

Palisadians Resume Production of Grief Video After Emotional Setback

By ALYSON SENA
Staff Writer

Susan Whitmore's idea to create a video for grieving parents came to her like a crack of light illuminating a dark path. In the depths of her own grief, she would bring meaning to the tragedy of her daughter's death and begin the healing process by helping others like her.

Encouraged by friends and family, Susan and her husband, Wendell, gathered a group of grief specialists, spiritual advisors and parents who had lost a child, for a weekend of filming in their Pacific Palisades home in July 2003. The Palisadian-Post featured a story on the event.

"We relived intimacy and pain," remembers one mother, Palisadian Anne Roberts, who, with her husband, Wayne Neiman, spoke about losing their 6-year-old son, Mitchell. "It took us a while to recover from that weekend."

In the months that followed, the parents anxiously anticipated the final product, which was being edited by a volunteer who had helped direct the project and was also a friend of the departed Erika Whitmore Godwin, Susan's 32-year-old daughter. The video never came to fruition.

Instead, the Whitmores and many of the video participants had to jointly sue the volunteer in order to get the approximately 75 hours of footage returned. The plaintiffs argued that the volunteer "aspired to create a documentary" instead of the proposed one-hour video and, according to the complaint, they were "threatened with having their personal grief exploited for personal, commercial gain."

The plaintiffs included former L.A. mayor Richard Riordan, who lost two of his five children; Marc Klaas, whose daughter Polly was murdered more than a decade ago; Jack Canfield, "Chicken Soup for the Soul" creator; and actress Naomi Watts, who met and developed a close relationship with Susan Whitmore while she was researching for her role as a grieving mother in "21 Grams." All had appeared in the taping for the video.

"It was like having something precious hijacked and held for ransom," said Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben of Kehillat Israel, a longtime friend of the Whitmores and another plaintiff in the case. Reuben was also one of the grief counselors interviewed for the video, part of which was shot at Kehillat.

"Emotionally, it was a huge setback," Wendell Whitmore said. "Susan was not only dealing with the grief of losing Erika but the project that she was doing in Erika's honor. It was salt in the wound."

After almost a year in court, the footage was returned to the plaintiffs, who held a celebration July 9 to thank the devoted lawyers of Liner Yankelevitz Sunshine & Regenstreif for handling the case pro bono. Susan presented attorneys Steven Turnbull and Credence Sol with the Peace of Heart Award for their "generosity of spirit and unwavering support, giving hope to parents throughout the world."

In an emotional speech, Turnbull told the parents, doctors and grief counselors (many of whom he'd never met), "I feel like I know a lot of you because I know something about your personal histories...You're the real heroes." He added that "as lawyers, we so seldom get to do something that's so meaningful."

Turnbull told the Palisadian-Post that "it was the kind of case I would go to sleep thinking about and wake up thinking about."

Ultimately, the plaintiffs did have to give the volunteer some money and video credit, but they regained control of the project, which is currently being edited. "I feel satisfied that the foundation can move on with the video," Turnbull said.

Many of the parents present at the "thank you" dinner expressed gratitude for the lawyers' work and relief that the tapes had been returned.

"I was very nervous that I was going to see myself on national television," said Jennifer Woolf, whose son, Zack, died of a rare liver and kidney disease at age 11 months. "I don't want to make a Hollywood creation out of my grief."

Woolf and her husband, Graham, said that being interviewed for the video was hard for them because it was so personal and close to the heart. "I never knew that it was going to set me back to square one," Jennifer said about the experience. "It had been three years [since Zack died] and it still felt like it was yesterday."

They are confident that the video, "Portraits of Grief: Badges of Courage," will help people who don't have access to or won't go to a support group. This was Susan Whitmore's original intention, that "in the comfort, safety and privacy of their own homes, parents could watch this timeless piece of hope."

"Susan is so compassionate about her vision, that's going to help a lot of people," said Dr. Roger Dafer, a psychologist who specializes in grief therapy. He explained that when people who have lost a child talk about it with other parents who have experienced the same loss, it resonates with those parents.

Susan knows this from her own experience. She said when Erika died of a rare sinus cancer in May 2002, the pain made it almost unbearable to live. "It was all I could do to just breathe. I was longing for someone I could just talk to, someone who had gone down the path of grief ahead of me."

Less than two weeks later, she was sitting in the Michel International beauty salon on Swarthmore when Anne Roberts walked by, saw the look on Susan's face and went in to introduce herself. "I knew the look of grief," Roberts explained. "It's like a club we belong to that no parent has ever wanted to join."

Susan was disappointed in the lack of comprehensive, easy-to-access resources available to grieving parents and, in an effort to turn her own grief into healing, started The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation and its compassionate Web site, griefHaven, in the fall of 2002. The site (www.griefHaven.org) provides a place where parents can honor their children and access links to support groups and organizations, books, music and poetry.

"You want your child to be kept alive in memory," said Roberts, whose son's picture is on the Web site. "When I help other people, it's a legacy to my son."

Dr. Judith Ford, who was Erika's palliative care doctor at UCLA, said she often guides grieving families to the Web site because she knows that Susan is a huge resource. "I'm just so truly proud of what she's doing."

Rev. James Putney, an oncology chaplain at UCLA who also worked intimately with the Whitmores, said that in spite of the emotional setback with the video footage, he believes it will be an even stronger, more challenging project now.

Susan agrees. During a follow-up interview in her home, she said, "As I've grown in my grief process in the last two years, the vision is still there but it has taken on a different bent for me because I'm at a point where I'm actually having fun—sometimes—I can see a glimmer of light." The people who talked about their own experiences losing a child and those experts who appear in the video gave her hope.

She sees the goal of the video as threefold: (1) to give parents who have lost a child the knowledge that they're not alone, that their feelings and thoughts have been felt by others and it will get better with time; (2) to educate the public at large on what parents who lose a child go through and what they can do to help these parents survive loss; and (3) to be used as an educational tool for medical staff in hospitals.

"What goes with the loss of a child is your meaning and purpose in life," Susan said. "It's really about hope. When your child dies, you're hopeless. You never get over it, but you will go on."

"Portraits of Grief: Badges of Courage" is scheduled to be completed by the end of this year. Contact The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation at 459-1789.



Susan Whitmore, president of The Erika Whitmore Godwin Foundation, with (left to right) attorney Steven Turnbull, Turnbull's domestic partner Stephen Moore, and Wendell Whitmore, vice president of the foundation.

Photo: Chris Brown



Susan and Wendell Whitmore (standing) with Dr. Judith Ford and Chaplain James Putney at the July 9 "thank you" dinner.