

Understanding the need of all those in grief

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

Those who don't know Harriet Sarnoff Schiff well 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 reserve for life's least depressing experiences. "That's the point," she said emphatically, leaning forward on her elbows. "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" day 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 experi-

ences with her, her husband, announcer Sandy Schiff and guest speakers knowledgeable on 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 resident 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."

THE COMPLIMENT pleases Harriet Schiff, but it doesn't overly impress her, or prompt her to think of an avalanche of dollar bills derived 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 did happen to 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 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 no 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."

THE WORDS sparked responses among thousands of grieving parents who crowded into theaters, church halls, community centers and around television sets whenever she appeared. She considered it a major breakthrough when her husband, who frequently accompanied her, was able to draw aside groups of men for candid discussions of their feelings.

"People can be so cruel," she said. "I guess they think that men don't hurt, but they do."

The experience of seeing men pouring out grief, anger and tears with one another made a vivid impression. One recent broadcast was devoted to male grieving, with guest experts Thomas Murphy, the Lincoln Park Councilman, and the Rev. Bob Walker, whose wife died unexpectedly on their honeymoon.

"We talked about things like people thinking that the best way to help a man get over grief is to find him another woman. Young also described his very intense grieving."

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 personalities 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."

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