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Bloomfield Hills

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Documentary gives hope to those struggling with unthinkable loss

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Five-year-old Myles Beckley always loved to make people laugh. Everyone he met, he called “my friend” — and even at age 4, he was concerned about helping others, suggesting his parents shovel all the driveways in the neighborhood as a surprise and plucking the first tulips of spring to give to the lady next door.

“He was just so happy and so outgoing everywhere he went,” said his mother, Virginia Beckley, of Bloomfield Hills.

On Jan. 5, 2008, the Beckley family’s world was turned upside down. While visiting Virginia’s family in Costa Rica, Myles was fatally injured in a horseback-riding accident.

“It was as though the world stopped. I wanted to run out of my skin, run out of my body and just keep running,” she recalled.

“I never thought I’d be able to smile again.”

Although the Beckleys arrived home to what Virginia described as an overwhelming outpouring of love and support from the Bloomfield Hills community and the St. Regis School, where Myles was a kindergartner, the months that followed his death saw her devastated by grief. Myles, an only son, also left behind an older sister and a baby sister who needed his parents’ care and attention.

“It’s like a hurricane coming through your house and turning everything upside down. You no longer know where anything is located. Everything is chaos, and you don’t know where to start picking up the pieces because even the floor is broken. You are overwhelmed. You are too weak to pick up pieces,” she said.

So when Bloomfield Hills resident and psychotherapist Judith Burdick asked Beckley to participate in her documentary, titled “Transforming Loss,” and share her story, Virginia agreed.

“I thought if I felt that way, how many other parents and those who lost loved ones were feeling the same way?” she said.

“I felt like I was alone, like no one understood, even though we had so many people supporting us.”

In 1991, Judith Burdick’s husband, Mark Rubens, was killed in a scuba-diving accident at age 35. Only 31 herself, and with two small children, Burdick was driven on by the need to move through the loss and find meaning in the tragedy.

“I had this incredible need to find meaning because it seemed so meaningless,” she said.

“A 35-year-old man goes scuba diving and never comes back. He had two children, a wife, a promising career.”

It was this drive to find meaning that led her to become a licensed psychotherapist, dedicating her life to helping others find peace and strength after loss. Burdick also created the website Widowed Young, designed to help others find support during the grieving process.

“‘Transforming Loss’ is not about giving up in the face of profound suffering, but instead rising to a new level of functioning and making meaning out of the experience,” she said.

“The loss actually fuels a fresh energy, which feeds the broken parts. As we heal, a deep desire emerges to help others through similar losses — to be the inspiration and example of one who has survived and now has the credibility to teach.”

In addition to Beckley’s story, viewers will hear also those of Molly Green, a Novi mother of four whose husband took his own life in 2010; Ricki Friedman, a Birmingham resident who lost her mother at age 13; Gary Weinstein, a Novi resident whose wife and two sons were killed by a drunken driver in 2005; Franklin resident Elizabeth Guz, who lost her 17-year-old son Michael to suicide; and Rachel and Michael Kain of Livonia, whose 4-month-old son Collin died of multiple heart defects.

Burdick said filming the documentary was a deeply profound and gratifying experience.

“These are very high-functioning grievers. This means they’ve taken their experience and moved through the acute stages of loss and are in the process of transforming those losses,” she said.

In the first several months following a loss, most people remain in a state of shock — especially if the loss was sudden. Because of this, Burdick said, what the grieving need most is the presence of those they love — not quick fixes.

“Just be there. Don’t try to fix it, don’t try to make that person get better faster,” she said.

“It’s a process and it takes as long as it takes. Just provide as much support as possible, and don’t be afraid to talk about the deceased. It’s very comforting, for most people, to process those emotions.”

Children, on the other hand, cannot and do not follow the same grieving process as adults.

“They grieve very differently. They are resilient, and they live much more in the moment,” she said.

“They can be crying one moment and laughing gleefully the next. Family counseling and play therapy is a great way for kids to act out what they’re going through. They can’t stay with it for very long, because they’re not introspective. That comes later, when they are young adults. The best thing is to not be afraid to talk about it with them.”

Burdick said the film brings the message of hope alive to those who are grieving and points the way forward.

“While it takes a very honest look at loss and pain and struggle, it also says, ‘This is what you can do with such a horrible tragedy as you move through the healing process,’” she said.

“These people all have that in common. They really had a driving need to help other people.”

Jan. 5, 2013, marked the five-year anniversary of Myles Beckley’s death.

Virginia Beckley says her faith in God and the tremendous support of her family and friends were what pulled her out of her well of grief.

“You don’t forget. The pain is still there, but it’s manageable. Now, I feel I can smile from the heart,” she said.

“You have to live your life and keep the memories alive as best you can. Sometimes I say, ‘Wow, I can still feel him, his energy.’ I can’t see him, but I can feel him, and that brings me comfort. I had always heard that love never dies, and now I understand what it means. Even when we physically die, the love we feel never ends.”

Judith Burdick’s documentary, “Transforming Loss,” will play at the Main Art Theater in Royal Oak March 12. For tickets or more information, visit www.transforminglossdocumentary.com.

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