

Expert advises

Understanding—first step toward coping with grief

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

Those who don't know Harriet Sarnoff Schiff will listen in amazement to her. She frequently creates the impression that here is an extremely macabre personality. Seated one recent afternoon at the Midtown Cafe, Mrs. Schiff talked about death and dying with the same humor and candor that the rest of us reserved for life's least depressing experiences. "That's the point," she pointed out emphatically, leaning forward on her elbows to spear her listener with bright, intelligent eyes. "I want most to have this show pull everything about

death and dying out of the closet!" The conversation took place on "any day but Monday," which is "Reachout" on radio station WCAR (1090 AM). The 2-3 p.m. program, she said, is a call-in talk show where listeners share grief, problems, concerns and experiences with her, her husband, announcer Sandy Schiff and guest speakers knowledgeable about the subject of death and dying. "This is not a suicide prevention service," she said. "It's a sharing service. What worked for grieving people, how they dealt with their grief, this is really what I love to hear. And, I do!" The tiny, energized Birmingham res-

ident is a former newspaper reporter, a successful author and a nationally recognized expert on the subject of death and dying. In his best-selling autobiography, television personality Phil Donahue described their meeting as his most unforgettable experience. The encounter took place on Donahue's syndicated show after publication of her book "The Bereaved Parent." That book detailed her responses to the death of her 10-year-old son. Mrs. Schiff drew an audience, he said, made up entirely of parents who lost children. "I saw those people sitting there, the audience, and many of them were younger than me," Donahue said, "and you know, I didn't lose it, but it's as emotionally involved as I have been or ever will be in a show. That show transcended the tube."

show seemed an opportunity to expand the discussion of death and dying to all grieving people who want to help one another or receive help, she said. Writing about death, and ultimately being able to discuss it on the radio, she said, was prompted by the death of her son Robby a dozen years ago. Five years later, she found that she was able to face his death with the skill that was most natural, writing about it on paper. In retrospect, she said, she had the idea that she was beginning a new life when she wrote, "The loss of a child of any age — even an adult child — 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."

Each program, she said, is the product of thorough advance research from which she prepares a list of questions to make sure that all aspects of the topic are covered. Whether the topic is "Death and the Law" or who should have the final say on the style of burial (the dead or the living?), each program will include personalizations and experts

conversant in the topic. "I also begin every program — by explaining that I have a dead child. It seems to open people up." Looking to the future, Mrs. Schiff sees no end to the list of subjects that should be covered during her program. Prominent on the list, she said, is a piece on suicide in Detroit. "Economics and suicide are a very big issue," she said firmly. "For instance, there is the corporate mentality that can't deal with being laid off and possibly never being able to return to what they were trained for. Or, the recent articles about the rate of suicide among policemen. I feel morally that something has to be done on this whole issue." Leaning back in her seat, her arms draped over the arms of the chair, she looked at the ceiling, around the room, and then focused her attention straight ahead. "There are so many things to cover that it's a question of what to cover next."

Bike-a-thon needs riders

Riders and sponsors are needed in the St. Jude bike-a-thon scheduled for 9 a.m. May 31 at First Presbyterian Church, 11 Mile and Farmington roads. The money raised through the Wheels of Life bike-a-thon will be donated to St. Jude Children's Hospital. Adult riders will follow a bike route from the church through Oakland Community College on Farmington Road near Twelve Mile and back to the church. Riders from 6 to 12 years old will be assigned a smaller route. There is a tricycle route for preschoolers within the confines of the church parking lot. Each rider will be given a lap card when they register at the First Presbyterian Church on the day of the bike-a-thon. Every time the riders go past the check point, officials will initial the card. At the end of the ride, the lap record will be signed to show that the rider earned the amount pledged by sponsors. Riders will return to sponsors after the event to collect their pledges. Participants will wear hospital braces bearing the slogan "I'm riding

for Lisa." Lisa is this year's poster child for the bike-a-thon. She was a 4-year-old afflicted with leukemia who died a few months ago. RIDERS who collect \$25 or more in pledges will be awarded a T-shirt emblazoned with the St. Jude bike-a-thon slogan and insignia. Persons who collect \$75 or more in pledges will be given backpacks carrying the same insignia and slogan. Sponsor sheets for riders can be obtained at the Farmington Library on Liberty, the Farmington Hills branch on 12 Mile east of Farmington Road and at the Farmington YMCA on Farmington Road north of Twelve Mile. Riders can enroll in the bike-a-thon before obtaining the sponsor sheet if they have written down the names of sponsors and the amount of pledges on a sheet of paper and bring it with them to the event. Persons who want to sponsor a rider for the event can call the Farmington area bike-a-thon chairwoman, Nancy Bates at 477-4351.

THE COMPLIMENT pleases Harriet Schiff, but it doesn't overly impress her, or prompt her to think of an avalanche of dollar bills deriving from exploiting her loss or those of others. "You know, I made a lot more money as a newspaper writer," she said. "However, since it has to do with me, and since I have the skills to work with — basically, since this horrible thing happened to me, then others should benefit from it."

Her book is in its seventh printing, with editions in German, Dutch and also printed in Great Britain. So the invitation to have a weekly radio talk

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