

Survivors After Suicide

YOUR PATH TOWARD HEALING

A Program of Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center • October/November/December 2007 • Volume 20, No. 3 • Published Quarterly

A Banner Year for Didi Hirsch's Alive & Running for Suicide Prevention 5K/10K

Instead of spending a quiet Sunday morning relaxing or sleeping in, more than 4,000 people chose to come out at the crack of dawn on Sunday, Sept. 30, 2007 to walk, run, volunteer and, most importantly, raise awareness for suicide prevention.

Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center's *Alive & Running for Suicide Prevention 5K/10K* brought together people from all walks of life - from young children and expert runners, to entire families and volunteers from across Los Angeles. Participants also included runners from Students Run Los Angeles (SRLA), an after-school intervention program, which joined our race for the third year. SRLA provides training and mentoring to prepare thousands of middle and high schoolers to complete the Los Angeles Marathon.

This year's event called attention to the devastating impact of suicide in our community.

"Each year, more people die by suicide than by AIDS in the U.S.," said Didi Hirsch President/CEO Kita Curry, Ph.D. "Yet few people are aware of this and even fewer know that free crisis services are available." Didi Hirsch's Suicide Prevention Center operates Los Angeles County's only 24-hour suicide prevention crisis line for people of all ages at risk of suicide.

For many on hand during race morning, it was a day to honor and remember loved ones lost to suicide. Survivors memorialized their loved ones through banners, unique shirts and bibs while also sharing personal stories so that others who might be hurting can get the help they need.

In addition to raising awareness, the annual walk/run also raised crucial funds needed to support Didi Hirsch's suicide prevention programs. Participants asked friends and family to sponsor them and several local corporate partners gener-

ously contributed as event sponsors. As a result of their generosity, we will be able to provide critical care on our 24-hour crisis line, support for those who have a lost a loved one to suicide, and suicide prevention outreach in our community.

Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center thanks the following sponsors for their support: Beacon Capital Partners, Macquarie Foundation, Leslie and Steven Carlson, Vera Jashni, Ed.D., Janine and Henry Lichstein, Means-Knaus Partners, Northern Trust, Wyeth, Cheri Renfroe Yousem and Martin W. Greenwald, and several generous anonymous donors.

Thank you also to our wonderful volunteers and runners, especially race committee chair Howard Loeb and the race committee, who helped make this year's race such a success.

Rachel's Upside Down Heart

Eileen Douglas, partner and co-founder of Douglas/Steinman Productions, an independent film production company, broadcast journalist, author, and survivor, has written a critically-acclaimed children's book about the grieving process, "Rachel and the Upside Down Heart." The book is the touching true story of a little girl whose father dies and is based on the death of Douglas' husband, Jeff, and the sense of loss experienced by their then four-year-old daughter, Rachel. Rachel Zients Schinderman will be the featured speaker at the SAS Winter Potluck and will share her mother's wonderful book.

Eileen's journey began on November 3, 1975 when she and her daughter Rachel came home to find that her husband Jeff had committed suicide. She relates those early days:

That night the neighbors took her (Rachel)

in. I told myself I would tell her in the morning. But in the morning, we needed to fly back East for the funeral. I put it off, thinking I would tell her at the airport. But at the airport, I couldn't. Settling into our seats on the plane, she asked me Where's Daddy? And the only words that came out of my mouth were Daddy's with himself. I'll tell her, when we land, I thought. But when we landed, I couldn't do it either. In the car, on the way to his parents' house, I put it off again. Finally, passing a park near the house (a house I knew would be packed with mourning family), we pulled over...Holding her under the biggest, greenest tree, I told her Daddy got broken. He's someplace now where he can't come back. Not ever. I wanted her to know that Daddy was broken. He can't come back and this was not her doing. She cried. The deed was done.

That night, as we lay in the dark, past midnight, not sleeping, she asked again, Where's Daddy? As if she'd never heard. Telling her once was not enough. I told her again. So began our life together as just the two of us...

