



M.I.S.S.ing Angels

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A Sanctuary for Bereaved Families

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A Year Ago: Casey's Story

Rhonda Overacker

A year ago, I gave birth via emergency c-section to my firstborn child, a beautiful baby boy, 1 lb 4 and a half ounces, 11 and a half inches long, with his daddy's blue eyes and flat feet, and my chin and fingers. He was perfectly formed, right down to the tiny fingernails and eyelashes that simply amazed me.

Casey James...born too soon at just barely 28 weeks along, my pregnancy had been perfect. It seems as incomprehensible to me today as it did on the day we learned he was going to join us in this world. How could this have happened to us? I remember so clearly the first moment that I saw him... laying on his warming bed...so small, so beautiful. I knew that night that he would not be one of the "miracle babies" that everyone talks about.

The part I feel so bad about is that for months beforehand, I had struggled with the idea of being totally responsible for another human being, wondered if I was really ready to give up so many of my own personal freedoms and give over my time and energy and heart to this little stranger who bruised the insides of my ribs with his kicks and kept me up all night with heartburn. I loved my baby, and looked for-

ward to motherhood, but still had that nagging doubt inside of me, and secretly wondered if I hadn't made some terrible mistake. But as soon as I saw him laying there, and I held my baby, my son, in my arms I knew beyond any doubt that I would give anything, do anything to protect this boy for the rest of his life. I couldn't protect him in the safest place in the world, and when I finally realized how ready I was for him, he was already gone. The bitter irony of that moment will live inside me forever. My son broke my heart open to a love more primal and fierce than I could ever have imagined, and a grief so overwhelming I thought it would swallow me whole.

A year later, I still don't have the words to describe the time that followed, the mind-shattering pain that stretched a day into eternity. The terrifying rage that could overtake me at any minute and the prayer I said each night, "Please God, don't let me wake up in the morning." I was slowly learning how to walk through the world and function and smile while I wept ceaselessly inside. Anyone who has lost a child knows exactly what I mean without me saying it, and no one who hasn't can begin to imagine it no

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Take Note:

- New MISS Chapters are forming now! See page 23 for Chapter information.
- See Safe Arrivals on Page 18
- **2nd Annual Children's Memorial Golf Tournament now scheduled for September at Troon! See inside for more details!**

A Year Ago *(continued from cover)*

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matter how many words I use. It was the darkest place I have ever been.

A year later, I am slowly re-entering the light. The pain of my son's death is less stabbing, and the memories of his life more (bitter)sweet. Grief attacks flatten me less often, and I can go weeks without tears. I am, impossible as it once seemed, healing, and can even see a time when losing Casey is less of a life-stopping tragedy and more a painful part of the story of my life. I even have another much-loved baby boy squirming in my belly, who kicks me awake at night and helps sustain my hope for the future. But nothing will ever erase the death of my first son, and no future child will ever replace him. The death of a child means the death of a part of your soul, and the loss is as eternal as the tomb. Even when I laugh, and mean it, a place in my heart is always crying, and at the center of even the sweetest joy, there will always be that small, aching emptiness of what should have been.

A year ago...I did not think that I could survive the death of my son, and there were many times when I did not want to. Survive I have, but certainly not through my strength alone. Never in my life have I needed my friends and family more, or relied more upon the strength and love of others to carry me through the difficult times.

So for Casey's first birthday, I want to take the time not only to remember him, but also to acknowledge the many people I am grateful to for making sure I made it through this year. I am grateful, first and foremost, for my wonderful husband, without whom I know I would not have made it. You are, as always, the rock that gets me through...the other half of who I am. Thank you for the tremendous courage you have shown in openly grieving for our son, and for being strong enough to share your weaknesses with me. I am grateful for my loving family, who have never forgotten Casey James or hurried my grief and who have proven in word and deed that they will always remember my son. Knowing that you will always include Casey as the member of the family that he brings me more comfort than I can say. I am grateful for the nurses and doctors who worked so hard to make Casey's life a beautiful memory for us, and who have shown such compassion and sensitivity throughout this subsequent pregnancy.

