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MAY 2006

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Gretchan Pyne
now believes
things happen
for a reason,
even if they
cause, at first,
unbearable pain

LOSING LULU

By
BELLA ENGLISH

It was a dreary, drizzly day in March 2001, the time of year when New England turns from snow to mud. The landscape was sheathed in monochromatic gray, not a bloom or bud in sight. "What a rotten day," Gretchan Pyne remarked as she drove home from an errand. In the backseat of the car, 3-year-old Lulu had donned a pair of plastic rose-colored glasses her father had recently bought her.

"Mama, look!" she said. "The whole world looks pink! Try them on."

Gretchan, cranky, told her daughter she needed to focus on driving. Then she looked in the rearview mirror and saw Lulu's crestfallen little face.

When they pulled into the driveway, Gretchan took the glasses. "Wow!" she exclaimed. "The world really does look better! Lulu, can I have these?" she asked.

The girl shook her head. "No, you have to find your own."

That night, her mother wrote down the story in her journal. It was this simple yet profound message from a child that would end up, in a way, saving Gretchan Pyne's life.

a few months later, on July 14, 2001, the Pyne family packed up their car and headed for Truro, Massachusetts, a pristine stretch of sandy beach on Cape Cod National Seashore. As usual, Gretchan and Warren Pyne and their three children, Lulu, 4, and 9-year-old twins Dylon and Drew, were the first to arrive and the last to leave. They built "sand bathtubs," digging trenches and letting the ocean fill them with water. They played paddleball

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and Frisbee, made sand castles and Boogie-boarded. Lulu noticed a little girl on a nearby blanket and asked her to play; she taught her new friend how to chew gum.

What Warren remembers of that outing was the rock. The Pynes had a tradition: Once the cooler was emptied of food and drink, it would be refilled with shells and rocks. As they were leaving the beach, Lulu, who had just turned 4, tagged behind, stopping here and there to collect one last treasure. Her father held the overflowing cooler in one hand, his daughter's small hand in his other.

"She picked up one about the size of a cantaloupe, and it was brown and in the shape of a heart," says Warren, 42. "I had to keep the cooler lid open to carry that one."

At the end of the day, the sea still in their hair, the Pynes stopped to get ice cream at Bob's Sub & Cone, in Wellfleet. It started to mist, creating a double rainbow. In the parking lot, Lulu licked her ice-cream cone and danced around while her father videotaped her. "I remember standing in line and looking at her and thinking, 'I'm never going to forget this moment,'" says Gretchan, 43. "She just looked so beautiful."

Gretchan went inside the shop to fetch her twins. As the three of them came out of the store, they saw Lulu step onto the base of a bicycle rack, the metal type that houses the front wheel of a bike, and strike what they call her "Vanna White pose," with one arm extended upward as if showcasing the rainbow. They saw the unanchored rack flip over on top of her, pinning her on the ground. They saw their father drop his camera and race over to her. As he knelt over her, she reached up and opened her mouth as if to scream, but no sound came out. "It looked as if she was reaching past me to the rainbow," says her father, who immediately pulled the rack off his daughter and began to administer CPR.

Grief experts will tell you that there is no more searing loss than that of a young child. "It's the wrong chronology. It's not the way it should be," says Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, a grief counselor who has written numerous books on the topic. "It's the death of your future, the loss of innocence."

A family is an organic unit; when one part of it dies, the whole is threatened. As little as she was, Lulu filled a large space. What happens when an unthinkable tragedy strikes a family? How do

the surviving members go on? What helps and what hurts in their journey back from the brink?

The Pynes' story began in Davenport, Iowa, in 1985. Every three weeks Warren Pyne would get his hair cut at the Phase III beauty salon. It was just a few blocks from the Palmer College of Chiropractic, where he was studying. The \$8 cut suited his student budget, and the hair-stylist suited his fancy.

He and Gretchan Russell dated for a year, and when it came time for Warren to graduate, they decided to come back East together. He had grown up in Brockton, a working-class town 25 miles south of Boston, and spent summers at his parents' cottage on Buzzards Bay, the gateway to Cape Cod.

The couple moved into that cottage while each established a practice: She opened her own beauty salon, he a chiropractic office. They married, in 1989, and the following year bought a raised ranch in Wareham that came with an additional lot that fronted the beach. They could see the water from their bay windows. For Gretchan, who never laid eyes on the

ocean until she was 21, it was a piece of heaven. For Warren, it was a necessity.

In 1992, Gretchan gave birth to twin boys. With two businesses and two sons, the Pynes thought their family was complete. But on July 5, 1997, after 30 hours of labor, Olivia Lynn Pyne was

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Lulu in July 2001, in her last moments



"I remember watching her and thinking, 'I'll never forget this moment, how beautiful she looks'"



born. The family nicknamed her Lulu because she shared a certain adorableness with Cindy-Lou Who, the blonde, doe-eyed girl in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

The Pyne family was in perpetual motion, hiking, camping, boating, skiing. Every nice-weather weekend they would take their boat over to Cuttyhunk Island or Martha's Vineyard; in winter, it was skiing in Maine. When she was 3 Lulu broke her leg on the slopes. She wore her hot-pink cast like a badge of honor.

