

Author brings 'Help for the Bereaved Parent'

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

"The loss of a child of any age — even an older adult — whether by accident, illness, suicide or war, is the ultimate of tragedies. But it is also a tragedy that must not be compounded by allowing everything around you to die."

This is the conviction of Harriet Sarnoff Schiff, a Beverly Hills journalist, who lost her own son 10 years ago and has since shared her experience with millions of other bereaved parents.

Mrs. Schiff will be speaking about her own and others' experiences with the death and dying of a child on Tuesday night at the Birmingham Community House. If the reaction to her appearances on the "Today" and the "Phil Donahue" shows are a barometer of interest, the 8 p.m. program should be one of the best attended and most thought-provoking programs on the Community House agenda this season.

The author of "The Bereaved Parent," now in its seventh printing with translations in Dutch and German, Harriet Schiff is anything but the reclusive grieving parent so often pictured by those who never experienced the death of a child, whether that child be a newborn or past middlelife. Immediately evident in her manner is the author's plus humor that abounds when she speaks.

It wasn't always that way, she said. Sandy and Harriet Schiff once had a middle child, a son Robby, who was 18 years old when he died in 1968 in the University of Alabama intensive care unit. The child had been born two months prematurely with a severely damaged heart. The operation to repair the damage was unsuccessful, she said. Within 24 hours of the surgery, Robby was dead.

"I wanted to write this until it wouldn't be therapy. For a long time I couldn't physically write the word Robby. I waited (five years) until I could approach it rationally — 'til I could walk in and talk to families in various stages of grieving."

And talk she does. "I have a goal of making it socially acceptable to say, 'I have a dead child,'" she said. "People would say 'how many children do you have?' I would say two, with my fingers crossed behind my back. To myself I'd say, 'I'm not denying you, Robby.'"

Mrs. Schiff believes that this type of

behavior is common. "You can say you are a widow or widower. People can die of grief. But when you say you have a dead child, people shy away. They are frightened of us. It's ridiculous to be in a closet with a problem like this."

She also feels that people who have not experienced the death of a child are fearful that it is contagious.

"This has been an awful battle," she said. "There were an awful lot of people who held back. They were thinking 'There but for the grace of God . . . They didn't know how much we needed them.'"

"YOU CAN BE a widow today. If you marry tomorrow you are no longer a widow," she explained. "But you are always going to be a bereaved parent."

Learning to live with that fact can make the grieving easier in the long run, but it cannot remove grief altogether.

Helping others to learn how to function, despite their sadness, has become an avocation that takes Mrs. Schiff away from her home and two surviving children at least two to three days twice each month. Any longer than that, she said, would be adding injury to loss.

"It is so important for the bereaved parent to be able to talk about the child who has died," she said. "Give his name, his age, what you liked the most and what you liked the least about your child. You have got to talk about him to keep honest memories. Too often people grieve for someone they didn't even know. I'd rather know Robby for real things — for temper tantrums — than for things he wasn't."

Mrs. Schiff also believes that by speaking out, the grieving parent can avoid unwitting cruelties inflicted by even the best intending friends and relatives.

"THERE ARE some things people say that are like red banners in front of a bull," she said. "Things like 'Well, you have other children'; or, 'You can get pregnant again'; or, 'You had him for 10, 30 or 40 years.' It is never long

enough. The best thing to say is 'I'm sorry.' Be a good listener. Ask about memories of the child. We want to share our memories."

She also believes that the funeral is an important part of the recuperative process, a time when friends are more important than at almost any other time.

"The important purpose to the funeral is that it gives the bereaved family a socially acceptable setting in which to grieve." She explained how one funeral director told her that Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, with her magnificent public stoicism at the funeral of the assassinated president, set grieving back a hundred years.

She created an example of dignity for the world that people emulated just as they emulated her dress, he told Mrs. Schiff. People did not stop to think that in private she cried and probably screamed just as we all do. Some of his clients actually were ashamed of their comparative lack of control when this attitude filtered down to the general population, he concluded.

Mrs. Schiff also questions the right of the public to demand that men maintain a "stiff-upper-lip" approach to such a catastrophic event in their lives. Today she is frequently accompanied by her husband, Sandy, who makes a point of drawing men together at meetings to discuss their grief.

"In Indianapolis recently, Sandy ran a for-men-only seminar," she explained. "He expected 40 men, but 60 crowded in. So many of them expressed their hostility toward what had happened to them. People need a chance to open up. Only then can they begin to heal."

Openly critical of many aspects of the way we deal with death, warmly compassionate toward those who are caught up in his tragedy, Mrs. Schiff sheds a new light on the subject. She dispels old theories and replaces them with clear thinking and solid advice.

Tickets to Mrs. Schiff's discussion are \$5 per person. For more information call the Community House at 644-5832.

nize our other children's needs."

MRS. SCHIFF blames many blunders on the fact that too few bereaved parents have anyone to turn to for understanding, comfort and advice.

"What we needed then was somebody who could say, 'I survived the same ordeal — you can, too.' The absence of such assistance compounds the tragedy."

Another problem, she noted, is buried in the American demand for instant gratification.

"We have a very instant society," she explained. "We expect everything to be better instantly. Grieving takes a long time. If grieving is still going on two years later, we become panicky."

The answer, she said, is to find others who have had similar experience and talk about what has happened. The reaction to her book and appearances is ample evidence that there are others who are also looking for others to share their problems.

By the time her appearance was aired on the Donahue show, she noted, the station had received requests to form 1,200 new chapters of the Compassionate Friends, an international organization for bereaved parents.



Harriet Schiff waited for five years before she was able to take a pen in hand and talk about the death of her son Robby. Now millions of bereaved parents are seeking her out to talk about children they have lost in infancy, accident, illness, suicide and war.


Botsford chairman named

Norman Wachler has been elected chairman of the board of trustees at Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills. A longtime civic activist, Wachler has been a board trustee for the past four years. His most recent po-

sition was that of chairman of the professional affairs committee. He is a graduate of Oakland University and is employed by Osmun's mens stores. Married and the father of two, Wachler and his family reside in Huington Woods.

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