Two inspiring women who have endured the loss of a loved one to suicide and found consolation through their suicide prevention advocacy were honored at Didi Hirsch’s Erasing the Stigma Leadership Awards on April 27, 2017 at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. Music icon Judy Collins received the Beatrice Stern Media Award and writer/actress/filmmaker Anna Akana received the Mental Health Ambassador Award.

Emceed by Melissa Rivers, the star-studded event celebrated the non-profit agency’s 75th anniversary of service. Joined by stand-up comedian Wendy Liebman, the dynamic duo got everyone laughing and co-led a hugely successful mobile text-to-donate appeal that raised $150,000 that night and brought the event total to over $675,000.

Famously known as ‘Judy Blue Eyes’, Collins is a Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter whose career spans over 50 years. At 78, she is still going strong with 120 performances annually and an upcoming summer tour with Stephen Stills.

Collins became the "voice of a generation" with her iconic version of the song "Both Sides Now." Less known is her resilience in the face of tremendous suffering throughout her lifetime. The daughter of an alcoholic she is herself a recovering alcoholic who suffered from depression and an eating disorder.

When her son, Clark, died by suicide in 1992, no books or support groups existed. Her friends, including Joan Rivers, encouraged her to keep working on her music, but she had to find her own way through the stigma of mental illness and suicidal loss for many years. In her book, Sanity & Grace: A Journey of Suicide, Survival, and Strength (2006), she chronicles her struggle to change society’s perception of suicide. Her other books tackle her battles with alcoholism, drug abuse and bulimia. "Doing these books and writing and performing songs became my therapy and, not only helped me, but I hope helped others who faced similar ordeals."

Now sober for over 39 years, Collins has written extensively about her life as a survivor. "I like to share it with people and receiving this honor allows me to talk about the stress, the illness, and how I’ve worked through it to inspire others." Today she continues to speak out on behalf of mental health issues and suicide prevention.

Anna Akana, a 27-year old filmmaker, producer, actress and comedian shares her deeply personal and inventive videos with over 1.8 million YouTube subscribers.

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Rick's Corner

When someone we know dies by suicide, our lives take a sharp, unexpected left turn across a median that normally protects us from the oncoming traffic of emotions, questions and uncertainty. Some are able to accelerate out of the turn and avoid the head-on collisions, but most of us are too stunned to navigate through the deer-in-the-headlights shock we feel. If we hit the brakes, we're still headed in the wrong direction. Somehow, we have to turn ourselves around amidst the chaos and confusion and get ourselves back on track, heading the right way.

How do we make sense of it all and ease the pain?
Where do we find comfort and what does it look like?

Comfort can be found in a variety of ways:

You might find solace from an affectionate pet that nuzzles your hand or lays its head on your lap.

Are there family members or close friends who offer loving, unconditional support?

Maybe you can feel consoled by wrapping yourself in a favorite quilt, digging your toes into wet sand at the beach, indulging in your favorite foods, watching the sun rise or set, or listening to music that soothes your soul.

No matter where your comfort lies, now is the time to nurture yourself. Let someone else do the driving until you feel ready to take the wheel and head in whatever direction you need to go.

Peace and Love,

Rick

Rick Mogil has been program director of Didi Hirsch’s Suicide Bereavement Services since 2007.
How We Do What We Do

By Jacqueline Rivera, LCSW PPSC
Survivors Support Services Program Coordinator

As the Orange County Suicide Prevention Center’s Program Coordinator (O.C. SPC), family, friends and even complete strangers often ask me “how do you do what you do?” The simple answer is: “We have the ability to make a positive impact on the community we serve and nothing is more gratifying than that.”

The O.C. team focuses on providing suicide prevention trainings and staffing for other suicide prevention outreach events. Our staff, along with community partners, provide these trainings at high schools, universities, clinical programs, churches, parent groups, foster care programs, after-school programs, resource fairs, community forums, and clinics throughout Orange County. During the last fiscal year, our office provided 64 trainings and 106 other outreach events that reached a total of 23,702 people. This is in addition to all the other suicide support services our program provides.

