What Our Pets Give Us in Grief and Loss  
By Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D.

There are many misconceptions about me. Because I wrote a book called "Ginger’s Gift: Hope and Healing through Dog Companionship," people assume that I have been a dog person all my life. However, if you ask any of my family members, they will laugh as they remember how the question in the house was, "Will Michelle ever touch the dog?"

We had a dog when my sister, Denise, killed herself. Chaos, a German shepherd, was ten the year Denise died and I have a memory of our dog looking confused as the house filled with people on the day we learned of Denise’s death. My older sister, Karen, remembers that in the days, weeks, and months after Denise died, Chaos would go to the living room window each day at the time Denise would get home from school and look for her.

I have heard similar stories from people over the years, describing what their pets felt, how the pet was sometimes the last connection to the deceased, and how the pet was there for them during their grief.

In 2003, my now ex-husband and I adopted a rescue dog we named Chaco. At the time I was coaching high school track in New Mexico, where funding and interest in suicide were picking up. I would work on suicide prevention and grief all day and then run out to coach track. When I came home, Chaco and I would go to the backyard and throw Hedgie, his stuffed Hedgehog. Chaco gave me a sense of connection, and I began to wonder what pets provide for people who are grieving.

In the fall of 2005, I began work on my doctorate in family studies. I had already decided to write my dissertation on pets and grief when Hurricane Katrina hit. When people refused to go to shelters that wouldn’t allow their animals, an awareness of the importance of pets as members of families began to rise.

My dissertation focused on how people use dogs to help them cope with the death of a human loved one. Although the survey involved multiple choice and yes/no answers, some people wrote in the margins about the many ways that their dogs helped them.

The most important thing I learned from my research was that overall, people were happy with their human social supports; they felt that they got the support they needed. But their dogs provided something unique, something they didn’t feel they got from the humans in their lives.

For most of them, the dog’s presence, simply being there for them in the home, was most important. Some people wrote that the dog forced them out of bed because it needed to be fed or taken for a walk. Other people said their dog’s funny antics provided them with laughter. For others, the dog’s simple companionship, especially when the tears fell, was most important.

Suicide grief is a unique experience, as is our experience of how pets help us through times of grief and loss. Whatever our pets provide for us is what we need most.

Michelle Linn-Gust, Ph.D., president of the American Association of Suicidology, has written several books about coping with suicide and loss. You can learn more about her at www.inspirebymichelle.com.

In Memory of Art Borgquist, the Ultimate Survivor

On July 13, 2012, a member of our survivor community, Art Borgquist, died after a long illness. Art’s dear friend, bereavement therapist, Susan Celentano, wrote the following tribute:

Not good enough – not even close. That’s what I thought when I read the dictionary definition of what it means to survive: “To remain alive or in existence; to live on.” It didn’t begin to describe what Art Borgquist had done after he’d completed his tour of duty in Vietnam and subsequently experienced the suicide deaths of his mother, his brother and his sister.

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Surviving the Fourth Quarter

It’s fourth down and three yards to go for a first. Do you kick, run or pass? With my “extensive” background in sports (NOT!!) I would select throwing myself to the ground, kicking my feet and pounding my fists. I didn’t particularly like the fourth quarter of the year and I didn’t want to be dragged into it. Too many holidays, too many memories.

My fourth quarter really begins in mid-September with the holiest day of Judaism, Yom Kippur and the Yizkor Service. Yizkor is the public observance of bereavement for the community during which many synagogues hand out a pamphlet with the names of loved ones who have died. The Yizkor service nine months after Ed’s suicide was the first time I saw his name on a memorial anything. There he was, on a list that included our grandparents, aunts, uncles and some older cousins. That moment marked my acceptance of the reality that there will be no more celebrations with Ed. That all the holidays that follow would be meaninglessness without him. Holiday is defined as a day of festivity. I certainly did not feel festive or celebratory. I felt alone. I felt betrayed. I felt empty. I could not feel.

