

# Survivors After Suicide

Your Path Toward Healing • Erasing the Stigma • Suicide is Preventable

A Program of Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services Spring 2020

## Finding My Color Again

By Rachel Wolke

"Mommy are you sad," my 2½-year-old daughter asked? I smiled, kissing her, "No my love, I'm just tired." I never wanted to lie to her but this last year she's seen me sad so often – not sad, more numb, silent, gray. I wasn't always like this; I was pink once!

At 8-years-old, my aunt told me that people with gray eyes lost their color. They'd forgotten how to laugh so hard that tears fell from their eyes; and how to love so much it almost hurt. Back then I didn't understand what she meant. Life was so beautiful and full of adventures – how could it take something away? Even though I'd had a difficult childhood, I loved life and created a safe world filled with white-winged angels, unicorns and fairies. I guess I still believe they exist and that's why I write children's books.

As a teenager, my motto was "no risk, no fun." We danced at nightclubs and snuck into award shows where we sat next to Jay-Z and Pink. In 11th grade, I decided to move from Frankfurt to Lübeck to be with my Dad. Everybody thought I was crazy leaving with only two years until graduation but I made the



*Rachel Wolke learned we all go through difficult times but it's worth it to open your heart and know you are not alone.*

move. Then, for the first time, life took something I loved. It took my dad.

Dad was my safe haven. None of my mom's "boyfriends" could beat her or me and there were no mean girls at school who bullied me because I was different. It was just us and suddenly he was gone. I felt lonely and alone and, for the first time, I lost a bit of me. I lost my pink.

This new world was dark and cold and after six months, I confided in a friend that I was afraid my eyes were turning gray. She gathered my friends together and we drank, danced and I cried. I allowed myself to feel the pain and grief but also my friends' love. I felt sadly happy. The next day I started writing my first children's book. I never imagined it would develop into a book series that would help me to love life again.

A few years later, I met a handsome singer who swept me off my feet and we eventually married. When our first child was born, I couldn't bond with her and felt stressed and overwhelmed. It wasn't until I was pregnant with my second child and went to therapy, I was diagnosed with postpartum depression. No one had recognized the symptoms before but eventually, as my baby grew, my anxiety eased and things got better. Just as life started turning around, a call from my aunt changed everything. "Your mom is dead. She killed herself." Feeling empty and in shock, I flew to Germany for her funeral. I knew she had depression but  
*(Continued on page 5)*

## Sylvia Sandler: Helping Survivors Find Resilience



Sylvia Sandler, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) at Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center, considers her job counseling those bereaved by suicide, the opportunity of a lifetime. As co-facilitator of **Survivors After Suicide (SAS)** support groups, she finds tremendous meaning and purpose helping people who have suffered profound loss. "Grief is a very close companion to me. Because I've been through it myself, I'm okay going into the muck, messy part of life with my clients," Sandler says.

At twenty, Sylvia's 49-year old mother died unexpectedly from what they believe was a brain aneurysm. She struggled with moving forward and achieving life's milestones – graduating college, her wedding, having children – without her mother's guidance. She found consolation in therapy. At age 38, Sylvia also lost her dad, yet both losses gave Sylvia  
*(Continued on page 3)*



# Rick's Corner

With all this talk about epidemics and pandemics, I wanted to write about a new word I created, *Paindemic*, that describes the effect a suicide has on various layers of connection to the person who has died. I even had a cool graph. Unfortunately, Dr. Melissa Cady, an anesthesiologist, already coined the term *Paindemic* to discuss chronic pain.

Next, I thought about social distancing: the conscious choice to keep safe by staying six feet away from others to avoid the transfer of COVID-19. With suicide, the choice of isolation may be imposed externally due to stigma, misconceptions, fear or personal beliefs. Internally, we may be isolating due to shame, fear of being judged or thinking others are tired of hearing our story. Iggy Pop's lyrics from his song, *Isolation* (you knew this was coming since most of my quotes are from songs before 1999!), aptly describes how I felt after my brother, Ed, died.

“And here I stand in isolation  
Feeling emptiness and doubt  
Walking down the broken highway.”

I clearly remember feeling totally alone in a room filled with well-wishers. What I needed was a room of people who understood the isolation. Eventually, I found this in the SAS eight-week group and drop-in groups that followed. It was there I learned that it is ok to want to be alone but unhealthy to want to remain alone. We don't have to suffer in silence, darkness and locked away. We can turn on the light of hope.