Frequently, people who attend our training sessions will share their own experiences with suicide – usually they are family members struggling with suicide or suicide loss. We don’t always know what happens to these people after leaving our sessions. Did they go home and have a conversation about suicide with their children? Did a clinical student incorporate the assessment, intervention and safety planning skills we taught to provide better care for their clients? Did a person suffering with thoughts of suicide who heard our discussion seek out support?

Thankfully, attendees sometimes do take the time to share how even just one training session affected their lives. This March, our team did a bilingual training to a small group of middle and high school parents. Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services provided both a speaker, who shared her story of losing her child to suicide, and a program therapist, who taught parents about adolescent suicide prevention. Although we received positive feedback from the parents who attended that evening, we were worried we may not have made much of an impact. Later that week, we were rewarded with an email from a parent, who is also a teacher in another school district and who had attended the training. She wrote:

“Your presentation was so incredibly valuable to me, and I wanted to share my experience this week. After your presentation, I thought it was really important to share the resources you gave with my students. I briefly spoke with each of my classes about what I learned. After class, one of my students, who has had suicidal thoughts before, came up to me and shared she was having thoughts of hurting herself again. I asked if she had thought about a plan and she had. I asked her if she had means and she believed she did. Eventually, we learned she had in fact written a note and was in severe crisis. Our school was able to help her and her parent get the support and resources they needed. She was taken in for an emergency evaluation yesterday. I know it is a long road ahead, and I am not sure what to expect. But I do know she is being taken care of right now, and her family is supporting her.

I can’t thank you enough for the information you shared. I felt so much better prepared to deal with this situation. I followed many of your suggestions, and luckily, this young lady was receptive to being helped. I know if I hadn’t attended your talk, I would not have been able to deal with my student as well.

Thank you, thank you for what you do. I know there weren’t many people at the presentation, but please know that it DID make a difference!”

So when anyone asks me how I do what I do for a living, I think of real stories like this and smile. Every day, I am proud of how our staff pours their passion and skill into helping those affected by suicide and for their prevention efforts throughout our community. Thank you to people like this mom/teacher who took her new knowledge to a higher level by talking to her students and in turn, identifying and helping an at-risk student.

The Knowledge of Hindsight

By Miguel Serricchio

It’s been a terrible year since our beloved Alex Damian Serricchio left us. I know that things will never be the same and I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what we do when something so terrible occurs. As survivors, how long we mourn is as unique as each of us and I thank everyone who has respected my process.

When we’re finally ready to move forward, mentally, physically and spiritually, what do we or should we change? Unfortunately, we can’t change the past even though we wish we could. Do we continue as we were before this event, or do we make changes? Hindsight provides us the opportunity to learn from our mistakes and move forward.

We all analyze how our actions affect others and can’t help but retrace the events that led to losing our loved ones. We question and beat ourselves up for how things turned out and if there were something we could have done differently. What if I hadn’t done … ? What if I had listened more? What if…?

When you are ready – not when someone else tells you you’re ready – make the changes you want in your life. Reach out to loved ones and friends. Tell those you love how much you love them more often. Don’t be afraid. Do something with a loved one simply because it’s what they want, not what you want. Listen better. Hug them strong. Write something beautiful. Do things with the knowledge of hindsight!

Accept!  Love!  Respect!
Figuring Sh*t Out
From Amy Biancolli’s blog figuringsh*tout.net

This past Monday marked five years since two cops appeared at my door to say that my beautiful, brilliant husband who was found near our home had died by suicide. Every year, I try not to dwell on the anniversary of Chris’s suicide. Every year, I fail.

At work I hit my deadlines, chit chatting with colleagues and making my plans for the week, all while carrying the weight of the day inside me. I didn’t want to feel it. Don’t go there, I told myself. I wanted Monday to be normal, the week to be normal, my whole life to be normal.

It isn’t of course – but whose is? And who doesn’t carry around a pocketful of dates that throb with consequence and pain?

In remembering Chris, I try to focus on the joyous markers and all their many blessings: his birthday, our wedding day, the births of our three children. I try to dwell with gratitude on his life and lingering gifts. I want to remember the light and love in his eyes; the way he laughed and kissed and cracked a grin. The fedoras he used to wear, the bike rides he used to take.

