I cared about. It was a world where I felt in control.

That summer I was going home to live with my parents in their new home, away from the

pain we felt in the old home where Joellyn and I were raised. I decided I would do a three-week fast where I would really finally get my weight "problem" under control. After all, the next year I was going to UCLA's theater arts program, and there I had to be skinny. I did it! I felt high, happy, and in control. I finally felt skinny enough: 99 pounds. I've heard that anorexia is dying, and bulimia is the mixture of wanting to die and live.

Off to UCLA I went, and, to control the weight, I'd fast for two to three days if I "overate." Thus began my year at UCLA. I tried out for many plays, but never got the roles. I didn't know why then, but I realize now that I had a lackluster aura about me. I lost all interest in everything but controlling my weight. I remember driving around for hours picking up my binge treats—bingeing to find pleasure, then shame, then remorse, and then three days of strict fasting. That was my life.

“Once I started being honest with myself and accepting my feelings, I began to see the possibility of experiencing true joy again.”

During my second semester at UCLA, I found that I couldn't make it through the three days of fasting any longer, which meant that my ability to control the weight through fasting wasn't working. I began bingeing all of the time without any fasting at all. I had lost that control I once had, and my feelings of self-hatred, shame, and remorse were too much to handle. I felt like I was caught on the 10th floor of a burning building, and the

only way out was to jump through a window. So I bought a bottle of aspirin and a bottle of wine. I swallowed and drank it all, not really wanting to die, but definitely not wanting to live. I know now what I really wanted was out of the pain that I had been trying to live with but woefully failing at miserably. No one knew; I didn't know, either. Fortunately, my roommate came home early and took me to the emergency room. My stomach was pumped, and my parents were called. I was so sorry to have put them through that, but, at the time, I felt I had no other solution. I didn't know how to live or be happy again—I had NO tools. After having tried to leave this life of pain behind, there I was—still there, still in deep pain, and still with no idea how to cope with all that had happened.

My parents were worried, scared, and privately angry. They couldn't handle losing me as well. I almost felt that it was my responsibility to live for them, but I wanted to "want" to live for me. I was given a choice: stay in Los Angeles, or move back to the Bay Area and live with my parents. Los Angeles felt sad and lonely, and the Bay Area felt warm and safe.

After moving home, I began seeing Ruth, a therapist who helped me tremendously over the next many years. It was with her that I finally began to experience the grief over the loss of Joellyn, to accept her death, and to accept myself as well. I learned that, when Joellyn died, I became an only child, and I felt that it was now my responsibility to be "everything" to my parents; whereas, before, Joellyn and I shared that responsibility. I also began to feel a little bit of a desire to live. In therapy, I started to honestly grapple with the mixed feelings I had about Joellyn's death, including that I had survivor's guilt. After all,



Heather and Joellyn

why did she die and not me? I believed that she was the “star child,” and now my parents were “stuck” with me. I had to admit to myself that, on the one hand, I would not be controlled by her anymore, and, on the other, I missed loving her and missed her love for me. I can never re-create a relationship like I had with Joellyn, and that is a huge loss. Once I started being honest with myself and accepting my feelings, I began to see the possibility of experiencing true joy again.

Looking back, I can see that my suicide attempt was a scream for help that no one realized I needed. I had extreme grief and sorrow over losing my sister, but no one else realized that, not even me. And once Joellyn died, I then felt tremendous pressure to be “everything” to my parents, which is a huge burden for any sibling to carry.

Over the next few years, I learned some new tools of acceptance and began leading a more normal life, experiencing joy and friendship again. There were times where the stresses of life would become so intense that I would find myself bingeing and purging, and I also noticed that my fear of loss made me afraid to commit to another relationship, so I made it impossible to settle down, but I continued to work on all of those issues with Ruth.

Two years ago, there was an incident that sent me back to the original trauma of losing Joellyn. While driving, I noticed I was being followed, and one of the guys pointed a gun at me and pulled the trigger. Thankfully, the gun was filled with blanks. What had happened to my sister had almost happened to me! I found a wonderful trauma counselor and started a new layer of grieving. I thought, “Why did I experience this? It’s not a common occurrence.” I know the answer now is that it forced me back into therapy where I dealt with an even deeper layer of my grief. I learned that, although I was surviving, I was not thriving. I felt comfortable living alone, seeing friends occasionally, but the only living thing close to me was my cat, Maupiti. In the meantime, most of my friends had gotten married, had children, and bought houses.