Here I am, nine years later, nine Yizkors later, nine Thanksgivings later, nine other holidays later and I am surviving. You might wonder, as David Byrne once asked, “how did I get here?” In a word, trust. Trust that my heart will always lead me forward. Trust in the wisdom and love of the survivors that surround me. Their story, their survival, is mine.

How can we survive the fourth quarter? Make it memorable. Plant a tree, a flower, or a seed. Name a star for your loved one. Place a photo, a piece of their clothing, a place setting, at the holiday dinner table. Share stories of your loved one. Volunteer to read stories at the local elementary school. The next time you are in a convenience store, buy a sandwich and bottle of water and give them to a homeless person. Tell them you do this in your loved one’s name. Remember one thing, “the greatest gift we can give to those who have left us, is to live fully in their place.”

Peace and love,

Rick

*Rick Mogil has been program director of Didi Hirsch’s Suicide Prevention and Bereavement Services since 2007.*
My 18-year-old son Julian Asea died on April 25, 2011 from injuries sustained when he jumped from a nine-story building in Santa Monica. To say this was the toughest challenge I have faced in my life is an understatement.

My family was devastated; it was as if a part of me had been severed. Julian was my first-born child. He attended Santa Monica College with aspirations to matriculate to UCLA. Julian was a handsome, charming, charismatic, creative young man admired by his peers. Prior to his death, he had started a photography business, had a part-time job and was an aspiring musician. It was a total shock that a young man with such a promising future would make the irreversible choice to end his life.

Julian was always guarded with matters of the heart and physical pain so when he told me he was worried about his friend, Jim, who was thinking about taking his life, it didn’t occur to me that Julian could actually be speaking about himself. It was only through the journals I discovered after his death that I found out he had been wrestling with deep depression. What ultimately lead him to end his life that day, I may never know.

I realized early on that unless I did something to turn this negative experience into something positive, the pain I was feeling could possibly engulf me. I also wanted to understand the complex subject of suicide.

A therapist, who is an expert in the field and has connections with Didi Hirsch, helped me begin the process of understanding suicide. He suggested I attend a survivors’ conference where I was relived to be surrounded by so many survivors, and it was here that I learned about Didi Hirsch’s 2011 Alive & Running 5K walk/run.

I was excited to pour my pain into something positive that would help other survivors, advance preventative efforts and keep my son’s memory alive. I began Team Julian and made buttons for my team commemorating Julian and the walk. I had over 30 team members and raised over $7,000 with the help of friends, family and the Saban Family Foundation. It was a great achievement.

I also had the good fortune to attend one of Didi Hirsch’s eight-week Survivors After Suicide support groups. I made good connections and although the void and pain still remain, I feel better equipped to get through my days.

Fueled by those experiences, I organized Team Julian for the 2012 Alive & Running event. This time, we were joined by 54 team members. With generous donations from the Sheraton Delfina hotel in Santa Monica, our team raised more than $10,000 – far exceeding our goal.

Having so much support inspires me to want to continue with this work to raise funds, bring awareness, erase the stigma and provide support for surviving families.

When I asked my pastor why such a terrible thing happened to me, he said sometimes tragedies lead us to ministries that we otherwise wouldn’t be involved in. Perhaps that’s why my work with Didi Hirsch and its efforts to end the stigma of mental illness and suicide makes me feel as if Julian’s death was not in vain.
Honoring the memory of people lost to suicide, the 14th Annual Alive and Running 5K Walk/Run near Los Angeles International Airport raised more than $200,000 for Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services’ Suicide Prevention Center.

The Sept. 23 event drew a record number of participants – more than 1,700 runners and walkers, including 300 dedicated volunteers and members of Didi Hirsch’s new Survivors of Suicide Attempts groups. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where actor Jonah Hill tweeted his support for the cause, also helped generate enthusiasm and support.