But even when I try hard not to focus on the anniversary of his suicide, it focuses on me. The 26th of September licks at me like the flickering tongue of a snake. I think of Chris’s profound sadness, the changes that overtook him in the months before his death and the rupture in the universe – the outrageous, senseless, gaping violation of it – that sucked him away. I think of the long day that followed. An endless day. A day that still feels like yesterday. A day that always will.

And yet, a lot has happened in the five years since he died. More life, more love, more loss. I’ve traveled to Ecuador, Edinburgh, Jamaica, Yosemite. Watched one daughter graduate high school, another graduate college. Marveled at a son who turned 16, filled with strength and kindness. Wrote a book about grief. Told a story for “The Moth.” Did a TEDx talk. Buried my second mother and my best friend. Held my and Chris’s baby grandniece, the most perfect creature you’ve ever seen born to parents who wed on Chris’s birthday. Laughed.

I got laid off from one paper and hired back by another. Started this crazy blog. Took up jazz fiddle. Shoved the piano into the living room (alone). Contemplated getting a tattoo (still contemplating).

(Continued on page 7)
Los servicios par sobrevivientes en Orange County han completado el segundo grupo en español de apoyo para sobrevivientes del suicidio. Los miembros compartieron que se han hecho como familia al fin de las ocho semanas. Los sobrevivientes esperan ayudar a romper el estigma en la comunidad latina y ayudar a otros sobrevivientes encontrar un espacio de alivio a través de la ayuda de Servicios de Salud Mental de Didi Hirsch.

Orange County Survivors Support Services has just completed their second Spanish Survivors After Suicide support group. The members shared that they all have become like family to one another at the end of the eight-week session. They look forward to helping break the stigma around suicidal loss in the Latino community and hope to help other survivors find a space for healing through the help of Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Survivors After Suicide
Summer Potluck
Saturday, June 3, 12:00-3:30 p.m.
Veterans Memorial Park – Rotunda Room
4117 Overland Ave., Culver City

Alive and Running 10K Walk/Run
Sunday, September 24, 7:00-9:45 a.m.
West 88th Street and La Tijera Boulevard
Just north of Los Angeles Intl Airport

AFSP International Survivors
of a Suicide Loss Day
November 18, 2017
Time and place TBD

Survivors After Suicide
Winter Potluck
Saturday, December 2, 2017, 6-8:30 p.m.
Veterans Memorial Park – Rotunda Room
4117 Overland Ave., Culver City
Suicide Prevention Center (Continued from cover)

"As the mother of a teenage boy, I’m glad there are places like Didi Hirsch where kids who are having thoughts of suicide can reach out for help," Melissa added. "With calls and chats tripling since 2008 and expected to double again by 2025, it’s critical that Didi Hirsch gets this new center to expand services and add new ones."

Rivers, who was a college student when her father, Edgar Rosenberg took his life, has been promoting suicide prevention education, especially among youth, for more than two decades. Honored at last year’s event with the 2016 Beatrice Stern Media Award, Rivers hosted this year’s Leadership Awards with humor, honesty and grace.

General Hospital veteran actor Maurice Benard, a 2002 honoree, presented the Leadership Award to Writer/Director/Composer Paul Dalio, whose debut film, Touched With Fire was inspired by his own experience of living with bipolar disorder. The film explores the relationship between mental illness and creativity.

21st Anniversary... (Continued from cover)

In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month, Didi Hirsch hosted “Stigma,” a nationwide video campaign aimed at erasing the stigma of mental illness. The campaign, which ran throughout the month of May, included inspiring stories from a diverse cross-section of 11 Didi Hirsch clients, staffers, Board members, advocates and celebrities who survived and thrived through a mental health crisis. The one-minute videos featured Melissa Rivers, who lost her father to suicide, actress Eva LaRue, legal scholar Elyn R. Saks, Didi Hirsch’s President/CEO Dr. Kita S. Curry, director Maya Forbes and others. http://erasingthestigma.org/video

In one extremely brave and poignant video blog called “please don’t kill yourself,” she talks about her sister’s suicide. Speaking directly to the camera, the viewer feels her loss and heartbreak as she explains why no one should take their life. Another video discusses her quandary over taking medication for depression. By openly discussing suicide and mental health issues with her followers, she is a leading voice among young adults in efforts to dismantle the stigma of mental illness.