We didn't stop talking about him. I didn't hide what happened from her. As she grew older, Daddy got broken, his head didn't work because Daddy took his own life, he was troubled. I didn't pretend to

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Save the Date!

December 1, 2007
SAS WINTER POTLUCK

"Words that Comfort, Words that Heal"

See Calendar of Events on page 2

Survivors After Suicide (SAS) helps people resolve their grief and pain in their own personal way, and helps them move forward in their lives, positively and productively.



Stay Connected

By Rick Mogil, SAS Coordinator

Spring has sprung, summer has waned, and fall is here. There is a coolness in the air. Well, maybe not in Los Angeles where it is climbing back up to 85 degrees (just remember this was written in October - it should be much colder in November, only around 82 degrees). You know what I mean. Old Man Winter is hovering just around the corner and I can already feel his frosty breath on my neck. The holidays are almost upon us, which is an apt description as they do seem to leap upon our fragile defenses when we are struggling to make sense of our loved one's empty seat at the table.

But, we need not face this alone. There are four monthly groups in Los Angeles that provide a safe, comforting haven (West Los Angeles, South Bay, San Gabriel Valley and San Fernando Valley). There are the phone numbers written on scraps of paper hidden in pockets, wallets and purses, of other survivors we have met on our journey, that we can call. There is the Suicide Prevention Center Crisis Line (1-877-727-4747). And, yes, we can even call other family members and friends who probably have an empty space at their table or in their heart. My wish for you this holiday season is to:

Stay connected | Reach out with love and for love | Accept what cannot be changed | Fight for what can be changed | Be safe

Peace and love,
Rick

Upside Down Heart

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be okay when I wasn't. We were always open, honest and real. Not everything has to go smoothly for a child to grow. They grow also from facing difficulties. Seeing you face yours. Knowing they can face theirs.

From her own journey, Eileen gives us "Rachel and the Upside Down Heart," a "tender, well-crafted story about grief and growth" (Children's Literature Journal). Donna Schurman, Executive Director of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children, says, "As a person in the field of death and dying, specializing in children's grief issues, and with...years of experience with thousands of children through the Dougy Center for Grieving Children, I can attest to the value of the book, its content, illustration and depth. It raises important issues in ways children can relate to, and provides a helpful framework for helping a child cope with a death."

Join us on December 1 at the SAS Winter Potluck to hear Rachel and others share "Words of Comfort, Words that Heal."

Calendar of Events

**Annual National Survivors of Suicide Day
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention**
November 17, 2007 at UCLA
For more information, visit www.afsp.org

**SAS Holiday Potluck
Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center**
December 1, 2007
For more information, call Patricia Serrano: (310) 895-2304

Worldwide Candle Lighting
December 9, 2007
For more information, visit www.thecompassionatefriends.org

Alive & Running was a great success for SAS. Thank you for your support. A very special thank you to our booth volunteers: Gittel Boxall, Ester Bryant, David Davis, Nina and Jamie Gutin, and Jeff Schachner.

Words of Comfort, Words that Heal

December 1, 2007 | 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

at Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center
4760 South Sepulveda Boulevard
Culver City, CA 90230

Our Winter Potluck is close at hand. It comes at a time when we hold dear the memories of families celebrating the holidays together, of our loved ones sharing and laughing with us. However our holiday was experienced, there is now an empty place in our heart and at our table.

Those first hours, days, weeks and months of "how can I ever survive this?" have passed and we are at another moment of "I wish they were here!" We have survived many such moments, sometimes by the grace of someone's written word.

We would like you to share what you have read that has given you comfort and hope on your journey, or has helped heal some of the wounds to your heart. They can be from a favorite book (a paragraph or two, a poem, a soliloquy), an article, a song lyric or quote. You will have up to five minutes, time allowing, to read your selection.

Please let us know if you would like to participate in the readings and the type of dish you will be bringing that will serve six people.