A colorful Remembrance Garden of rose petals and river stones lined the course, which also featured a memorial banner with names and photos of people who have taken their own lives. Gold and silver paint pens were provided to participants who wanted to honor loved ones by writing their names and brief messages on the stones. Many took their stones home as keepsakes of the event.

Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department Chief Lee Baca and Didi Hirsch President and CEO Dr. Kita S. Curry welcomed the crowd as they took their marks to cheers from CheerLA and drum beats by Chikara Daiko Japanese Taiko drummers. Many of the walkers and runners, who organized themselves into more than 90 teams, wore t-shirts bearing the names and photos of loved ones lost to suicide.

Dr. Curry recounted how attitudes toward suicide have improved over the past several years, and how bringing the names of loved ones out of darkness and into the light has made it possible for many grieving people to find out about the support services offered by the Suicide Prevention Center.

“Fourteen years ago, only a few hundred people participated in Alive and Running and hardly any businesses wanted to sponsor the cause,” Dr. Curry said. “This year, we raised a record amount of funds to support our efforts to erase the stigma surrounding suicide.”
The Wisdom of a Refrigerator Sticker

By Ester Ybarra-Bryant

A sticker on my refrigerator door reads “Life is Good,” but it took me 15 years to believe it. You see, my 13-year-old-son, Nathan, died by carbon-monoxide suicide on June 3, 1997, at home in the garage. When Nathan died, I lived with overwhelming grief, guilt and endless tears. I lost all hope and depression consumed me. I was devastated and became suicidal. How was I ever going to get through this? I tried anti-depressant medication, therapy and still, I didn’t seem to get better. I could not return to work; I could not return to life. Losing my precious son and struggling as a single parent were unbearable. I suffered every waking minute with the heart-wrenching pain of missing Nathan. I wanted to learn all I could about suicide to understand why my son chose to die. I was on a quest.

Five years volunteering with SAS and Pugs ‘N Pals (a dog rescue group) was my turning point. In fostering pugs, I found comfort and a need to care again. Pugs give unconditional love and provide cheer, security and a sense of wellness. In fact, I laughed for the first time since Nathan died when I thought I would never laugh again. I attended workshops and conferences. I was better, I was healing due to my caring and compassionate SAS support group, family and friends. Thanks to Didi Hirsch, I became stronger and my depression was quickly fading.

Approaching the ten-year mark, I could feel the dreaded anxiety beginning to set in. From all I learned at SAS, I was prepared and knew what to do. I applied the skills I learned; I shared and I got through the ten-year milestone. Staying involved and volunteering helped me recover. My volunteer work with Suicide Prevention was rewarding and became my passion. My guilt subsided and finally disappeared. I was able to accept my son’s suicide, and I stopped asking the haunting question, “Why?”

Fifteen years later and more than ever, I am alive! Family, friends, coworkers and health care providers rescued me and kept me alive. I survived because caring people like Lois and Sam Bloom helped me live when I wanted to die. I am so very grateful to these dear people for not giving up on me.

I happily continue to volunteer with Suicide Prevention and Pug Rescue. I no longer mourn, but instead honor, Nathan’s life. I carry my sorrow as a badge of honor when I need to. But for now, it is tucked away. I survived and wish the same for you. Every day is a challenge and I choose life because I believe happiness is right around the corner. I find happiness every day in family and friends, and through the eyes of my children and grandchildren. Life is Good.
SAS Group Meetings

Everyone who has completed an eight-week Survivors After Suicide Support Group is invited to attend scheduled monthly meetings. There is no charge.

Monthly Drop-In Groups Located in:

- San Gabriel Valley
- San Fernando Valley
- West LA: Didi Hirsch Culver-Palms Center
  - Santa Ana
  - South Bay

Eight-Week Groups

Groups meet once a week for an hour and a half for eight consecutive weeks, with locations in Sherman Oaks, Culver City, Redondo Beach, San Gabriel and Montrose. To be placed into a group, please call Rick Mogil at (310) 895-2326