Today, Akana is proud to serve as a resource for viewers who feel alienated and alone. “I do believe I was put here to tell stories and be creative in that way. It’s given my life purpose and meaning to know that I am helping people. I only wish my sister had something similar that could have helped save her.”

General Hospital veteran actor Maurice Benard, a 2002 honoree, presented the Leadership Award to Writer/Director/Composer Paul Dalio, whose debut film, Touched With Fire was inspired by his own experience of living with bipolar disorder. The film explores the relationship between mental illness and creativity.
Paul Koretz Introduces Motion to Reduce LA Suicides

About two Los Angeles County residents die by suicide each day and Councilmember Paul Koretz is looking for ways to reduce that number. Earlier this year, he introduced a motion requiring all gun stores and firing ranges in Los Angeles to display posters and literature containing suicide prevention information.

According to Koretz’s office, suicide is the leading cause of death among Californians who have purchased a firearm within a year. “I want the city to play an active part in expanding our firearms safety efforts to include firearms suicide prevention education,” he said. “This type of signage would make no statements on firearm ownership, (and) instead would make sure that individuals who may be contemplating ending their lives using a firearm know they can always talk to someone.” Koretz’s motion was seconded by Councilman David Ryu and will now go before the Public Safety Committee.

When you donate to the Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center, you are helping people affected by suicide get the support they need to recover from their devastating pain and loss. Here are some of the ways your donations help:

- $50 – supplies one support group with handouts and brochures about suicide
- $100 – prints 1,000 suicide prevention cards for community distribution
- $200 – provides a support group to one suicide attempt or loss survivor without financial means
- $300 – sends a staffer to the scene of a suicide to provide comfort and resources
- $350 – supplies a month of drop-in groups to survivors needing ongoing support
- $500 – produces 2,000 bracelets with the crisis line phone number
- $1,000 – trains one volunteer crisis counselor
- $1,500 – hosts one two-day ASIST training
- $5,000 – produces a short video about how to help someone in suicidal crisis
- $10,000 – pays annual salary of one chat counselor working 8 hours/week
- $12,000-15,000 – cost of training one agency to start suicide attempt survivor group

Figuring... (Continued from page 4)

Adopted two kittens. Made new friends. Turned 49, then 50, then 51, then 52, then 53.

So here I am, a little older and grayer, a little creakier, a little more arthritic in my knees and lower back, but not yet as old or gray or creaky or arthritic as I’ll be tomorrow. In another two years I’ll be 55, Chris’s age when he died. Yet more life will have passed, then more life, then more.

I believe in the eternity of the human soul. I believe in the solidity of human love. I believe that souls are love, and eternity is solid, and no one who spends his life embracing and lifting others is ever truly gone. I’ll see Chris again, of that I’m sure. But not right now. Not right here. My job is to be in this world, going about the business of living with whatever faith and relish I can muster.

So no, I didn’t want to dwell on the anniversary of his death. But dwell indeed I did, all through Monday and the week that followed, thinking about the permanence of a moment and the transience of a life. Five years are forever. Five years are gone. How strange, that I’ve lived five years without him.
SAS Group Meetings

Everyone who has completed an eight-week Survivors After Suicide support group is invited to attend scheduled monthly meetings at any of the locations listed below. There is no charge.

Drop-In Groups

San Gabriel Valley
Meets the 4th Wednesday of each month, 7:30 – 9:00 p.m.
Meeting Dates: May 24, June 28, July 26, August 23

San Fernando Valley
Meets the 2nd Saturday of each month, 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.
Meeting dates: May 13, June 10, July 8, August 12.

Santa Ana
Meets the 1st Wednesday of each month, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.
Meeting dates: May 3, June 7, July 5, August 13

South Bay
Meets the 2nd Sunday of each month, 11:30 am – 12:30 p.m.
Meeting dates: May 14, June 11, July 9, August 13

West Los Angeles
Meets every Tuesday night, 7:30 - 9:00 p.m.

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 Marino, Santa Ana and Newbury Park.

Please call to be placed in a group.
Los Angeles/Ventura counties: (310) 895-2326 or Orange County: (714) 547-0885