I am grateful for the friends, old and new, who have been there for me in countless ways. You have allowed me time and space, accepting both my tears and laughter, and most of all, always being willing to talk about my son. I'm just sorry that it has taken such a tragedy to make me recognize what a rich blessing you are in my life.

I am extremely grateful for the

wonderful women at MISS who have become my lifeline through some of the most difficult days, who listened to my pain, and shared their own with me. Even when I wasn't posting much, just knowing that you were always there if I needed you gave me the strength to get through. Thank you for sharing the burden of this pain, and for always reminding me that I wasn't alone. I am grateful, too, for the women in real life who shared their own similar losses with me. And I have to give special thanks to Kelly, Jenny and Christi, who understand so well how we can laugh our way through our heartache. I love you.

I am grateful for everyone who has given me so much support this year. You may never realize how much your kind word, card, hug, or prayer meant to me, but I will always remember it. I can never repay your kindness.

And most of all, I am grateful to my son, Casey James, who taught me more about life and love and loss in the seven short days that I held him than I had learned in the 28 years before that. The joy of holding you in my arms far outweighs the pain of losing you, and I will never regret having you in my life. No matter how many children I have, you will always be my firstborn, the boy who made me a mother. I miss you, sweet baby boy, and will carry you in my heart, forever.

Mommy

Surrounded by Life

Nancy Grayson



Nancy Grayson (Left) and Michele Beaudry
at the Passages 2002 Conference

A newly bereaved mother asked me, "How can you stand to be surrounded by death each day?" She wondered how anyone would work daily with

the families that have had a baby die. My answer to her was simple, "Because someone was there for us when Joel died."

After much thought and reflection, the inspirational hospice work of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross comes to my mind. Labeled by some as the "death and dying" doctor, to me Dr. Kubler-Ross is the living and dying well doctor. Indirectly, she gave my husband and me the courage to take Joel home under hospice care. We are thankful to Dr. Kubler-Ross, for her tenacity, teachings, respect of life and forever grateful to her for the gift of memories and comfort in the face of death. Elisabeth, we wish you love and peace.

How and why do we work daily in this world of babies dying of disease, accidents and all too often medical reasons that cannot be explained or understood. Yes there is death, it comes with living, ideally after a long and well lived life. We do believe, however, that our love does transcend death. With each obituary read and call made, I think of the life of that child. I think of the tiny life that was and will forever be - a precious child. "A person is a person, No matter how small." - how true, dear Dr. Sues!

Being a volunteer M.I.S.S. Foundation coordinator and facilitator is not working with death. It is the

work of honoring and remembering the life of a child, who is someone's baby, a daughter or son. Perhaps this baby is a sister or brother to a hurting and grieving child and a much loved and now missed grandchild.

Several funeral directors know me on a first name basis. I daily scan the obituaries for children gone too soon. I speak before medical groups in hopes they will refer their patients to our support group. We are most grateful for and humbled by the loving team of M.I.S.S. volunteers and the many people in our community that help us reach out to bereaved families.

There are, however, days I simply sit at my desk not knowing where and how to begin. There are so many families touched by this permanent heart break, a deep grief and tormenting sadness to deal with. How I wish no one ever knew this level of grief. We hope our service to others and the remembrance of our son, is an example to our community to support bereaved families and remember the children. As my husband and I have found the joy in our son's life, I pray that other parents will find the joy in their child's life.

Nancy & Peter Grayson, facilitate and coordinate for The MISS Foundation Idaho, MISS group: Children of HOPE & The Compassionate Friends. Volunteer with March of Dimes and coordinate the Worldwide Candle Lighting on Children's Memorial Day. Boise, Idaho. In memory of Joel Albert Grayson Aug. 27 - Oct. 8 1999 and our two miscarried babies Drew Janan and Jess Asher, 2000. Precious Lord, thank you for our children and your promises.

***It is always the right time
To do the right thing...***

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

A Weekend in the Life of a Bereaved Mother

by Kara L.C. Jones

This year's conference was held on May 23-25 at the Scottsdale Paradise Valley Resort in Scottsdale, AZ. This time I attended the conference as a bereaved parent and as a professional presenter hosting a workshop for others. And instead of attending with my husband like I normally would, I met my mom (a bereaved nanna) at the conference.