"We spent all of our time with our kids," says Warren. "And we still do. That's one regret we don't have."

Lulu loved to pick up starfish and crabs. She kissed frogs and chased dragonflies. "It was inconceivable to her that someone could be in a bad mood," says her mother. "She was happy all the time, and rightly so. We all adored her."

The 45-minute ambulance trip along the Cape's narrow, winding roads was the longest ride of Gretchan Pyne's life; she prayed, sang and talked to her daughter the entire time, while Warren and the boys followed in another car. But Lulu, who had no pulse, was unresponsive. When they arrived at Cape Cod Hospital, in Hyannis, Dr. Craig Cornwall labored over Lulu, inserting a tube to try to get her to breathe, as Gretchan held her limp hand. Although he knew at a glance it was hopeless, Dr. Cornwall spent nearly half an hour with Lulu in an effort to show Gretchan that he had tried everything possible to save her child. The father of three young girls of his own, it was, he would later recall, the most devastating night of his career.

By the time Warren arrived with Drew and Dylan, Dr. Cornwall had given up. Lulu's chest and trachea had been crushed by the bike rack; she had died almost instantly. An autopsy would later show that her heart muscle had been severed. In a terrible irony, the happy-go-lucky girl, the darling of the family, had literally died of a broken heart. She was 4 years old, and there was still mint chocolate-chip ice cream on her lips.

Warren Pyne could not, would not, accept it. Hadn't his little girl been dancing in the parking lot of Bob's Sub & Cone, in Wellfleet, only an hour earlier? In the hospital he remained with her body for hours, until Dr. Cornwall gently told him it was time to say good-bye. The doctor gave the couple something to help them sleep. He also gave them some advice. "The only thing I can tell you is that you just have to continue to do what you do.

Whatever it is you do, go home and do it. Don't get so obsessed with your loss that you give up your life."

When the sun came up, Warren gathered some of Lulu's stuffed animals and took them to the morgue. Workers took the toys, but would not allow him inside, so he spent the morning in the parking lot, the closest he could get. It didn't feel right that his little girl should be alone. Gretchan was home with the boys, who were in shock, too. Drew, the quieter twin, told a family friend that the double rainbow that appeared before Lulu died was God welcoming her into heaven.

Dylon wrote in a school essay that "her purpose in life was to make people that were mean turn kind."

Right after Lulu died, her mother found her rose-colored glasses. They now sit on a windowsill in her bedroom. "I don't wash them," Gretchan says, "because her fingerprints are on them."

Lulu's message of hope is now shared in a book



**After Lulu died,
the days passed
in numb agony.
To cope, her
parents decided
to create a
living memorial**

In the days that followed the funeral, which passed in a kind of numb agony, Gretchan would go down to the beach, watch the sun rise and write about her daughter. One morning it came to her: Their beach lot would become a memorial garden. Warren found her out there digging furiously and joined her.

For two weeks, in 90-degree weather, they worked day and night. Finally, Lulu's Rainbow Garden was finished. A sign at the entrance reads, "ANGELS AND BUTTERFLIES WELCOME."

In those first months, the parents found it difficult to eat or sleep. They were, says Gretchan, "like the walking

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dead." Once she lost her keys but found them later in the refrigerator. While the boys were at school she'd curl up on Lulu's floor, in a ball, for hours, not even able to move. For weeks Warren would go to the cemetery at night, lie down on Lulu's grave and pray she'd somehow return. There were other times when he was so overcome with grief that he couldn't move, even to get out of a chair. He sold his beloved boat; it was too powerful a reminder of Lulu.

The Pynes had three years to file a lawsuit against Bob's Sub & Cone, which they did shortly before the deadline, in July 2004. There are no industry-wide safety standards regarding bike rack stability. A spokeswoman for one California company, Creative Pipe, in Palm Desert, said their bike racks are manufactured with drilled holes so that they can be either bolted down or staked in the ground, but it's the user's responsibility to do so, and no local code requires this. A lawyer for Bob's Sub & Cone declined comment, citing the ongoing lawsuit.

After Lulu's death, the Pynes did all the things the books say to do. They went for grief counseling. Warren and Gretchan joined a bereavement group but did not find comfort in other people's pain. The boys had their own group. Gretchan briefly tried an antidepressant but found it made her groggy. Acupuncture helped. She saw a spiritual counselor, who, she said, helped her come to believe that Lulu's "energy, her presence, her spirit is still alive."

Warren, a fitness buff, began

working out maniacally. His counselor told him to focus his pain and anger as he was lifting weights, and then release it. Once a stranger at the gym remarked, "You're working out so intensely, are you trying to kill yourself?"

But the couple had two good reasons for getting out of bed each morning: Drew and Dylan. Though the boys don't talk about Lulu's death, they do like to talk about Lulu, about how they would push her on her Big Wheel or their skateboards. About her love of Cheetos and how she ate Parmesan cheese by the handful. About how she'd dress up in a tutu and grab their plastic gun: The warrior princess, they called her.

