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Project Grace

Helping others heals the pain of losing a child

BY JIM WOOD



PHOTO BY TIM PORTER

Many say the death of a child is the worst loss any parent can experience. A part of you is gone, a loving aspect of life that will never, ever return. Parents are not supposed to outlive their children—yet sometimes that happens.

And when it happens, two Marin mothers, Catherine Bowen Stern and Carole Mahoney, are available with a concept they believe will help ease the pain. It's called Project Grace.

“The grief softens over time,” says Michelle Miller, “but it never goes away.” Poignantly,

she adds, “I wouldn't want it to go away; that's all I have of Carolyn.” Eight years ago this month, while playing with her dad and brother on a desolate Point Reyes beach, Carolyn, then eight years old, was swept to her death by a rogue wave. “Over time, my grief has taken a different form,” Miller says, “but the healing will be a lifelong process.”

As part of that process, on September 27th Miller and six other Marin moms who've lost children will fly to Bucerias, Mexico, and involve themselves in the lives of children living in an orphanage and those inhabiting the local dump. “The purpose of the trip is to get a grieving mother away from the environment that has isolated her,” says Mahoney. “Each mom will be honoring the memory of her lost child—and they all know that in helping others they will actually be helping themselves.”

“Personally, I’m looking forward to ‘getting out of myself,’” Miller says, “and realizing once again that everybody suffers.” The journey will cost each parent \$1,000 (airfares not included) with a few “scholarships” available for those who can’t meet that expense. An earlier trip to Phoenix occurred in May and a Project Grace journey, in conjunction with Seeds of Learning, to Nicaragua in June 2010 will not only be open to bereaved moms but fathers, grandparents, siblings and, according to Mahoney, “anyone else who’d like to honor a loved one by serving a community in need.”

Project Grace was named to honor the daughter of San Francisco’s Anne Magill, who was lost to suicide. The project is a program of Sausalito-based CorStone, an international organization that aims to provide emotional support for dealing with conflict and crisis. Other participants have lost children to pediatric cancer, automobile accidents and heart disease. As for cofounders and directors Mahoney and Stern, their inspiration for starting the project came from seeing the film *Motherland*, which explores the idea of finding healing through service to others. On Wednesday, September 16, at 7 p.m., that award-winning film will be screened at the Rafael Film Center in San Rafael, with filmmaker Jennifer Steinman participating in a post-screening Q & A. For more information on Project Grace, call Catherine Bowen Stern at 415.999.2694 or Carole Mahoney at 415.381.4980.