

Documentary

By Thomas A. Parmalee

Voices of Grief

HONORING THE SACRED JOURNEY

DOCUMENTARY EXAMINES THE JOURNEYS OF SURVIVORS

When you watch the “Voices of Grief” documentary, you probably won’t notice Kathy Sparnins.

Her story is not one of the ones featured in the film that shares wisdom from contemporary authors, grief experts and spiritual teachers along with the stories of several people who’ve lost someone they love.

She’s just a name when the credits roll.

But make no mistake about it: The co-producer and executive producer of the film that’s being lauded by funeral homes, hospice care organizations and others knows all too much about loss.

“The idea for the film project was rooted in the traumatic death of my sister in a car accident many years ago and my subsequent work as a

grief educator for hospice,” said Sparnins, a bereavement educator who works with numerous organizations, including Prospect Home Care & Hospice in Teller County, Colorado.

Her own journey was particularly difficult. “My sister, Christine, was 15 when she was killed in an automobile accident in 1975,” she said. “She and her friend were taking a drive before they went to work at Pizza Hut, around 3 in the afternoon. They picked up another one of their friends, a young man, and allowed him to drive – he took off so fast from a stop, he hit a tree and killed both my sister and her girlfriend.”

Sparnins, who was 14 when her sister was born, felt an extra level of connection to Christine – “she was sort of like ‘mine,’” she said.

“I remember being really surprised right after the funeral that the world was still going on. I wanted to tell the cashier at the grocery store that my sister had just died. How could they just keep doing their job?”

But Sparnins knew that a documentary would be a powerful way to show what grief is – and isn’t. “As I walked in my own journey of attending to the pain of grief, it became clear how our culture’s response was broken, as was my own,” she said.

“Voices of Grief,” which seeks to inform that response, premiered at the Rocky Mountain Women’s Film Festival in Colorado Springs in March 2016. It only recently began to be distributed on a larger scale to funeral homes, hospice care organizations and others that assist families at the end of life.



Photos, top row from left: Kathy Sparnins, grief educator and executive producer of “Voices of Grief, Honoring the Sacred Journey.” Sparnins together with Alan Wolfelt at a Springs Funeral Services community event. Bottom row from left: Film sponsors being introduced at the documentary’s world premiere. The Springs Funeral Services President, Terri Flores-Brown, together with Paul Wood at the world premiere. The film team receives a standing ovation at the world premiere. The team, left to right, Arnie Sparnins, Lise Bennett, Deb Collins and Kathy Sparnins. (Photos courtesy of Kathy Sparnins)



Other members of the film team include Deb Collins, producer, director and editor who is the founder of her own multimedia company, Starinsky Studios; Lise Bennett, writer, assistant director and assistant editor, who has won numerous writing and screenwriting awards; and Arnie Sparnins, production manager.

“Voices of Grief,” however, is much more than just a film: It is sponsored by From the Heart Productions, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The group’s mission is “to restore compassion, forgiveness and loving kindness in the process of grief in our culture by preparing individuals with the tools to address grief.” Sparnins is the group’s executive director.

The documentary’s message is an important one, Sparnins said.

“Through shared stories, we offer concrete examples of the individualized nature of grief and how people companion themselves and others in helpful ways,” Sparnins said. “Powerful voices in the field of grief work, including Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Thomas Lynch, Rabbi Harold Kushner, Marianne Williamson and David Kessler bring a kind of blessing to these stories. Ultimately, our goal is to instill hope that there is a way to live alongside profound loss and to be whole again.”

John Zarpaylic is one of the individuals who shared his story in the film. He lost his wife, Mary, to cancer.

The two had met at age 12, started dating at age 14, “and it just kept going from there,” Zarpaylic tells viewers.

A former fighter pilot, Zarpaylic

shares that “Fighter pilots are not supposed to cry ... I found out that that’s not true.”

Hendrika Layton shares how she lost her son, Benjamin Alexander, who was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia at age two.

Of her son, Layton says he “made lemonade somehow out of a bad situation” and notes that while he had “a good year” after treatment, he relapsed. But he is “as real today as he was six years ago,” she notes.

After her son’s death, Hendrika and her husband, Chris, raised more than \$250,000 and inspired thousands of volunteers to build “Ben’s Red Swings Community Playground” in Salisbury, Maryland, as a memorial to their son. The playground opened in May 2004 and continues to bring joy to children in the community.