R.S.V.P. by November 23, 2007 to:

**Patricia Serrano
Phone: (310) 895-2304
Email: pserrano@didihirsch.org**

A Five Year Journey

By Marilyn Nobori

As part of the Summer Potluck panel, I was asked to speak about where I am now and how I got here. Here is my story.

THE BEGINNING

My journey began four and a half years ago when I came home to find my only child, my 14-year-old daughter, Catherine Aiko Nobori, had committed suicide. Many of you have walked in grief, you know the emptiness of “What do I do now?” and the waiting for death to claim me because there could never be joy again. In my case, I was fractured. I described it as being split in two—one life talking to people, making arrangements no matter how slowly or disjointed. The other life was pure pain, sorrow and despair. I bounced back and forth between these lives at the sound of a song or a flash of a memory. There was a hole in my heart that would never heal.

WHERE AM I NOW?

I’m facilitating in several bereavement programs, retired, filling my days with volunteer activities, thinking about returning to school, still trying to decide what I will do with the rest of my life. Every day I miss my daughter, and that hole in my heart has not gone away. In January, as I started my fifth year without her, I was thinking I could go through those last two boxes of clothes, I could give away her collection of Pokemon figures, Yugio cards and Anime manga and movies. Maybe this would be the last year I would take altar flowers for her memorial and birthday. I had turned another corner on my journey.

Then in April, I began to feel disoriented again, unfocused, agitated. There were flashbacks and extended periods of crying. What was happening? I remembered that in group I often talk about our grief being like an onion. I had reach a point where another layer of the onion skin could be peeled away, and I could look at these events from a different perspective. Once I had labeled what was happening, I could go though the experience, knowing I could come through the pain with new knowledge of myself and the events. I could embrace the experience instead of running from it in fear. I could incorporate it into my story, my journey.

HOW DID I GET HERE?

By the grace of God! Looking back, there were many gifts put in my path. Of course, I had to choose to see and accept the gifts, but they were there, even if I did not recognize them until later. In fact, they often felt like trials.

My husband’s wisdom: My husband is an extremely private person. But, in those first days, he had the wisdom to say, “There is no shame in how Aiko died.” So, from the beginning we choose to be open about her suicide. It was a hard gift because inevitably the “why” question would be raised. There was no satisfying answer even though she had left a manuscript and letter. As I was prompted to search for an answer, I eventually realized I wasn’t asking why, but I wanted a different timeline. With that realization I began to make peace with the reality of her death.

Family and friends: From the moment I found my daughter, family and friends have been there. At the beginning, just sitting with me in silence, and later probing beyond the “I’m fine” response. They insisted that I be honest about how I was doing so I began to respond with “Today’s hard,” “Right now I’m okay.” and “I miss her.” They brought meals and companionship, gave me the number to SAS and books. Most of all, they helped me be comfortable with the tears whenever and wherever they came—in the middle of a hymn at worship or the middle of a sentence.

My community: Our church community is very supportive—insulating us from the stigma of suicide, walking with us, embracing the tears, sharing memories and their sense of loss openly long after the memorial service. As a community, we explored this unknown called suicide as we heard speakers from SPC’s outreach. But, there were too many memories and with it pain. The sense of loss when Aiko’s classmates graduated high school and went off to college last year was overwhelming. This year, my full participation in our church bazaar is what triggered my subsequent temporary upsurge of grief (STUG) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) episode. This is an event we used to do together and I haven’t done fully since her death. The instinct is to run away and avoid the pain but the history goes back four generations and holds me fast. It is a nurturing community that allows me space to grieve and memorialize my

daughter. Every year, they are the foundation for Aiko’s Team at the *Alive & Running for Suicide Prevention 5K/10K*.

My individual therapist: There was a dark scary place to my grief - a place I was afraid to explore. I felt if I allowed the despair to be released, I might not be rid of it. Finding a therapist who understood the emotions of a survivor offered me a lifeline back. I was able to explore those dark places and feel safe I would not be lost.

