

Loss and Found

The death of a child changes a parent forever.

But out of that terrible darkness, some have

transformed their grief into advocacy and activism

— and created legacies to keep their light alive.

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Parents are not meant to bury children.

Most of us will never come close to understanding the depth of a parent's pain when a child dies. Whether they are lost to illness, addiction, suicide, accident or violence—as 20 of them were at Sandy Hook Elementary 10 years ago—every surviving parent sees the life they once imagined for their child evaporate. Time is forever measured in “before” and “after.”

“To this day I’ve never fully grieved Dylan,” says Nicole Hockley, the mother of a “joyful” 6-year-old who was among 20 children killed at Sandy Hook Elementary. “I’ve never really accepted the fact that he is gone. When I start thinking of the circumstances of his death, I become so angry and so sad. I’m afraid if I start crying, I won’t be able to stop.”

It’s not uncommon for parents who have lost children to *not* let go. Bereavement—the period of mourning following the loss of a loved one—can last for weeks, months, years or a lifetime.

“Grief is a journey. But it’s not a lockstep journey,” says grief counselor Wendy Davenson. Now practicing in Colorado, the licensed family therapist lived in Sandy Hook for 45 years, where she counseled families facing addiction, divorce and loss. She worked with some of the teachers and families of children who survived the shooting in 2012. “Grief is an experience that is painful, unpredictable and non-sequential,” says Davenson.

“How a child dies has an impact on a parent’s grief,” she says. “For example, suicide is a stigmatized loss and many people don’t want to talk about it.” The path to acceptance is hard if a parent feels shame and refuses to reach out in some way, she says.

Even when a parent knows a child is terminally ill, they may spend months, sometimes years, anticipating and mourning their loss, says Bido Aguessy, an end-of-life psychologist and bereavement counselor at Connecticut Hospice in Branford. “They start grieving long before the child dies, as they try to make sense of it,” says Aguessy. Faith, however, can have a powerful effect on grief, he says. “Some

parents find comfort in believing a child is at peace.” Still, while faith can ameliorate pain, it can never fully take it away. “You learn to *adjust* to your loss, but you never recover,” says Aguessy.

It seems unthinkable that anyone could ever accept, adjust or adapt enough to live on from such a loss. And yet remarkably, some parents have found ways to channel heartache into mission. They’ve immersed themselves in causes, in things they believe will make a difference. And in many cases, that redirection has been transformative for them and others.

Public sorrow, and a promise

In the hours and days after Dec. 14, 2012, everything seemed surreal to the heart-wrenched Hockley. She remembers “feeling as though I was looking at everything from the outside. I don’t think I ever thought about how much of my life and grief would be shared with the public,” she says.

Within a few weeks, though, she started wondering how the tragedy might have been prevented. She learned that some parents in town were convening to discuss the very same thing. “I knew I wanted to do something,” says Hockley. “When they reached out saying, ‘We’re creating a platform for any family to work from,’ I knew I’d found my purpose, and I got into it really fast. I wanted to learn.”

Sandy Hook Promise was started just one month after the shooting. Hockley is now the national nonprofit foundation’s very visible CEO, along with co-founder Mark Barden, who lost his 7-year-old son Daniel in the shooting. Their mission is to stop gun violence before it starts by teaching others to detect warning signs of trouble—and to intervene. The group has been impactful in the areas of gun safety, school safety, mental health, youth empowerment, and legisla-





tion, thanks to the determination of Hockley, Barden and their staff, advocates and volunteers. Hockley is very quick to say: "I did not do this by myself."

Among its achievements, the organization was a key partner in drafting the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden earlier this year. In addition to supporting legislation at the state and local levels, Sandy Hook Promise has trained more than 7.5 million people nationwide in its "Know the Signs" programs that focus on putting an end to the epidemic of gun violence.

Hockley credits therapy with helping her out of "the darkest place" she's ever been. "I've seen about five different therapists who were meeting my different needs at different times," she says. "Directly in the aftermath I was dealing with trauma-response therapy. Then grief therapy. Then a combination of the two. You've got to find what works for you and know when you're ready to stop." She'll tell you she's come a very long way: "I think I'm as near to the me I was before... as I've ever been," she says.

"Sandy Hook Promise is the most significant part of my healing process," says Hockley. "I do it for my surviving son, and everything that came after Dylan's murder. This is his legacy. It's how we're keeping his name alive. It gives me purpose."

Since losing her son Dylan (*shown opposite page, top*), Nicole Hockley has poured her heart and soul into ending gun violence through Sandy Hook Promise. "I wanted to be of service, and be seen as more than a grieving mom," says Hockley. "I very intentionally tried not to cry in media appearances. I was afraid people wouldn't listen to my words."