Many survivors have been through where you may be now and have each found their own way of navigating beyond that “broken highway.” Fight the urge to isolate and join us at drop-in groups, potlucks and the *Alive & Running* event on Sunday, September 13, 2020. Share your story in the newsletter. Slowly, each at our own pace, we set a new course that gives life meaning and connection to others.

Peace and Love.

Rick Mogil  
Program Director  
Didi Hirsch Suicide Bereavement Services

## Resources for Survivors and Suicide Prevention

### CRISIS AND HELP LINES

#### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline/ Didi Hirsch Suicide Crisis Line

24/7 English and Spanish  
(800) 273-TALK or (800) 273-8255

#### Disaster Distress Helpline

24/7 English and Spanish  
(800) 985-5990

#### 24/7 Lifeline/Didi Hirsch Crisis Chat

[www.crisischat.org](http://www.crisischat.org) or  
[www.didihirsch.org/chat](http://www.didihirsch.org/chat)

#### TEEN LINE

Staffed by teens 6-10 pm;  
other hours by Didi Hirsch.  
(800) TLC-TEEN, (800) 952-8336  
or (310) 855-HOPE

#### Didi Hirsch Korean Crisis Line

(877) 727-4747  
4:30 p.m.-12:30 a.m. daily

#### Trevor Helpline (LGBTQ)

(800) 850-8078

### SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCES

#### Didi Hirsch Suicide Prevention Center

10277 W. Olympic Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA 90067  
(424) 362-2900

#### Survivors After Suicide

Suicide bereavement support groups  
for Adults and Teens  
LA/Ventura (424) 362-2912  
Orange County (714) 547-0885

#### American Association of Suicidology

(202) 237-2280  
[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

#### American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

(888) 333-2280 [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

#### Suicide Prevention Resource Center

(877) GET-SPRC or (877) 438-7772  
[www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org) or [www.sprc.org/thepark](http://www.sprc.org/thepark)

### MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

#### Didi Hirsch Suicide Bereavement Resources

Central intake  
L.A. County (888) 807-7250  
Orange County (714) 547-0885  
[www.didihirsch.org](http://www.didihirsch.org)

#### National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

Support for families  
(800) 950-6264  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

#### Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

### NEWSLETTER

**Editor:** Randy Levin-Cohen

**Editorial Board:** Kim Kowsky,

Rick Mogil, Patricia Speelman

**Design:** Curtis Hill

#### Reprint Policy

Nonprofit support organizations may  
reprint material from our newsletter.

# A Measureless Gift in the Midst of Immeasurable Sorrow

By Cheryl Downey

My son, Christopher Bandasch, banished his pain on his second suicide attempt at age 30. He did so in Ecuador. The American Embassy called me one hour after I returned home from Greece. I had planned to travel to Ecuador next. My daughter went to retrieve his ashes.

I can hardly speak of it, even now, without tearing up. If I had not already taken the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI) Family-to-Family course for those who love someone suffering from mental illness, and then continued attending NAMI's support group which met in the Didi Hirsch building, I may not have found Didi Hirsch's Survivors After Suicide weekly drop-in group. I registered with Rick Mogil, the Program Director of Didi Hirsch's Suicide Bereavement Services, and started regularly attending the Saturday morning drop-in group. I have continued to do so long after completing the SAS group.



*Cheryl Downey and her son Christopher in happier times*

I need what it offers: profound empathy.

I continue to find it to be a measureless gift in the midst of immeasurable sorrow. Here was a group I could share my grief, my guilt, my pain, with. Here were, not one but two, trained, compassionate

Facilitators and a varying but also consistent group of grievors.

I had long "envied" my husband's (not Christopher's father) ability to find support and comfort no matter where in the world, or when, through AA. He is more than 30 years sober and I have celebrated many AA birthdays with him. I have also attended months of Al-Anon meetings, not because of my husband, but because of Christopher. So, I am someone so grateful to finally find a group for me, for permanently broken me.

When I was able, last Fall I created *Team Christopher* for the annual *Alive & Running* fundraiser. Some short-time acquaintances came while long-time friends did not.

Others totally surprised me with generous donations. I was so grateful to raise money for this amazing group SAS offers us in our suffering, grieving, healing, weekly, daily process.

My thanks and love to all of you as we struggle through this sorrow and loss.