It's very difficult to have such an amazing and overwhelming experience that lasts for three full days, and then come back and try to explain in mere words what that was like for me. But I learned so much and my heart was touched by so many bereaved parents,



Dr Guillermo Gutierrez, MISS Board Member, presents his workshop that was truly a spiritual experience for all

professional care givers, and the spirits of so many dead children, that I cannot let it go and drop the ball on sharing this experience with you.

The most stunning presentation I saw there was one given by Dr. Guillermo Gutierrez. This session was titled "The Caring Physician: Reconnecting Your Power." Now if you've read my works before, you know I have no great love of health care providers. Dr. Gutierrez has a good reputation, and many parents have told me they had wonderful experiences in his care. But when I saw the title of his session, I imagined a bunch of professionals reconnecting to their power over us poor, bereaved par-

ents (said with much sarcasm). I wasn't going to this session.

Then I ran into Joanne (Founder of MISS) just before Dr. Gutierrez started his session. She insisted that I attend. She told me I "had to" and that I wouldn't be sorry if I would just go and hear him. Jo is one of my mentors. I love her to the bottom of my heart, and I generally don't question her because she has been an amazing guide for me. I went to Dr. Gutierrez's session.

W-O-W-!!!!!!!

Dr. Gutierrez's son Nico was killed in an accident on Thanksgiving 2001. His entire presentation was about honoring the connections that bereaved parents continue to have with their children after their children have died! What?! I was in shock as he presented his session, offering us proof of his continued connections to Nico. He said that obviously he'd rather have his son back, but now that Nico has died, he knows he has a mission to make other professionals aware of these connections between bereaved parents and their dead children. His mission is to make professionals aware of how to honor the parents in their care!!! WOW!

He presented a myriad of events that have happened since Nico's death. At first he thought he could understand them as "coincidences," but then he had typed up a program for the memorial service. This program was comprised of excerpts from Nico's diaries. Dr. Gutierrez was going to translate the program into French and Spanish as well, but he wasn't sure it was right. So he asked Nico to send a white dove to him if the program was okay as it.

This is Arizona in January 2002. So a while after he put that request out into the Universe, his other son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild came over to his house. He told them about his request of Nico. They went about fixing



Karen Crofford, Angela Iverson, and Tara Marino give a standing ovation to Dr. Gutierrez

their car in his garage.

So there he is in January, standing in his garage, holding his grand-

baby, his son and daughter with their heads in the car fixing it, and he looks out to the street in front of his house. Yep. A white dove in the middle of the street. Just sitting there looking at him. He taps his kids on their shoulders, and they look. Someone runs for the camera. They take 8 photos of it, several of which include the bird and his daughter-in-law and grandbaby.

He had at least 30 other stories like this. I was encouraged to try this theory out myself. It used to work for me, but I hadn't paid much attention in ages. I put out a request and told my son Dakota that I needed to see his name in writing, in all capital letters like I had once seen it written in the snow, and *not* in reference to the conference nor to the states of North or South Dakota. Several days later a friend sent me a link to a Rumi website. I surfed there, then surfed their links to other Rumi websites. Then I came across and interesting one and decided to see who ran that site. In the owner's bio, there was a listing for a short film he is working on called "DAKOTA" -- all caps. Every care giver on the planet should meet and hear Dr. Gutierrez.

There were many other sessions at the MISS Conference, too. Abby Garcia ran a very interesting session about "gender differences in grief" and again if you have read any of my stuff before, I am not a fan of segregation in the bereavement world. So I attended with somewhat of an attitude. But Gar-

cia proved to be very insightful and open-minded. She was saying that we have to start looking at how *people* grieve differently and help them from wherever they are...I raised my hand and asked if I could play devil's advocate. She said that was fine. I asked how we can ever start looking at how *people* grieve differently when she was still offering lists based on the segregation of gender. I asked how these lists would apply to same sex couples enduring the death of a child.

She said that with same sex couples, you have to delve into the relationship first and see what roles the partners have carved out for themselves in that relationship. Then, she said, you work from wherever the partners are individually in relation to each other and in reference to their grief. I countered that this might just be the model that we should

all be using to work with bereaved people in heterosexual couples or single parenting situations. She said that just might be right, and she was very conscious during the rest of her presentation to talk about differences between *people* rather than "men" vs "women."