My trauma therapist helped me to uncover my feelings about life and death and helped



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me see that I found more solace with the people who had died than people who were alive. This was not only a symptom of my sister dying, but also the fact that my family is not very large, and I wasn’t close with my mom for most of my life. I’ve repaired that relationship with her, leaving behind all bad feelings and only keeping the love and gratefulness. I have chosen to live with and love the people who are here now—to find solace in the fact that they are important to me and in my life here and now.

Even though my sister died, I know that other losses will still happen, and I cannot control when or how. I accept that this is life. I know now that it’s not because I did anything wrong to “create it,” but rather that these things happen. It helps for me to repeat the serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. I choose to live. I still grieve for the loss of Joellyn, and sometimes I still cry for her. I’m sure if you relate to any of my experience, you will always have the feeling of loss, but we learn to live with the loss and still live with joy!

It’s been 30 years since Joellyn died. Although I still feel the pain sometimes, I no longer fight it, and I know, when it’s here, it won’t stay forever. I have grief tools that I learned over time and with outside help. This, too, can happen for you if you let someone know how much you are hurting, get help, and use the tools available through organizations like griefHaven that are there to help you.

I have gained a deep compassion for those who have experienced loss, developed a joy for life, and learned to express my love for the people in my life. I want those of you who have experienced the loss of a sibling to also know that you will feel better, life becomes more worth living, and there are treasures here in life that you have yet to discover that make life worthwhile and meaningful. Your brothers and sisters would only want you to be happy and live life. I can think of no better way to honor the lives of our brothers and sisters than truly living our lives in the best way possible. 🌸

camela markman: loving wife, mother, daughter and sister

by dianne sherry

Cami was born when I was sixteen. I had been an only child, and I'd always wanted a baby sister. I used to hold her and play her Donovan and the Beatles, certain that I was enriching her brand new life. I've always said Cami taught me how to love. Because she was a child, and I was almost old enough to be her mother, our love flowed freely and unconditionally throughout her childhood.

As an adult, Cami became a social worker. She did her master's thesis on the holocaust; specifically, the playgrounds people designed for their children in the concentration camps. She was an avid supporter of charities for children. The night she died she was working on a benefit she was chairing for Westside Children's Center.

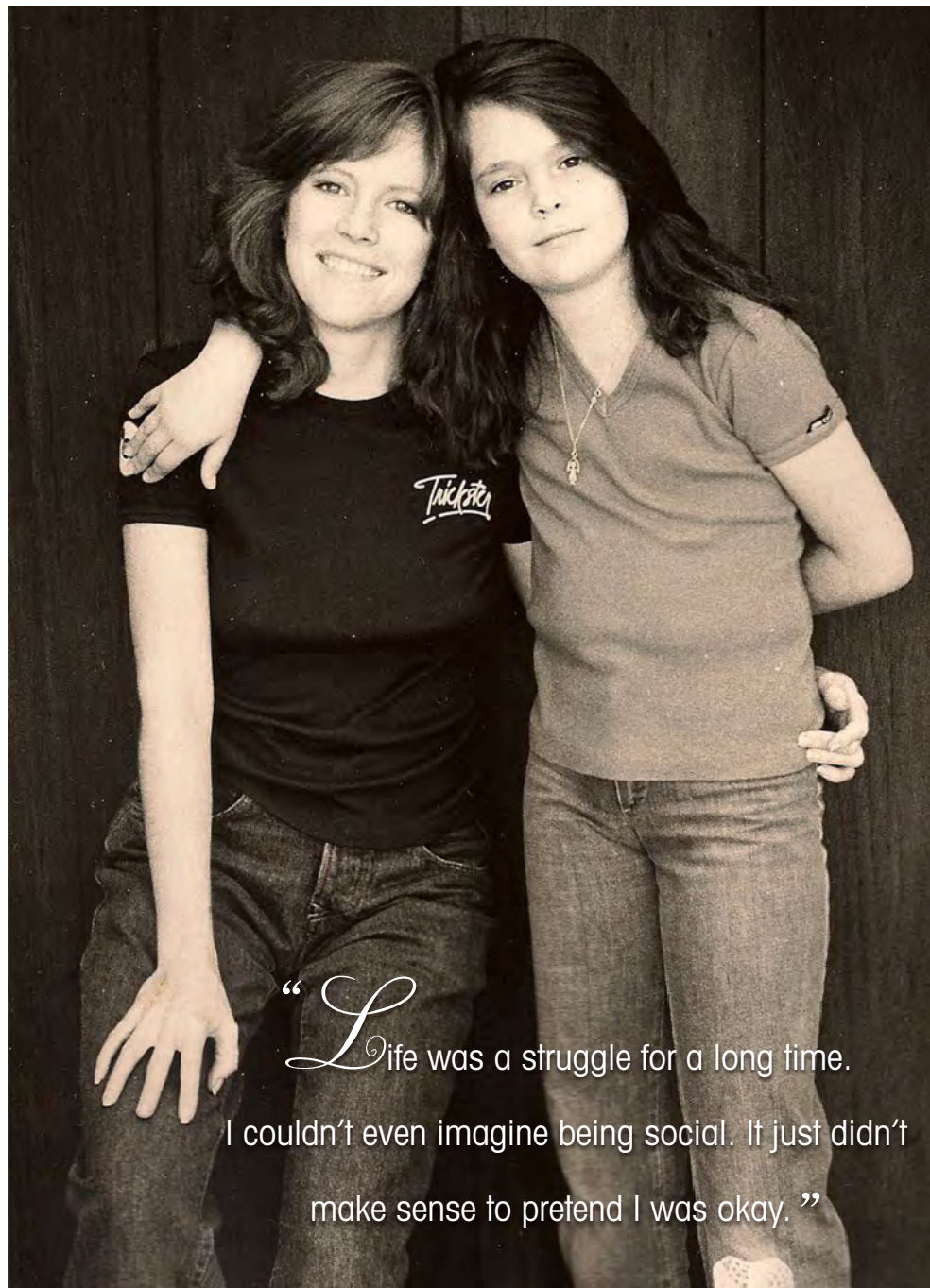
Cami had two children, and what a good mother she was! She was always on the phone making plans for them, keeping in touch with other mothers, and designing their social and academic lives. She studied child rearing intensely and always gave me books on motherhood. One I still have is called *Mitten Strings to God*. She was a wonderful aunt to my daughter Leah, and took care of her when my second child was born.