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## ***Sylvia Sandler, continued from page 1***

a clear understanding of how grief impacts your whole life cycle. "There are moments when you are doing really well and times when you're all-consumed by grief," she said. "It's even more complicated when it pertains to suicide."

She started on the path toward becoming a therapist, but marriage and three children put her aspirations on hold for 15 years. This interim period taught her that even the best laid plans get derailed by crisis and distress and we have to adjust and grow from life's many challenges. Using her fluency in Spanish to help her husband, an immigration attorney, she worked as a translator for his Spanish-speaking clientele. Now, she's able to use that bilingual fluency in SAS groups.

The eight-week SAS program provides a safe space to talk about suicide without the stigma that survivors often feel in a death-averse society. What Sylvia finds most inspirational about her work is her clients' resilience. At first, survivors don't

see there is a trajectory to their pain. "That first night in group is really difficult because survivors are diving headfirst into the trauma and realizing the reality of what's happened. Expressing their feelings can be very raw and they are extremely vulnerable. But then, what's remarkable, is that over time, I see people start feeling better by attending group," says Sandler.

Sylvia's responsibilities include doing initial phone screenings with survivors to determine whether adults and teens could benefit from a suicide bereavement support group. She is also doing community outreach targeting organizations that work with teens to help attract them to Didi Hirsch's Teen Bereavement Support Groups — a program funded by Everychild Foundation. I know from just the intake process, teens are grateful to have this platform to connect with other teens, learn who they are and how to navigate their future without their loved one."

## IN HONOR OF

Judd Apatow  
Avant Artists  
James Baek  
Andrew, Soffia, Mattias and  
Bettina Blystra  
Marie and Christina Chacon  
Manuela Eberhart  
Charlotte Fletcher  
Marty Frank

Adam Franko  
Libby Gill  
Anne Globe  
Iden Kamishin  
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Lisa Schumacher  
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Sean and Wanda Snyder  
Michael Steffes  
Melvin Werber  
David Wolf  
L. Woodrow  
Rina Wu  
Bob and Eileen Zigman

## IN MEMORY OF

Jeremy Archer  
Alan Arinsberg  
Caney Arnold  
Joel Avila  
Drew Bernstein  
Marc Biederman  
Benjamin Bolan  
Elliot Brabson  
Leon Broussard IV  
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Tristan  
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Jerry Vu  
Johnny Wardlaw  
Emma Nicole Wheeler  
Alice Y. Wu  
Timmy Yeh  
Alex Zambory

October 29, 2019 through March 23, 2020

## Do You Know a Teenager Who Has Experienced the Death of Someone By Suicide?



Help us connect teens to an 8-week grief support group where they can talk with other teens about their shared experience. Meetings are in small groups, once a week, for 90-minute sessions where they'll learn healthy stress-management tools and new and creative coping skills to help them deal with their loss. Here they'll find emotional and therapeutic support from clinicians and other teens so they don't feel isolated and alone. Teen support groups are part of the new Everychild Suicide Prevention Project. **Now offering virtual groups!**

For more information call 424-362-2911 or [spccounseling@dididhirsch.org](mailto:spccounseling@dididhirsch.org).

## UPCOMING EVENTS\*

### 22nd Annual Alive & Running 5K

Sunday, September 13, 2020. 7:00-9:45 a.m.  
[aliveandrunning.org](http://aliveandrunning.org)

### International Survivors of a Suicide Loss Day

Saturday, November 21, 2020

Visit [afsp.org](http://afsp.org) for times and locations of events in Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange Counties

### Survivors After Suicide Winter Potluck

Saturday, December 5, 2020, 6:00-8:30 p.m.

Veterans Memorial Park, Rotunda Room, 4117 Overland Avenue, Culver City

\*Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some events may be cancelled or held online. We'll keep you posted as we know more.

# Managing Your Mental Health and Well-Being During COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a public health crisis unlike anything we've seen in 100 years. Widespread cancellations of sporting events, concerts and other festivities — outings that bring joy to many — can cause disappointment and stress.

The lost opportunities to socialize, along with recommendations on social distancing, may exacerbate feelings of loneliness, anxiety and depression in those who already live with mental health conditions.