Though each boy wants his own bedroom, they would not dream of taking over Lulu's, the only other one in the house. Her sheets have not been changed since she left that day for the beach; her pajamas are tucked under the pillow. "I can still smell her on them," says Gretchan, holding the flannel nightgown to her nose. "When she had a fever, she smelled like burnt cotton candy."

Three years ago Gretchan moved a desk into Lulu's room and it is now command central for Lulu Belle Books, the Pynes' fledgling company, which in December 2003 published *Lulu's Rose Colored Glasses*. It's the story of the cloudy, cheerless day the March before Lulu died, as seen through a child's rosy prism. It's about viewing the world with optimism, seeing all the colors, not just the gray. On the back is a photo of the entire family with the words, "Real love stories never have endings."

Perhaps more than anything else, the book has helped heal the Pyne family. "My little girl taught me that the world is how you choose to see it," says Gretchan. "I can choose to be

depressed, miserable, grumpy and horrible. Or I can choose to fight my way back and find happiness again."

The book quickly became a family project. Warren was in charge of finding the rose-colored glasses that would be tied to each copy. They hired a local company to print the book, which is illustrated by Anne Carrozza-Remick, a friend of Gretchan's. Then the women went knocking on bookstore doors. Some told them they didn't sell self-published books. But a surprising number—from small independents to giants like Borders (it carries the book in Massachusetts)—said yes. Their first thousand books sold out quickly, and 10,000 more are nearly gone. (The book is available at www.lulubellebooks.com.) Part of the proceeds are going to a scholarship in Lulu's name at Warren's chiropractic college.

"People buy it for adults who have illnesses, for parents who lost children. They're in hospitals and hospices and in schools," says Gretchan. One man bought books to take to an orphanage in Bangkok, Thailand, and an HIV clinic in Costa Rica. A woman with ovarian cancer bought the book for her granddaughter; when the woman died recently, everyone wore rose-colored glasses to her funeral.

Gretchan feels Lulu's message is about hope and happiness, that adults should try more often to see the world with a child's rose-colored vision. She also has a heightened sense of how precious children are and has little patience with people who take them for granted. "I just want to shake parents and tell them to wake up," she says. "Your children are a gift that you're only going to have for a short period of time."

Gretchan, who almost flunked high school speech because she was so terrified of public

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speaking, is being asked to talk publicly about grief and coping—and she does it, because talking about what happened to her family helps her to heal. The boys accompany her to signings, handing out flyers in the stores or mall.

"I'm not as fearful a person as I once was," says Gretchan. "When you have a child who dies . . . what else is there to be afraid of?" She quickly answers her own question. "God forbid, you have the fear of losing another child." She and Warren both worry more than they used to about their boys. "Because you know the worst can happen," she says.

Lulu's presence still looms large in the Pyne home. Framed photos are everywhere. Each night they light a candle at what was her place at the table. Every July fifth they make a cake with birthday candles and set off fireworks for Lulu. Two years ago they held a butterfly release in her garden; Lulu loved "flutterbies."

But they have also begun to build new memories. When they sold the boat, they bought a piece of land in Vermont, far from the ocean Lulu so loved. They spend many weekends there and, as they have the last several years, plan to be there this Mother's Day. In an e-mail to friends last year, Gretchan wrote that she feels Lulu's presence strongly on that day. "It's as if all three of my children are with me. Lulu's love helps us heal."

Still, nearly five years later, there are potholes in the road to recovery. Gretchan and Warren employ "hug therapy" and talk about happy times with Lulu. They work to safeguard their marriage against the reality that a huge percentage of marriages end after a child dies.

Recovery comes in baby steps.

Warren, who loves the ocean, has started to look at boating magazines again. The boys adore their new American bulldog puppy, Belle. Gretchan takes pleasure in planting more hydrangeas in Lulu's garden, watching the twins on the tire swing, hiking in the Vermont woods. "The only way to honor the person you lost is to find your happiness again and to carry the person with you," she says.

While the boys have grown to be wiry 14-year-old eighth graders, Lulu, who would be 8 now, will remain frozen in time as a 4-year-old to her family: a little girl in a tutu and tiara who still loved her "blankie."

Last year Gretchan met an 80-year-old woman at a book signing who lost a child of her own decades ago. "I could see the pain in her eyes still. It becomes part of who you are," says Gretchan. "You can't possibly be the same person you were before."

It has helped her to believe things happen for a purpose—that Lulu's brief life was about spreading love, that her death was about becoming an angel who sows the message of hope. "I don't believe God picks off kids," she says firmly. "If I thought her death was just some random thing, how could I go on?"

She constantly prays for signs: "Lulu, let me know you're there, let me know I'm doing the right thing." Then, one summer night, as she stood on her deck, she saw a double rainbow—the first she'd seen since that horrific day when Lulu died. She grabbed a camera and herded Warren and the twins down to the beach. The rainbow seemed to start at their property, stretch across the harbor and end at the cemetery on the other side where Lulu is buried. Tears streamed down her face. Warren blinked back his. "Thank you, Lulu, thank you," her mother said. 