It was wonderful to have an exchange like this with a professional who is open to the flaws of the current support system and who is willing to look at new ideas for correcting those flaws and consequently offering better assistance to those in need. Bravo, Abby!!!

I'll share one other amazing experience. Dr. John DeFrain, author of "Stillborn: The Invisible Death" and "How Strong Families Endure the Death of Their Child," was a FAB speaker and most sensitive professional! He came to the front of the room, showed us a bunch of pages he

had typed up to read as his presentation, then tossed the papers over his shoulder. He said he wanted to learn from the bereaved parents in the audience instead. He presented 10 ques-



Dr. John DeFrain comforts an attendee

tions and proceeded to facilitate an inclusive, moving, overwhelming, room-wide discussion. He shared his experiences along the way, and he was open-hearted and open-minded about everything the bereaved parents in the room had to offer. I believe this kind of presentation had the most impact on the professionals in attendance that session.

They were forced out of their "15-minute" physician consults, or the EMT "emergency" situations, or the focus on paperwork that case workers normally have. They sat for an hour and a half and *listened* to bereaved parents about the long term effects of grief after the death of a child. It became real, and even safe for them to remove some of that thick skin...

That day, that session, Dr. John DeFrain made a significant contribution toward offering better support for care givers and parents. I cannot thank him enough.



Kara and Joanne

Joanne Cacciatore (Founder of MISS) held an amazing all-day session on "The Power of Compassion: A Phenomenological Approach to Child Death" on that Thursday. This is my second time attending this CE course. She's amazing and right-on in her presentations. She shared part of an upcoming PBS show called "Losing Layla" a documentary

by Vanessa Gorman. This should be mandatory viewing for care givers, family, friends, potential parents all over the freaking world.

I did purchase the manual that maps this CE course. I've put the buzz in Jo's ear that I really want to turn this into an online certification course for her. My feeling is that there are parents and professionals who cannot get to AZ, but who would take the online class. And Jo would be a dynamic online facilitator given the tech tools needed to make that happen. Hopefully, I'll be writing soon to let you all know how you can get this training, too.

There was much more. I enjoyed teaching my Creative Healing class tremendously. The parents and poets in that session shared so much. In particular, my mom wrote a piece for my dead son Dakota.

My mom and I had a wonderful connection there. We did enjoy the pool and sunshine, too. But it was most moving to share this grief conference with her. To that end, I want to honor her love and care and sensitivity and her own grief over the death of her grandson by publishing her poem here. Thanks Nanna-Memoo for being with me at this year's MISS Conference!

*I sit among rocks
visions of Kota in
hummers sipping from flowers
in the garden
heat, sand, wind
surrounding a cactus
resembles a grandson
sitting & watching
I dream of could have been
sharing awareness of the
desert around us
Keeping an eye out for
scorpions, snakes that
Nanna fears*

-poem by Dakota's Nanna-Memoo

A Photo Journal of our Conference



Angela Iverson and her Mother



The Castellanos Family



Sgt Force teaches with his heart



Kim St. Laurent and her Mother



Children learned sign language



Katie giving manicure to Anna Kennedy



Kyle Brooks lights a candle for Stephanie



Phoenix Fire Dept and our Children



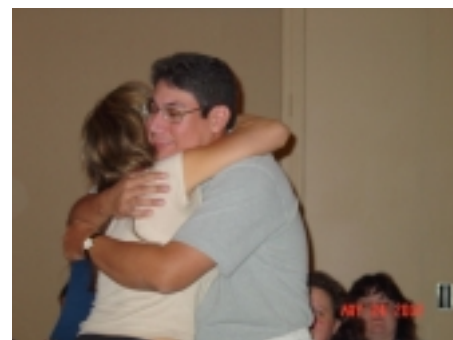
Kara Jones and Debra Brooks setting up



Music therapist, Persephone Dimson, with children at the grief retreat



Heather Farrier, Connecticut Facilitator and Alisa Detwiler, California Facilitator



A tearful moment for Steve Cunningham, as he remembers Abby

Integrity is when you do the right thing even when no one is watching...