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services offers these suggestions for staying calm and healthy during the current crisis:

- Rely on trusted primary sources for news. These would include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health;



- Consider limiting your exposure to news to a few times per day. Avoid watching or listening to reports about the crisis right before bedtime;
- Stay in touch with friends, neighbors and loved ones by phone, text or email;
- Make the most of family time, whether walking the family dog, doing a jigsaw puzzle or cooking together;

- Consult with a trusted financial advisor before making any drastic decisions about finances;
- Follow CDC guidelines on handwashing and other hygiene matters. Eat well, exercise, and get enough sleep. Read a novel you've set aside or renew a hobby or fun activity. Go for a walk or a hike.
- If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal or in an emotional crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 or the Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990.

During this time, Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services has mobilized all the technology needed for its staff to stay in touch with clients through telemedicine and teletherapy, and also has limited staff at each of its sites for current clients in crisis who urgently need in-person care.

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## ***Finding My Color Again, continued from page 1***

had no idea what that meant. Someone I admired once told me depression is a selfish disease and, unfortunately, I believed it. I wish I'd learned more about this serious illness and how I could have helped her.

It was the end of my mom's journey but the beginning of my turbulent, emotional one. Pregnant and struggling with grief, anger, sadness, and significant weight loss, I worried for my unborn son. Luckily, my entire extended family came to support me. There is a saying, "Life takes, and life gives" and, although this tragedy took my mom, it also showed me I wasn't alone.

My mom's suicide opened old wounds. I would die for my children, but my mom wouldn't live for me. Throughout my life, I felt inadequate; not smart enough, skinny enough, Jewish enough, you name it. I blamed myself for everything including my mother's suicide. I got so unbelievably angry at my mother, at myself, at the world. Until one day, my 2-year old daughter did something stupid and I responded so abhorrently, I didn't recognize myself. I realized I had turned gray.

I decided I needed therapy. It wasn't easy asking for help or admitting I couldn't deal with my pain on my own. I wanted to punish my mom and thought if I forgave her, it would justify her actions or let her off the hook. They say not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. I needed to learn about depression and how her suicide wasn't my, or anyone's fault.

It took time to understand forgiving her was for me. I wasn't forgetting or excusing the fact my mom took her life. But I understood her pain was unbearable and had nothing to do with me. I also learned to forgive myself for letting other people define me. Those who know me, see me for the nice, funny, caring person I am. I also started to forgive God or whatever higher power controls the universe.

It's been 14 years since my dad died and over a year for my mom. It's still hard but I want to live again. I want to become pink again. I want deep friendships and to love so hard it almost hurts. That means opening my heart, expressing my feelings, and being vulnerable again. It means risking the possibility of losing someone I love. Being brave doesn't mean you're not afraid of something; it just means you do it anyway. There are still days I wake up sad, angry, and afraid but I have accepted that. Every day I find my way back to life. I enjoy and appreciate every moment with my family, and this year, my husband and I celebrate our fifth anniversary.

We all go through difficult times but it's worth it to open your heart. Life is beautiful and full of colors and wonders. We just need to allow it to happen and trust a little. If you've fallen, I hope you'll keep getting up. And, if you, or someone you love, have depression, I hope you'll seek professional help. And if you're in a dark place, I want you to know you are not alone!



4760 South Sepulveda Boulevard  
Culver City, California 90230

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**Sunday, September 13, 2020**  
**7a.m.—9:45a.m.**  
**West 88th Street and**  
**La Tijera Boulevard near LAX**  
**[www.aliveandrunning.org](http://www.aliveandrunning.org)**

## 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 3rd Saturday of each month, 10:00—11:30 a.m.  
Meeting Dates: Jul 18, Aug 15, Sep 19

#### Santa Ana—English and Spanish

Meets the 1st Wednesday of each month, 6:00—7:30 p.m.  
Meeting dates: Jul 1, Aug 5, Sep 2

#### San Fernando Valley

Meets the 2nd Saturday of each month, 11:30 a.m.—1:00 p.m.  
Meeting dates: Jul 11, Aug 8, Sep 12

#### South Bay

Meets the 2nd Sunday of each month, 11:00 a.m.—12:30 p.m.  
Meeting dates: Jul 12, Aug 9, Sep 13

#### West Los Angeles

Meets every Saturday morning from 10 a.m.—11:30 a.m.

### Eight-Week Groups

Groups meet once a week for an hour and a half for eight consecutive weeks starting in February, June and October with locations in Sherman Oaks, Century City, Santa Clarita, Redondo Beach, San Marino, Santa Ana and Newbury Park.

Please call to be placed in a group.  
Los Angeles/Ventura counties: (424) 362-2912 or Orange County: (714) 547-0885