Support groups: I found several support groups, but the Mothers’ Group was a place that changed my guilt into regret. Because of the pain, I often did not want to go. But, as I sat with the guilt of “if only”—I knew about the warning signs of suicide, got her into therapy or on medication, listened to my instincts instead of whoever. I listened to their stories—they had done everything I felt could have saved my daughter and their stories still included a suicide. They felt as guilty as I did. Slowly, I began to forgive myself and others for being human. We act based on what we know at the time. That is the best we can do. We often feel like we should be able to know and control everything, but we can’t. With this lesson in humility, forgiveness is possible.

Journaling: Shortly after my daughter’s death, a church member left two spiral bound notebooks on my doorstep. It took me several months to begin writing, but as my entries become more frequent, they became directed at my daughter. “You didn’t wait to get the first issue of the anime magazine,” “I’m so sorry you felt so alone,” or “Your friends are graduating and going to college.” Journaling let me put my thoughts outside my mind so I could examine them instead of just ruminating. It allowed me time each day to talk to my daughter and a time to cry.

Spirituality: Each moment was “one foot in front of the other.” This was not moving on— it was simply steps without direction. Sometimes I’d sit in front of the computer, not sure what I was doing. Did I just finish or was I about to start something? Which way was forward? I could not think beyond the moment, could not imagine an hour from now let alone this afternoon, tomorrow or next week. But, somewhere in the foundation of my soul was a little light that offered hope.

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Contributions
July 1, 2007 to October 31, 2007
A million thanks for your generosity!

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Happy Anniversary

By Ann Ellertson

Today would have been our tenth anniversary. On our seventh anniversary, Jon and I left our 14-month-old twins with my parents for the first night ever. We went to the Marriott Hotel in Long Beach and celebrated with a beautiful dinner and some much needed time together. The uninterrupted sleep only added to the romance, as we hadn't seen much of that in 14 months!

Less than one week later Jon hung himself in our back yard. The memory of that day relives itself in my mind like an old *I Love Lucy* episode. As in those episodes, I know every line, every facial expression and exactly what she and Ethel were wearing.

I watched Jon mentally deteriorate after our daughter, Sophie, was stillborn in 2000. This happened following years of infertility and at 37 weeks. Needless to

say, we were devastated. He was my rock for the first six months, and then it went downhill from there. I saw this once kind and loving man become someone that he despised. I believe that was the battle going on in his head. The hardest part, and the part which makes me the angriest, is the lack of resources for those of us left standing. The resources that are out there require so much investigating to find, and are often inadequate and expensive. I remember driving on the 405 during rush hour traffic. Jon had been missing for a few hours, and I was once again calling his psychiatrist, his psychologist and the hospital. I was screaming and begging all at the same time, needing help and guidance. I found very little. I remember his psychologist-du-jour (he had so many) finally telling me, "There's just not much that you can do." I couldn't help but weep.

Of course, I battle in my head everything that I could have done differently

that would perhaps have changed the outcome of that fateful day. But, I have come to realize that what I may have been able to postpone for a week or two wouldn't have changed things for long. I go from anger to sadness in a mere moment, but quickly make it to my therapists' office. She and everyone else tells me that I'm doing great, and that I've been strong for my children by building them a solid life here on the Westside. I guess one thing that I've learned is that it's the little successes that keep me going, but it also makes me ponder "what if?"

My favorite *Lucy* episode is when she tries for the hundredth time to break into his show. She comes through the front door and Ricky has rigged a bucket of water to fall on her head. He then grabs her, kisses her and says lovingly, "Come here you." I fantasize about Jon coming back with some little punishment to assuage my guilt, and then takes me in his arms, never to let go.

Lifekeepers Memory Quilt

Our quilts are displayed at national meetings, suicide-related conferences and other events. All 50 states have come together in this joint effort to educate the world about the need to reduce the incidence of suicide. You can share your pictures and sentiments by dedicating a square in the Lifekeepers Memory Quilt, offering the image of your loved one. A \$20 fee covers the cost of material, labor and postage necessary to create your visual tribute. You will receive a cotton square and instructions on how to proceed.

