



Today's Female Changemakers: The Founders Of Project Grace

What these two women have started will move you.

After watching the documentary film, [*Motherland*](#), which explored grief and loss in another culture and the healing that came from service to others,

Catherine Bowen Stern and Carole Mahoney were inspired to do something.

The two moms from Northern California started Project Grace in 2007 as a means to help mothers who were suffering from the death of a child. They began with one trip to Mexico to work with children in an orphanage. What they found was a dramatic transformation and healing process that took place with the grieving mothers when they got outside their comfort zone and into a place where they could channel their emotions in a positive, nurturing way.

Since then, Project Grace has taken several other trips and expanded its participants to include grieving fathers, siblings and other relatives. All of the trips are service-based for poor communities, intended to heal the lives of the recipients. But the impact goes much deeper and often affects the givers more.

To find out more about Project Grace and its impact, Chicks for Change had a chance to talk with Stern and Mahoney:

How many trips have you taken, where to and for what projects?

We have taken a total of eight trips. Our first trip was in the spring of 2008 to Bucerias, Mexico where we volunteered with the orphanage, Casa Hogar/Manos de Amor. We also spent a day volunteering with The Families at the Dump, an organization that supports the families living off the of the Puerto Vallarta landfill. We have taken four trips to Bucerias, all of which have been “mother’s” trips.

In the spring of 2009 we were thwarted by the swine flu epidemic and diverted our Mexico trip to Phoenix, Arizona where we volunteered with Camp Get-A-Well-A in the Phoenix Children’s Hospital.

We have twice teamed up with Seeds of Learning, a wonderful organization that works to improve access to education in Central America. We have traveled on two occasions to San Ramon, Nicaragua, where we helped with the construction of a school. Our first trip with Seeds of Learning was a “family’ trip in which several mothers came with their adult children (surviving siblings) to honor their lost child. Our second trip included two mothers, two fathers, a sister honoring her brother and father, and a son who was there to honor his mother.

What’s next for you?

This summer we will go to Tanzania where we will volunteer with The Foundation for Tomorrow, an organization that works to bring education to Tanzania’s orphans. We will also be returning to Nicaragua with Seeds of Learning in the fall.

How would you say the experience of serving others helps to transform the grieving parents and family members?

For a mother who has lost a child the grief is ever present. Many bereaved mothers also suffer a second tragic loss, the loss of friends and community who all too often seem to disappear. Often these women become pariahs — after all, they represent, in the flesh, the reality of every parent’s worst fear. We’ve heard from mothers that “the phone stops ringing.” Anyway, we think it’s important to acknowledge rather than ignore the pain. We don’t claim to “heal” our participants or even suggest a Project Grace trip will make things any easier. At the very least, we provide our participants a place to put it, or you could say, a positive outlet for this grief that is all encompassing. There are benefits to the service in that knowing that they are doing something important, outside of themselves which brings back feelings of self worth. Each one has expressed something to the effect of “My son would be proud of me,” or “he/she would want me to do this.” No, the service doesn’t mask the pain, but they are able to see their loss in a new perspective.

How does this affect the participants when they are there?

When we started Project Grace we felt confident that bringing people out of their daily lives to be of service to a community in need would indeed be therapeutic. What has been almost as important to our participants is that they be immersed in a group of women (or people) who have been through a similar experience. Our moms are allowed to say whatever they want, and they are so relieved not to have to pretend to be OK.

They are given so much compassion as they tell their stories, and you can see them becoming stronger and more self-assured as they offer that compassion and support to others. Also, they really, really enjoy just talking about their kids — they get to tell the group all about their son or daughter, what he liked to eat, what books she liked to read — all the joyful moments and characteristics that made him or her so precious. And they get to talk about it in a group that is genuinely interested, not just shutting down at the mention of his or her name. By the end of each trip we feel that we have really gotten to know each child and loved one. Their stories live on, and that is just so important to our moms.

Why do you travel to other countries versus doing something local?

We are frequently asked why we insist on traveling out of the country, and our answer is always the same – it’s necessary to get our participants out of their daily lives and into a culture and community very different from their own. They are pushed into immediate friendships and instant bonding happens over the shared adventure. For better, for worse, we are in it together and no one can say, “Well, I think I’ll go home now.” Also, it is vital that our moms (or dads, siblings, etc.) witness how other cultures and communities live, grieve and thrive in the midst of poverty or circumstances so very different from their own.

What has been one of your favorite moments that you have seen from a mother?

I think we both have so many “favorite moments.” There is one thing however that happens time and time again, and we are just so humbled by this – when we introduce ourselves to the community we are serving, they immediately embrace us (obviously they know a lot about loss). They want to know about the person we are honoring, they want to hear our stories, too. The union of the two communities is sincere and uncomplicated.

Here are some examples:

Arriving at the orphanage on our very first trip. We were nervous and the women were just getting to know each other. Suddenly these kids came running to us and jumping into our arms, instantly disarming us all with their innocence and joy.

We have one participant who has been on three Project Grace trips. The first trip was only months after the loss of her son. She was given tremendous support and

mentoring from the other women. As time passed and she joined us on other trips we have seen her grow stronger and to the point where she is the one mentoring.

One mom sharing her deceased daughter's birthday with the community we were serving. On the day of her daughter's birthday, we brought a huge Winnie the Pooh cake to the community and handed out cake to the entire group – kids, villagers and our group. Everyone sang happy birthday and you could just see how much it meant to this mom.

Watching our group of women get together to learn about and then create their own Koliva – a traditional Greek dessert. The Koliva is to be shared, and the women passed it around to each other reciting the mantra "Live to Remember."

A mom telling us one of her favorite memories will always be the time she was walking one of the little girls from the orphanage to school. As they neared the school and other groups of women and children, the little girl reached up to hold her hand, as if she wanted the others to see she too had someone who cared about her.

One mom sprinkling her son's ashes in to the mixed concrete. She remarked, "He wanted to be here."

One of the Nicaraguan women was so interested in hearing all of the stories and seeing the photos of the loved ones. We had buttons made with photos of loved ones on them and every day she joined us in wearing one of the buttons.

Would you say the family members are getting just as much out of these trips as the people who they are helping?

If by "family members" you mean our participants, absolutely. As we said before, just being in a group of participants who have been through a similar experience, being able to speak freely about their child or loved one and not having to pretend to be OK, and being able to offer support to others is a huge relief for our participants. Siblings get to meet other siblings, dads get to meet other dads, and everyone gets the freedom to grieve, share, and serve in a safe and supportive environment.

We have been told that everyone gains from these Project Grace trips. The participants come home refreshed, restored, and relieved. Family members are thankful because try as they might to help their loved one, they don't always know the right thing to do, or

say. These trips provide a much-needed break for everyone, while introducing a new perspective and appreciation.

We have also seen that men and women often grieve in very different ways and this can take its toll on a marriage. When a woman joins one of our trips it is often a great “break” for her husband or partner. Men can feel so burdened by the need to be supportive to their wives, even when they are suffering and grieving too. Our trips allow the women a source of support and listening outside of the marriage. Getting away from the family on these trips also allows parents who have been “holding it together” for the surviving siblings a break from that responsibility.

What have you learned through Project Grace?

Our participants are so full of compassion, patience and understanding for one another. When you see a woman who has been through the worst possible experience that any of us can imagine, when you see her hold out her hand and offer support to someone else. — well, this is the best possible side of humanity. We are awed each and every time we witness this compassion.

For more information on Project Grace, [visit their website](#).

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