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— Nicole Hockley



From dependence to prevention

Carolán lost her son Brian to a prescription drug overdose when he was 28. “I will never, ever forget that day,” she says. He hadn’t been in touch with her for a few days, which was unusual. “I had a bad feeling, so I asked his dad to drive over to his apartment with me.” When they found Brian, it was too late. “I was grief stricken,” she says. “And now, more than 20 years later, I still am.”

Brian had been in and out of rehab for more than 10 years, says Carolán, who lives in Middlebury. “He’d stay clean, but relapse would always come back to haunt him,” she says. While Brian fought his addiction, Carolán suffered shame and guilt as she tried to keep it secret, especially from her three young children. But everything changed once his fight was over, she says: “I had to think about how I was going to cope because I had three other children at home.”

Carolán made her mind up to do more. “My son died from drugs and I couldn’t save him,” she says. “So, I kept asking myself if there was anything I could do to create a safer environment for my surviving children and others. I

spent many sleepless nights wondering how I could be the change and do something to honor my son.”

She and a friend, Donna DeLuca, started to research addiction and drug abuse in and around Newtown, where Carolán lived at the time. They were distressed, but not surprised, when they found out it was rampant. When they learned there had been 14 drug-related deaths in the community within a three-month period, they decided they had to act. They called a meeting to discuss drugs in the community and more than 300 people showed up. Carolán says: “This was the start of my work.”

In 2003, in an attempt to network with other families impacted by addiction, the two women founded The Parent Connection (now known as the CT Parent Connection). Its mission statement, then and now: To educate and empower the community in the prevention of substance abuse and to embrace families in crisis. “We offer hope to help people through a life-altering experience,” says Carolán.

The nonprofit holds forums in schools in Fairfield, Southbury and Newtown, and Carolán spreads the word in the surrounding community. They run three weekly Hope & Support meetings in Newtown, Waterbury and Milford. Run by a licensed grief therapist, their monthly bereavement group is a compassionate venue for anyone who has lost a loved one due to, or related to, substance abuse. “I couldn’t change anything that Brian did, and now I know that and accept it,” says Carolán. But we’re making a difference, by providing the one thing that was missing when Brian was in the throes of his addiction: education.”

A state grant made it possible to secure a permanent home in Newtown for the CT Parent Connection, founded by Dorrie Carolán, who lost her son Brian to drugs. The group’s mission is to prevent substance abuse and help families in crisis. An added benefit was becoming a role model for the revitalization of buildings on the Fairfield Hills campus.

Healing through kindness

The suicide of a 17-year-old boy in Fairfield in the winter of 2021 left his town shaken, his school devastated, and his parents bereft. “No one saw it coming,” remembers his father, Jim Kuczo. “In fact, that very day my wife told a friend: ‘I think we’ve made a turn for the good.’” But son Kevin wasn’t telling the truth about his schoolwork—and his mood.

“Kevin was a great kid, really smart... a good person. He loved team sports, being a part of the lacrosse and football programs at school. He was kind. But he was troubled, too,” says Kuczo. “He’d started seeing a therapist in August, but it probably should have been sooner.”

His father says virtual learning took its toll on Kevin. Accustomed to doing well in Advanced Placement classes, he found himself failing. “All the things he looked forward to—lacrosse, volunteering trips, family vacations, school dances, football—they were all canceled because of the pandemic,” says Kuczo. “We had to treat our kids like prisoners.” He also points to social media for making all teens, not just Kevin, “feel like they’re never good enough.” And he blames himself for not seeing the signs of depression more clearly. “There was a lot of guilt and regret,” he says. Later, when he learned of two eerily similar cases of suicide—one in Maine and one in Chicago—he and his wife Kristen realized they weren’t alone. “We now know that depression is real. And that Kevin’s decision was irrational,” says Kuczo.

Jim Kuczo of Fairfield lost his son Kevin to suicide in 2021. He and his wife Kristen turned their grief into compassion by founding a non-profit dedicated to helping families impacted by mental illness. He’s shown here with a “buddy bench,” one of many in town designed to encourage kindness and awareness in young people.

The healing for Kevin’s parents began just two days after his death. When a cluster of people gathered outside their home for a vigil, they were moved. “We talked to them. We were touched by their kindness. And we decided in that moment that being kind would be the good to come out of losing Kevin,” says Kuczo.