Whenever Cami would leave town for the weekend with her husband, she would spend hours making a book for her children and leave them a little gift for each day she was gone. It made me so sad after her death to read, "Mommy always comes back."

The last thing in the whole world Cami would have wanted to do was to leave her children. But on Sunday morning, January 4, 2004, my phone rang at nine a.m. "David just called and said Cami died." My mother had a desperate question mark in her voice, like "How could that possibly be?" "What?" I asked simply. "That's all I know." She sounded hollow, distant. "I'll meet you over there," she said.

I threw on some sweats and jumped straight into the car to see what the mistake was. I drove to my sister's house in Pacific Palisades by rote. The streets were totally empty in Santa Monica Canyon, as if everyone were sleeping in. "David just called and said Cami died." I repeated these words over and over in my head.

But it was a normal Sunday morning.



dianne and camela

“Life was a struggle for a long time. I couldn't even imagine being social. It just didn't make sense to pretend I was okay.”

Nothing that bad could have happened. What kind of joke or game or trick or mistake is this anyway? Intellectually, I was drawing a blank. Died, as in dead?

As I arrived on Cami's street, a couple of women jogged by. "See?" I told myself again. "No one goes jogging when someone has died, right?" But as I approached her house I saw the police cars, three of them. My sister's

house. Sunday morning. Police cars.

My sister's father-in-law is there at the front door, nodding his head. Yes, it was true. Cami had died. I tried to make coffee, but I couldn't remember how.

My mother came, insisting to see Cami's body, saying she wouldn't believe it was true if she couldn't see the body. When my mother walked down the stairs, in the arms of

a policeman, she swooned, a cry so primal that it is at once too horrific to remember and too deeply human to forget.

years of goodbye

It was all I could do to get my kids off to school before I went back to bed. I would get through the day however I could and buck up when the children came home from school. I was able to accomplish my duties, somehow. I even finished my master's degree, but frankly, I didn't do a very good job that year. Life was a struggle for a long time. I couldn't even imagine being social. It just didn't make sense to pretend I was okay.

I've seen friends weather the death of children and husbands a lot better than I seemed to. Each one of them had the help of a grief group. I didn't. My deep grief lasted for years and was deemed by my therapist to be "complicated grief." I am sure that all grief is complicated by something, often the nature of the relationship with the deceased.