Yes, I want to create a quilt square to honor:

Send the material and instructions to me:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number(s): _____

E-mail: _____

Enclosed is my \$20 check or money order made out to Mary Halligan to cover the cost of material, labor and postage.

Mail to: Mary Halligan
21422 Grant Avenue, Torrance, CA 90503
or call Mary at (310) 316-4392 for information

A Five Year Journey

Continued from page 3

I trusted that if I continued to step, I would journey somewhere.

A little dog: Three days after my daughter died, my husband opened the front door and in walked a small stray dog. We were not in any shape to take care of anyone or anything. But she stayed. We named her Megumi which means "blessing" in Japanese. At a time when we did not want to get out of bed, let alone go on living, this little dog would jump on the bed and poke us with her nose "get up I've gotta go outside." Once outside at 5 a.m., I'd look at the crisp clear sky and twinkling stars and even though I wanted the world to just stop, I marveled at its beauty. This dog would make eye contact and be aware of our mood and made every attempt to engage us. She reminded us that we had life. And, she made us laugh!

There are two Chinese characters for the word "crisis." One of the characters also means "opportunity." The event, a death of a loved one by suicide, happened. It happened and I cannot change it. But, if I remain open to possibilities, I may find unexpected gifts along the journey. They may not look like gifts at the time, but if I give time to the unfolding, I might be surprised.

Choices are not easy. Often their significance can only be seen though the distance of time. But, like the aimless steps I took at the beginning, if I keep journeying with the hope and love I want for my loved one, I find I have come back to life again. The hole in my heart is still there, but hope, love, joy has surrounded it and helped incorporate it into my story, my life journey.

I hope you find the gifts that have been left for you on your journey.

HELP LINES

Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center's Suicide Prevention Crisis Line
Los Angeles and Orange Counties: (877) 7-CRISIS (727-4747)
Everywhere: (310) 391-1253

Hopeline: 24-7 national suicide hotline
(800) SUICIDE (784-2433)

Lifeline: 24-7 national suicide hotline
(800) 273-TALK (8255)

Teen Line: Suicide hotline for teens
staffed by trained teens 6-10 p.m.
(800) TLC-TEEN.

Trevor Helpline: Suicide hotline for gay,
lesbian, bisexual, transgender or
questioning youth
(800) 850-8078

RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology (AAS)
(202) 237-2280
www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)
(888) 333-2377
www.afsp.org

Before Their Time: A musical resource
to provide comfort to people after the
death of someone close
www.beforetheirtime.org

Compassionate Friends: For parents
grieving the death of a child; chat room
from 10 a.m. - 11 p.m.
National: (630) 990-0010
Los Angeles: (310) 368-6845
www.compassionatefriends.org

Crisis, Grief, and Healing: Articles of
interest and forum
www.webhealing.com

Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center: Nine sites throughout Los
Angeles provide mental health care for
those with severe mental illness and
little money
(310) 390-6612
www.didihirsch.org

For survivors, click "Suicide Prevention
Center" then click on "Lost A Loved
One?"; current and past issues of the
SAS newsletter are available as pdf's
through this site

Fierce Goodbye: From a documentary
focusing on survivors
www.fiercegoodbye.com

Friends for Survival
www.friendsforsurvival.org

Grief Net: Grief support; can connect
you with various resources
www.griefnet.org

Heartbeat: A peer support group
offering empathy, encouragement and
direction following the suicide of a loved
one
www.heartbeaturvivorsaftersuicide.org

**International Association for Suicide
Prevention**
www.med.uio.no/iasp

**International Friends and Families of
Suicide**
www.friendsandfamiliesofsuicide.com

Living With Loss Magazine
(888) 604-HOPE (4673)
www.bereavementmag.com

Name a Star: Name a star in
remembrance of a loved one
www.nameastar.net

**National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
(NAMI):** Provides support for family
members of those with mental illness
National: (800) 950-6264,
www.nami.org
California: (916) 567-0163,
www.namicalifornia.org