They started Kevin’s Afterglow, a foundation dedicated to education, an open dialogue on mental illness—and kindness. It was named for Kevin’s positive and lasting impression on others. Kuczo puts a face on mental illness by giving presentations in which he speaks passionately about Kevin, coping after death, a new way of looking at depression, and the importance of being kinder. The foundation is also raising funds to offer scholarships to students who want to pursue careers in pediatric mental health.

The most moving tribute to Kevin’s memory may be the foundation’s commitment to place a “buddy bench” outside every elementary school in Fairfield. Kuczo explains: “The rules of the bench are if you’re feeling down, you go sit on the bench. If you see someone on the bench, you go join them, and you talk. It’s a simple act of kindness that may help someone through a difficult time.”





A caring sanctuary

Most parents whose bereavement evolves into something actionable do it to honor their lost child in a meaningful way. “Grieving parents are always reaching for something,” says Davenson. “They’ll often choose something that was important to the child.”

A perfect example is the CVH Foundation, a nonprofit started in 2013 to honor the life of Catherine Violet Hubbard, another 6-year-old Sandy Hook victim. Set on 34 acres in the heart of Newtown, the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary “promotes compassion and healing through the human-animal connection.”

“The sanctuary represents everything that mattered to Catherine,” says her mom, Jenny Hubbard. “She loved all animals. She was always taking care of a frog or a worm or a butterfly. She always said that one day she wanted to care for animals.”

The sanctuary came to be in the midst of Hubbard’s grief, and she owes it all to a typo. While writing Catherine’s obituary, she asked that donations be made to the Newtown Animal Control Center in lieu of flowers—but she left out the word “control.” Donations started pouring in to a small rescue organization run by four

The CVH Foundation and Animal Sanctuary are dedicated to the memory of Catherine Violet Hubbard, a Sandy Hook victim who loved animals. The nonprofit provides learning opportunities and promotes the care and nurturing of animals. As a founder and board member, Jenny Hubbard is intent on keeping her daughter’s memory alive.

women in town. Surprised by the \$130,000 that had been donated so far, they reached out to the Hubbard family and shared the idea of funding a sanctuary.

The CVH Foundation offers education programs and K–6 enrichment opportunities provided to schools free of charge. The “Senior Paw Project” provides veterinary wellness care, prescriptive, and ongoing food support to seniors in financial need. Weather permitting, they hold workshops on the property now; and provided the funding is in place, they’re planning to break ground on two buildings in the spring. One will house education programs,



while the other will serve as a veterinary intake facility with quarters for an onsite caretaker.

While the sanctuary provides solace, Hubbard says grief never ends, nor is there a timetable for it. “As I’ve grown and healed and moved forward, there are still times when things bubble up. “I just sent my son to college. It was hard, and it brought up missing her. She would have been 16.”

The ongoing work at the CVH Animal Sanctuary shows that honoring a loved one can be a forward-thinking gesture. Just as it can take years for a garden to grow, Hubbard knows that Catherine’s legacy will last.

“A parent’s hope is always to keep the child in other people’s minds without making it maudlin,” says Davenson. “As the years have gone by, I see the sanctuary as a place where Catherine’s spirit is still alive,” says Hubbard. “I like knowing that her life is providing hope and meaning. Isn’t that what every parent wants?” ■

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Sandy Hook Promise

The Newtown-based national nonprofit honors all victims of gun violence by supporting legislation and taking meaningful action in schools, homes and communities to stop the tragic loss of life. 203-304-9780, sandyhookpromise.org

CT Parent Connection

Committed to addressing the problem of substance abuse directly, this Newtown-based organization is dedicated to increasing substance abuse awareness, and supporting families impacted by it. 203-270-1600, ctparentconnection.org

Kevin’s Afterglow

Based in Fairfield, this foundation is dedicated to education, an open dialogue on mental illness, and kindness. It was named for Kevin Kuczo, a Fairfield teen who lost his battle with depression in 2021. kevinsafterglow.org

Catherine Violet Hubbard Sanctuary

Honoring the life of Catherine Violet Hubbard, a 6-year-old Sandy Hook victim, and set on 34 acres in Newtown, the nonprofit promotes compassion and healing through the human-animal connection. 866-620-8640, cvhfoundation.org

Connecticut Hospice

Established in 1974, the Branford facility provides home and inpatient hospice care and palliative care for patients facing life-limiting illnesses, and their families. 203-315-7301, hospice.com

If you need help:

The **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) is a network of more than 200 state and local call centers. Services include 24/7 access to trained crisis contact center staff who can help people experiencing suicidal, substance use and other mental health crises, provide referrals to resources, and perform transfers to mobile crisis services or emergency services. To reach the lifeline, call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.