My grief was complicated by the fact that my sister and I had a complex relationship. First of all, we were siblings, but our age difference was the same as our mother's and mine. Sometimes I felt a parental sense of responsibility, and other times I would relate to her just as a sibling.

In the last few years of her life, we weren't as close as we had been. I attributed this

partially to the fact that she had young children, and we were never alone. I looked forward to a closer relationship as our children got older and we had more time.

But our last real conversation consisted of her expressing an anger that she had been holding onto for years and never told me. Even though I was hurt and shocked, I also felt that this was kind of a breakthrough—the beginning of a deeper relationship.

I'm so grateful for the message she left on my machine a few days later wishing me a Happy New Year and telling me she loved me. I also deeply regret that I didn't return her call soon enough.

ladybug

But, even during the darkest of days, there were times that seemed mystical. A few weeks after my sister died, I finally went to my regular yoga class, a place where I felt safe enough to relax. I did 45 minutes before I felt I had to leave. In the bathroom I wanted to wail, but I sobbed quietly instead.

Next, I went to the lobby and bought *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. As I was paying, a ladybug walked across the counter and crawled up onto my hand.

Delight filled me as the ladybug stayed on my hand through my walk down the street. I didn't even want to cross when the light turned green, preferring to commune with Miss Ladybug. Like a crazy street woman, I spoke gently to my sister, whose spirit I felt for sure was in that ladybug for those few moments.

I ordered multi-grain pancakes and eggs. One meal a day was all I could face. My ladybug friend sat on the napkin as I ate. When I was finished, I offered her my hand. She walked onto it and came with me as I paid the bill, crossed the street, and went into the yoga room to fetch my mat.

Amazed, I showed the guy manning the counter that the ladybug was still on. Once outside again, I attempted to commune with this ladybug on a different plane. She felt so much like a visit from my sister. When I was done speaking with her, she flew away, up into the air, like a kite released, she disappeared.

2011

It is nearly seven years later, and I've finally given my first Christmas party since my sister's death. And I'm also on holiday with the group I call family. Along with my mother and stepfather, it includes my two daughters and my sister's children, Naomi and Noah, and their father David, now remarried to Dianne for five years.

“The loss doesn't get

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Dianne is so in love with the children and takes such good care of them. Seeing the four of them as a family is joyous. Dianne and David have created a happy family, and the children are thriving.

Not that we don't think of Cami. The loss doesn't get lessened. It just gets further away. And new memories get formed, as the old ones gently fade.

We all went horseback riding, and Noah couldn't help but take the lead by galloping down the beach. All those 6 a.m. soccer games Cami drove him to surely paid off, making him one hell of an athlete.

I noticed in the sunshine how very much Naomi, who looks a lot like her mother, also resembles Dianne. And Naomi's crazy about Dianne, who has also become an aunt to my children. I love seeing my daughters, Leah and Natalie, laugh with their cousins.

Life will never be the same without Cami, but my family feels whole again, close again. And for that I am thankful. 🍷



camela

my brother; my friend

by spencer neiman; written november 2008, 13 years after the death of his brother

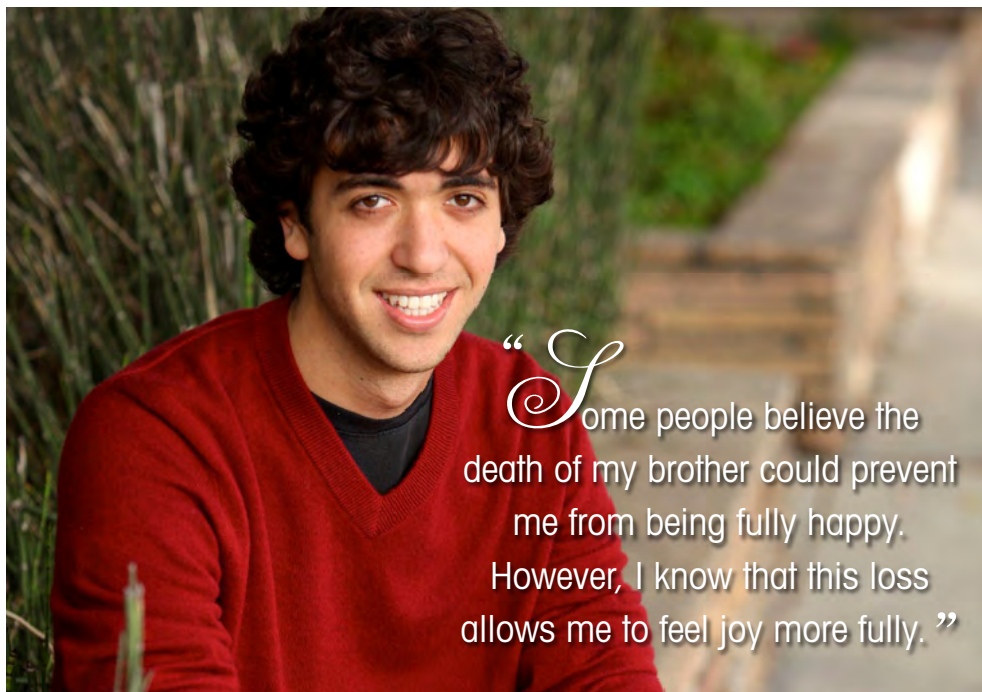
When I was four-years-old, my six-year-old brother, Mitchell, died of a very rare form of cancer. I hate the fact that I have almost no memories of Mitchell or my life until the age of seven. My parents have told me that Mitchell was both an amazing big brother and my best friend. In retrospect, I believe that I subconsciously blocked out this extremely painful time in my life.

