

Documentary walks you through grief to healing

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In 1991 at age 31, Judith Burdick was happily married to her college sweetheart, Mark Rubens, 35. The couple was living in "idyllic" San Diego, with two kids, ages 4 and 6, and Mark had just completed his residency as an orthopedic surgeon. They were living the dream.



Producer, writer and director Judith Burdick, left, of Bloomfield Hills talks with executive producer Marguerite Parise before a private screening of "Transforming Loss." The film focuses on six people who suffered terrible losses but turned their pain into a way to help others. (John M. Galloway / Special to The Detroit News)

In an instant, the whole dream was shattered. Mark died in a freak scuba diving accident. "The grief was brutal," Burdick says.

Now 22 years later, Burdick sits in her office in Bingham Farms and reflects on the path her life has taken since, owing its many turns to a combination of providence and sheer will, grace and brawn. She went from a young widow reluctantly moving back to Bloomfield Hills because it was better for the kids, to becoming a graduate student commuting round trip to Ann Arbor three days a week, to opening up private practice as a

psychotherapist 12 years ago, to her newest admittedly out-of-the-box title: filmmaker.

"It is very cool," she says of the success of her latest venture, a documentary she wrote, produced and directed called "Transforming Loss." "But I do feel like it came from something bigger than me. It was very much ..." she smiles and points a finger upward "divinely inspired."

"Transforming Loss" documents the grief journeys of six local people who, in the face of devastating losses, were able to transform themselves and their pain through helping others.

"I wanted to provide a roadmap, a blueprint that did not exist when I was going through it," Burdick says. Burdick's vision, which began as a book and evolved into a film, was to provide "an intimate view of grief that would force people to really feel and experience the whole process: from grief to healing to transformation."

To that end, the film, which begins with the Carl Jung quote "I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become," does not cut corners. There is no shortage of raw pain, but it is not gratuitous; this pain is purposeful. "My

point is you can't run from it," Burdick says. "You have to face it and feel it in order to begin healing."

To be sure, the film also lives up to its name: Each person transforms his or her loss into a force for good and living with purpose.

Gary Weinstein of Novi lost his wife and two young sons in 2005 to a drunken driver. When he describes being summoned to the hospital, we feel his dread: "I knew that seeing helicopters circling was not a good sign." We are with him in a conference room with the doctor. "I said, 'You mean no one made it?' And he said, 'No one made it.'"

Remarkably, Weinstein publicly forgave the man who killed his family. "I don't hate him for what he did; I hate what he did," he explains. "There's a difference." Now Weinstein is committed to teaching others. "The conversations I'm having about forgiveness are really some of the more powerful and useful outcomes to have come out of the tragedy."

Similarly Elizabeth Guz of Franklin painstakingly describes the downward spiral of her 17-year-old son Michael, who ended his life. She reads a note he left: "Death is not the worst thing that can happen to someone. Sometimes living is worse. I'm sorry."

But eventually, we see Guz come out the other side. She began volunteering at the Heinz C. Prechter Bipolar Research Project as a way to bring meaning to Michael's death. "I don't fear death like I did," Guz says. "The quote 'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience' is very comforting to me. I know this is not all there is. I know I will see my son again."

Molly Green of Novi, a 41-year-old mother of four, describes finding the body of her husband, Michael, a stock market trader in between jobs in August 2010. He died from a self-inflicted gun shot wound in the family home while she'd taken the kids to their cottage.

Green began writing through the pain. The writing became a blog, which became an online support group. "People want to know how to get through the suffering. Everybody does it differently. But they just want honesty."

For herself, Burdick's transformation was becoming a psychotherapist specializing in grief and loss. "I knew my life experience would lend credibility to the people I wanted to help," she says. "That patients would feel: 'Aha, she gets it.'"

She especially designed the film to appeal to everyone. "I wanted to normalize death, to strip all the myths that exist in our culture. Let's face it: The truth is we can't escape life without experiencing it."

For film showings, go to www.transforminglossdocumentary.com.

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