Recognition

“Voices of Grief” has already received numerous awards and recognitions, including:

- Greater Woodland Park Chamber of Commerce’s Nonprofit of the Year
- Charleston International Film Festival – Best Documentary, Audience Choice Award
- Hudson Valley International Film Festival – Best Documentary Short Nominee
- Official film festival selection: American Psychological Association Film Festival, Rocky Mountain Women’s Film Festival, Santa Fe Film Festival, Lyons Film Festival

Others share their stories, and several of them have given back to their communities to honor their loved ones.

Supporters Applaud the Film

Sparnins, who earned a certification in death and grief studies from Wolfelt’s Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, said going through his training was a life-changing experience.

“Dr. Wolfelt gave me his support immediately,” Sparnins said. “Dr. Wolfelt continues to support our film with the inclusion of our home-use DVD in the Center for Loss bookstore as a resource for grieving

people and grief caregivers. We feel honored.”

The film “is an excellent forum to provide education to both the general public as well as professional caregivers and volunteers,” Wolfelt said. “Funeral homes would be able to build their alliance with hospice staff and other caregivers in their community by hosting the film. This would help the funeral home be seen as a valuable resource on death education in their community.”

One of the funeral directors supporting the film is Paul Wood, co-owner of The Springs Funeral Services, which has locations in Platte and Oakwood, Colorado.

“I believe very strongly that this film is a great way for funeral directors to educate the community and promote the value of funerals,” he said.

Wood crossed paths with Sparnins as he engaged in community outreach, and he was impressed by her passion in working with the bereaved. “She shared the work they had done on the film, and we were very impressed and moved by what she had already accomplished,” Wood said. “Consequently, we became a sponsor in 2015 to get the film completed and released and have been working with Kathy to get the film out to the community.”

The funeral home’s initial sponsorship was \$5,000, Wood said. “We felt the film had a great potential to help many people in this area as well as others,” he said. “We have helped with sponsoring showings of the film with minimal cost. Usually, we will provide refreshments at the screenings. For the sponsorship, now anytime the film is shown in our area – to a hospice group, to a church group, to an assisted living facility, or anywhere else – our name and logo appear on the opening as a sponsor. I feel like this is one of the most cost-effective endeavors we have done.”

Since the world premiere of the film, which was attended by more than 700 people, Wood’s funeral home has shown it at least once a quarter. “We have shown it four different times at one of our locations, and the other showings have been at churches, hospices or assisted living centers, which we sponsor,” he said. “In addition, we have partnered with several different churches to provide holiday grief workshops utilizing the film and an average of four or more showings a year with either hospice or various churches.”

When the funeral home has shown the film to individual hospice organizations with smaller staff, only a

dozen or so people may watch it – but if it’s at a larger hospice or church, up to 100 people have watched it.

Funeral home showings tend to bring in families that Wood’s firm has served. “In part because we promote and communicate these showings more directly to our families,” he said. “The churches will have a larger number from that specific church. But in all cases, those in attendance share very positive feedback on the impact of the film to them personally.”

The typical attendee is someone who has recently experienced the loss of a friend or loved one. “I think it tends to attract many that have traumatic-type deaths in their family or multiple deaths and are struggling,” Wood said. It’s also common to have chaplains, clergy, hospice counselors, church bereavement staff and funeral coordinators in attendance, he added.

“The response is always very positive,” Wood said. “Most always, those attending will engage in a discussion following the showing. It has been a good forum to direct participants into various support groups. In our area, Kathy Sparnins herself leads support groups, so we work with her and many of the participants will join her groups or others in the area.”

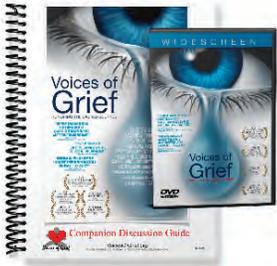
While generating more prearrangements was never a goal for Wood, he does note that his funeral home has received several referrals from those who have attended a screening.

Sparnins is pleased the film is helping Wood and his business. “What I see happening is that Paul has become known for his heart for education and service,” she said. “I think there is an automatic translation for his business as he continues to become known throughout the year at these different facilities. He’s not pushing ‘funeral business.’ People see him,

Learn More

Funeral homes and organizations can buy various tiers of licenses to show “Voices of Grief.” Special pricing is available for bereavement counselors, therapists, clergy and facilitators of small bereavement/grief support groups – as well as schools and other organizations.

Community screening kits include everything you need to host a successful event, including the DVD of the film, an unlimited license to publicly exhibit the film at your location, a 15-page facilitator guide, a 46-page companion discussion guide, master copies of participant handouts and surveys, master copies of promotional posters and postcards and more.