Losing my brother and growing up as an only child has changed who I am. Most significantly, it impacted the nature of my relationships. Thinking about it now, I realize that when I was younger, I would not allow myself to become close with people in order to prevent someone else from leaving my life. In high school, however, my loss has made my friendships much more important to me.

Knowing how precarious life is has taught me to never take the people in my life for granted.

Throughout elementary and middle school, I never had close friends and was jealous of kids who did. In high school, I began acting in school plays. This experience helped me connect with other kids on a meaningful level. I was happier than ever before. I loved these friends with an added intensity because this was a new experience for me. However, the problem with caring deeply about other people is that when they hurt, you hurt.

In my sophomore year of high school, my circle of friends became increasingly worried about one of our close friends because of her progressively introverted manner. We discovered that she had been cutting herself obsessively. I spent a lot of emotional energy thinking about her and trying to solve her problem. My parents noticed that I was not my usual happy self. After failed attempts at trying to help her, I realized this problem was too big for us to handle ourselves. While I had promised to keep her secret, and was concerned that breaking her trust could hurt our friendship in a possibly irreparable way, I was afraid of what she might do to herself. I lost my brother, and I was terrified of losing a friend. Standing by and possibly having one of my friends take her life was not an option. Despite some of my other friends' refusals to take actions that would get her help, I told the school counselor. Within a week, she was checked into a hospital. I felt relieved that her safety was no longer my responsibility alone. She was finally being taken care of. After



spencer neiman

“Some people believe the death of my brother could prevent me from being fully happy. However, I know that this loss allows me to feel joy more fully.”

seeking outside help for her, our friendship deteriorated, but recently, we have reconnected on a stronger and deeper level.

Although sophomore year was a difficult time for me, having dealt with this problem helped me become a better friend. Before high school, I had little experience with conflict resolution because I was not close enough with people to help them or be involved in their lives. This experience gave me the confidence to take risks in relationships and trust both my judgment and that true friends will appreciate how deeply I care. My sense of self is strengthened by how much I can help people. Protecting the people

I love is important to me. I may not have super powers to stop my friends from feeling pain, but sharing my love and compassion helps them not feel as alone. My emotional availability helps people trust me; when I share my emotions with friends, they are more likely to share theirs with me. My friends and I provide equal support for each other. While no one will ever take the place of my brother, I expand my heart, and my friends become like my siblings. This is why they are so important to me. They partially fill the void of my missing brother.

Some people believe the death of my brother could prevent me from being fully happy. However, I know that this loss allows me to feel joy more fully. While I feel sadness, there is also extreme joy and happiness in my life. I do not remember enough about Mitchell to miss him personally, but I do miss the idea and relationship of having an older brother. The impact of losing a brother has come full circle. It started by closing me off to others, but now has opened me up to stronger connections and deeper relationships. ❤️



spencer and his brother, mitchell

we would love to hear from you!

Please contact us at griefHaven by email, letter or phone

We would love to hear from siblings of any age who want to contribute to future newsletters or parents whose siblings have expressed an interest in contribution. Here you can share your stories and let us honor your brothers and sisters while also helping so many others like you who will be forever grateful for the loving guidance and hope your stories will provide.

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