**National Mental Health Awareness
Campaign:** A public service campaign to
educate the public about mental health
issues and eradicate the fear, shame
and stigma commonly associated with
mental illness
(877) 495-0009
www.nostigma.org

**National Organization for People of
Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS)**
(866) 899-5317
www.nopcas.com

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Parents of Suicide Mailing List: Submit
your email to join the mailing list
[www.groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/
parentsofsuicides](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/parentsofsuicides)

Parents of Suicide Support Site
www.parentsofsuicide.com

Sibling Survivors: Michelle Linn-Gust's
website
www.siblingsurvivors.com

**Suicide Awareness/Voices of Education
(SAVE):** Provides information on
depression and suicide
(952) 946-7998
www.save.org

Suicide Discussion Board: Open for the
purpose of suicide awareness, support,
and education
www.suicidediscussionboard.com

Suicide Memorial Wall: A tribute to lost
loved ones
www.suicidememorialwall.com

**Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network
(SPAN)**
National: (202) 449-3600,
www.spanusa.org
California: (760) 753-4565,
www.span-california.org

Suicide Prevention Resource Center
(877) GET-SPRC (438-7772)
www.sprc.org
www.sprc.org/thespark to receive the
Suicide Prevention Resource Center's
online newsletter

Suicide Reference Library: Provides
helpful information to those who are
involved in suicide awareness, grief
support, and educational activities
www.suicidereferencelibrary.com

Suicide Wall: Honoring Vietnam
Veterans who have taken their own
lives
www.suicidewall.com

SurvivorsAfterSuicide Yahoo Group:
Created by a member of our survivor
community, this group can be used to
post photos and chat with other survivors
[http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/
SurvivorsAfterSuicide/](http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/SurvivorsAfterSuicide/)

Survivors of Suicide: A website
dedicated to those who have lost a
loved one to suicide
www.survivorsofsuicide.com

**Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention
Project, Light for Life International:**
Teen suicide prevention
(303) 429-3530
www.yellowribbon.org

Reaching Others at the Alive & Running for Suicide Prevention 5K/10K

By Gittel Boxall

“Did you lose someone to suicide?” I asked this question far too many times as people approached the Survivors After Suicide table at the recent Alive & Running for Suicide Prevention 5K/10K. Everyone’s reply was in the affirmative. We conversed and cried together and, as a survivor, I know what lies ahead for him or her. Newcomers were more than pleased to learn that Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center cares and understands, and is able to assist them in expressing their loss to compassionate and understanding counselors and volunteers; to have the Crisis Line, outreach programs as well as potlucks and get-togethers for survivors; to know there are safe havens to find help.

Some of the stories shared that day: a 15-year-old student from Central America who lost his mother; an African-American woman who lost her niece to suicide and

dedicated the walk in her memory; an elderly Chinese son who shared the shame and taboo of having to hide his secret from family and friends and who was relieved to learn that Survivors After Suicide has a full support and prevention center; a school principal who showed interest in bringing suicide awareness to his students; a young woman from San Diego whose boyfriend took his life and who was more concerned about how his parents will deal with their loss.

It was a gratifying and humbling experience. I was able to reach out to every color, race and creed, young and old, who feel the inexpressible pain of losing a loved one, and to let them know there is telephone support, group meetings, and trained counselors. I hope that I brought awareness to all who crossed my path and touched my heart that day. I thank the Survivors After

Suicide program for allowing me the opportunity to relate with so many survivors. Hopefully I have made a difference in their lives.

Son Daniel 6/14/77-9/11/99

How To Volunteer

We always need people to share their energy and talents!

- Volunteers for SAS may co-facilitate support groups, offer telephone support counseling, help with filing, plan events, etc. Call Rick Mogil at (310) 895-2326.
- Volunteering as a counselor for the Suicide Prevention Center’s Crisis Line involves seven Saturdays of training and a minimum commitment of one year (one weekly four-hour shift). Call Dave Smith at (310) 895-2325.

Contributions

Continued from page 5

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