All events using the material must be offered free to the public.

Visit www.voicesofgrief.org and click on the “purchase” tab to learn more about purchase options.

and he shares some of his grief stories and he becomes a caring presence.”

She added, “How often is a funeral director able to knock on doors bearing the gift of a film that is so needed in our culture? Paul becomes known without showing self-interest, and it’s honest!”

“Voices of Grief” is also partnering with Horan & McConaty, which has seven locations in Colorado, and Koch Funeral Home in State College, Pennsylvania.

Horan & McConaty formed “The Heartlight Center,” which provides classes on grief, mourning and

support as part of its community outreach and uses the film on a regular basis, Sparnins said.

Koch Funeral Home was one of the participants in a Selected Independent Funeral Homes webinar in the early days of the film, Sparnins said. Jackie Hook, a celebrant with Koch who leads “Helping Grieving Hearts Heal” purchased a level of the film for use and has found it useful when conducting community outreach.

Hook has shared the film with grief support groups, community groups, government agencies, hospice staff and volunteers, churches, clergy groups, retirement

communities and undergraduate and graduate classes at Penn State University. “Even with the variety of ages, professions, etc., of these groups, the responses have been overwhelmingly positive,” Hook said. “We’ve found that it is a great way to share the message about the importance of grief and mourning, ways to companion one another on the grief journey and the benefits of rituals and ceremonies – all offered in an authentic and supportive way.”

The film, Hood said, “is making a difference in individual lives and in helping to move us from being a mourning-avoidant to mourning welcoming community. We are grateful.”

Other film partners include churches, senior living communities (including Bethesda Senior Living, which is a primary film sponsor and has 18 communities over six states),

hospice, chaplains and the Threshold Choir, which is a national organization with members that sing at the bedside in hospice.

Coping with Loss

After losing her sister, Sparnins realized how powerful and isolating grief can be to those who’ve suffered a loss.

“I began seeing how we have evolved into this nation of ‘rugged North Americans’ who don’t want to feel, much less honor our losses,” she said. “We are not a bad people, we are being motivated in a new world order that I don’t think we have examined. It became clear that a new perspective on this natural cycle would encourage us back to our own soulful values of life and death. I found a filmmaker who wanted to join me in producing this documentary, we became a

nonprofit and began raising money and filming some of our experts and grief group participants.”

The goals for the film were “almost grandiose,” Sparnins said. “We believe in the ripple effect,” she said. “We want to be one part of the change in our culture that brings us back to honoring our grief and mourning over the death of our loved one. It is important to our emotional and physical health to be able to claim the value of our loved ones, to remember them, to celebrate them and to honor their important thread in our tapestry. As one of our film participants, Susan Babcock, asserted, ‘Death is not something to be afraid of – it’s just another part of our living, and if we forget this piece of our lives, we forget what is important and we lose a part of ourselves in the process.’”

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While the film includes commentary from grief experts, at its core are the stories of the everyday individuals who've suffered a profound loss.

"We selected the stories featured in the film because of their connection to many of the important stories I have experienced as a grief educator," Sparnins said. "I worked with each person over the past 10 years and felt their stories were grounded, connected and real. They each struggled with the old ideas of how to be present to their grief and emerged with the ability to lovingly counsel themselves and others. They were able to begin trusting their own laments with kindness. They knew what they needed and were able to give words to this newfound wisdom."

The message seeks to convey that

there is no timetable to grief – and that, in fact, no one ever gets over it.

"We have the ability to begin integrating our grief and reconciling our grief into our new life," Sparnins said. "Each of these folks in our film continue to grieve on some level, yet they model how their lives have moved and changed and how they continue to carry on the legacy of their precious loved ones."

Blooming Success

So far, Sparnins is pleased with how the film has been received.

"We consider our project to be a success unfolding," she said. "The natural life of an educational film is to take at least a year to apply to appropriate film festivals and begin some local outreach."

The film has been accepted into a

number of festivals throughout the country, including the American Psychological Association film festival in Washington, D.C. Thousands of people have seen the film, which has been released as a streaming version to hospices in 13 states for use with staff and patient families.

"We are now in the midst of offering our educational film distribution to the public," Sparnins said. "We are also continuing to explore funding possibilities through foundations and angel funders with a goal of free distribution to all who need this important work."

Wood thinks funeral homes would be well served to start showing the film in their respective communities. "Showing it to a few key people can get doors opened to show the film in a variety of groups," she said. •

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