

New film shows Michigan families' triumphing over heartache, shocking loss

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Molly Green had a premonition that Sunday afternoon in August 2010 as she drove her four young children home from a weekend spent at her sister's cottage.

"I knew that day, from the very beginning, there was something wrong, so when I pulled up in our driveway, I had my children stay in the car," Green said.

Her husband, Michael Green, despondent over money lost in the stock market, had killed himself in their West Bloomfield home.

Molly Green, a stay-at-home mom, was faced with raising their children -- ages 10, 8, 6 and 4 -- alone. In the weeks that followed, she learned her husband had stopped paying the premium on his life insurance, and they were broke. She and her children were forced to move into her sister's basement.

Those dark days -- and the strength it took to rebuild their lives -- are part of a new documentary called "Transforming Loss" that features six Michigan families who have triumphed over heartbreak.

The privately financed film will premiere Feb. 6-7 at the Maple Theatre in Bloomfield Township, sponsored by Temple Beth El of Bloomfield Hills.

"Transforming Loss" is the work of Judith Burdick, a licensed psychotherapist in Bingham Farms who has dedicated her career to helping people transform their deepest grief into their greatest strength.

Burdick began that journey in 1991, when her husband died in a diving accident off the coast of California. She was 31 and a stay-at-home mom with two small children. Like Green, Burdick had to find a new path.

"If these people can do it, anybody can do it," Burdick said.

Today, Green works for an insurance company and owns her own home. She and her children are in therapy, spending time with family and building their routines again.

Green, like others featured in the 50-minute film, found her strength in reaching out to help others. She writes a blog about her challenges, guiding newly grieving families through the difficult first months. She said several women widowed by suicide have contacted her as a result of the blog.

"I feel like I'm the perfect person for people to talk to about this," she said in a recent interview. "It takes time, but you learn lessons of strength, compassion and acceptance. There is some joy back in my life."

Burdick -- who wrote, directed and produced the short documentary -- used some of her own patients in the film, but also looked to the community for stories of loss, hope and giving.

The documentary is being submitted to national film festivals, including Sundance and the Traverse City Film Festival.

Other Michigan families featured in "Transforming Loss" include a father whose wife and two sons were killed by a drunken driver; a young woman who was just 8 when she began witnessing her mother's five-year battle with

terminal cancer, and a mother whose teenage son committed suicide after struggling with addiction.

Each family began helping others who were grieving. For instance, Gary Weinstein -- who lost his wife, Judith, 49, and sons Alex, 12, and Sam, 9 -- to a drunken driver in May 2005, has forgiven the man who killed them, Tom Wellinger, who is in prison. Weinstein also speaks publicly about the power of forgiveness.

"These are high-functioning grievers," Burdick said, noting that in her years of practice, she discovered loss can fuel "a new energy which feeds the broken parts."

"The people chose to reach out to others in pain, to help, and in doing so, they became teachers, healers," she said. "And as a result, they began healing themselves. They became more than who they were before."

That was the case for Michael and Rachel Kain of Livonia. Their newborn son, Colin Timothy, spent 109 days in the hospital as doctors tried to fix his heart defects before he died in February 2010.

The Kains were never able to bring Colin home to his two older brothers, Ethan, now 9, and Austin, now 7.

Michael Kain said the beginning was unbearable because they held out hope, day after day.

"He was perfect when he was born, a beautiful baby. You would never know anything was wrong," Kain said. "And the doctors were telling us these things could be corrected."

In the months after Colin's death, the Kains began reaching out to others who had lost a baby. They joined Tomorrow's Child, an organization that works to help prevent infant death and supports families who are grieving over a lost child.

The Kains began organizing twice yearly fund-raisers for heart defect research. They successfully lobbied the Michigan Legislature to declare February Heart Health Awareness month, kept in touch with other families they met along the way, and Rachel Kain started writing a twice-monthly column for a parental magazine about the family's experience.

Participating in "Transforming Loss" was enormously painful, Michael Kain said. But it also was tremendously rewarding, he said. The filming of their story took place over two days.

"It was like pulling off the bandage, and opening the wound. It was hard," he said. "It was raw, but we knew it was going to help somebody, so we did it, and we're glad we did."

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More Details: To see the film, learn more

"Transforming Loss" opens 7-9 p.m. Feb. 6-7 at the Maple Theater, followed by a reception.

Admission is free, although pre-registration is encouraged by calling 248-808-5569. The Maple is located at 4135 W. Maple Road in Bloomfield Township.

To see the trailer, go to www.transforminglossdocumentary.com. Read Molly Green's blog at www.mollygreenfamily.blogspot.com.