

Moms make a difference

By Stacie Charbonneau Hess

And somewhere between the time you arrive, and the time you go,
may lie a reason you were alive but you'll never know

—Jackson Browne

GRIEF AND FEAR are emotions we'd rather shy away from, but certain people don't have this luxury. Two South Coast mothers, Gretchan Pyne and Kelly Weglowski, have lived the emotions so close to their homes and hearts that they both admit the same thing: they aren't the same people they were before their children were born.

What's different is that along with broken-hearted grief and fear, enters compassion and courage. Both of these moms have transformed their fears into something amazing, useful and inspiring for children they may never even know.

Lulu's Story

When Olivia Lynn Pyne, known as "Lulu" to all who loved her, was born twelve years ago, her family rejoiced. She spent four years making everybody laugh, loving her mom, dad and older twin brothers, four years dancing and twirling and even teaching her parents how to pause and enjoy the little miracles in each day. On the picture perfect summer day when Lulu's life was snatched from her in an accident, her parents' hearts were wrenched from them. They felt victimized by grief.

Seven years later, Gretchan Pyne, Lulu's mom, says this, "No matter what happens to you, you have a choice." When she speaks, she sounds passionate, open-hearted, and strong. "You don't have to stay a victim."

These days, Gretchan Pyne speaks with fervor to audiences throughout the eastern United States, sharing Lulu's vision of hope and love. Her cause has picked up momentum, and is now directly impacting hundreds of children each day at a New Bedford elementary school. She speaks as if Lulu is right here with her, instructing her and guiding her in her decisions. Gretchan also credits Lulu for the wondrous things she has been able to accomplish.

Of all her accomplishments, the most well known and far-reaching so far is Gretchan's self-published book, *Lulu's Rose-Colored Glasses*. In the true story, Lulu teaches her mother a heart-warming lesson about seeing the world in a new, "rosy" way,

reminding her mom that she gets to choose the way she views everything: from the weather to a tragedy. The book became more than just a local success.

Pope John Paul received the story in 2005, and sent an acknowledgement letter to the Pyne family along with a rosary blessed by his Holiness. The second book, *Lulu Decorates Daddy*, likewise instructs its audience, in a funny and endearing way, to never lose a precious moment to a gray and soggy mood.

Lulu's Lovely Dress That's Too Small, book number three authored by Pyne, will be released next year in the early spring. This story was inspired by another real life event, one that moms of preschoolers can especially appreciate. Young Lulu had outgrown her "most favoritest dress," recalls her mother. She insisted on wearing it to school.

"She was dancing and twirling. Just so happy, happy. So what was I going to do? I grabbed a pair of shorts out of the laundry and let her wear them under the dress. I felt like I was a bad mother!" Gretchan jokes.

The teachers giggled when Lulu came into school that morning, because, as her mother discovered—it was picture day! Looking back Gretchan muses, "Of course I should have realized!"

These days she looks at the picture and hardly notices the outfit at all—all she can see is her daughter's "magical grin." The story ends with Lulu finally agreeing to give the dress away for some other little girl to wear.

In this generous spirit, the book release will also feature a clothing drive. Donated clothing will be



Gretchan with Jack Canfield co-author of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" and other titles as well as motivational speaker.

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given to the non-profit agency Gifts to Give in New Bedford, an organization that redistributes "previously-loved" clothing to people in need. The drive is purposefully planned just before Easter, so clients can have something beautiful to wear for the holiday. Gretchan also hopes that the effort will encourage children to donate—and in turn let them know that although they are little, they have power, because they have something to give. "A gift of love is never too small," says Gretchan.

Though Lulu was small, the celebration of her life is still growing. 100% of the proceeds from the sale of all Lulu books goes directly to the Olivia "Lulu" Pyne Foundation. This foundation helps fund family and child-centered programs, such as the one most recently introduced by Gretchan and embraced by the Alfred Gomes Elementary School in New Bedford: Project Dream, Believe, Do.

I am the Rainbow

Project Dream, Believe, Do was inspired by a profound dream Gretchan Pyne experienced, one in which Lulu and she were dancing a world of "utter bliss"—a rainbow world. The message for the project is "I am the rainbow and so are you," and its purpose is to create a positive learning environment for children, to raise self-esteem, and to teach children to value themselves. The project-based learning program celebrates the creativity in children by putting art back in the schools, a goal that resonates with other groups in our South Coast community. The pilot project at Gomes will hopefully be a model other schools can easily replicate and use.

Gretchan's work has drawn people from throughout our community and beyond, looking for some way to share their gifts. The Rhythm Room, a phenomenal drumming group headed by Rick Morin, will play at a fundraiser on April 9th at Keith Middle School's new state-of-the-art auditorium.

Local healer Kendra Bond shows kids at Gomes how to move from a low frequency to a high frequency state, and improve their outlook, energy and test scores. The Boston-based media company, Fablevision, is taking Lulu's stories to the next level by creating short animated films which will be used to promote Project Dream, Believe, Do. Fablevision is based in the Boston Children's museum and has created positive, quality entertainment for children in association with well-known entities such as WGBH and the Jim Henson Company.

To learn more about Lulu, attend the upcoming book signings and clothing drives: March 13, 2010 at Best Friends Preschool in Wareham at 1 p.m., Baker Books in Dartmouth on March 20, at 1 p.m., and The Old Company Store on March 27th at 1 p.m.

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Brady's story

Four-year-old Brady Weglowski will usually make a guest appearance at the annual Healing Little Hearts fundraiser at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, this year on March 6th. In fact, he will be the guest of honor.

Brady's mom, Kelly, is currently planning the third annual event, to benefit pediatric cardiac research at Children's Hospital in Boston. The event has been so successful that hundreds of thousands of dollars have already been donated to further the research, which has the potential to greatly minimize the number of hospitalizations and surgeries a child with heart defects must endure.

When Brady was born, Kelly knew little about heart defects, and even less about how common they are. "It's the most common birth defect," she says. "One in a hundred babies are born with some form of heart defect. More babies die worldwide of heart defects than any other birth-related defect." Although Brady is only four years old, he has already undergone 30 hospitalizations and seven surgeries. "It wasn't supposed to be that many," says his mother.

But like Gretchan Pyne, Kelly Weglowski was not content to feel the victim of her son's condition. She had known what it was to lose him at two days old, when the staff at Children's Hospital "called the code when I was sitting six feet away from him." He had ceased breathing on his own, and spent several days on life support. No one knew what the outcome would be.

"It was awful, horrendous. It was two of the longest days of my life," says Kelly. "He fought his way back."

As a mother, Kelly wanted to find out everything she could about her son's heart condition. She asked his doctor John E. Mayer about his research to develop a heart valve that grows with a child, eliminating the need for repeat open heart surgeries.

Although research has been persistent for the past nine years, Dr. Mayer said, "funding was difficult," she remembers. I told my husband, "I want to help." Kelly owned her own real estate business at the time, with five employees.

She realized when Brady was born that her energy and attention would need to be elsewhere, so she channeled it into creating Healing Little Hearts, the organization that is currently tied to Children's Hospital. Her business and marketing experience gleaned from the real estate business helped launch the first fundraising efforts.

"We have the area's top caterers, great entertainment, and everything is donated. People are so generous when they hear it's for Children's (Hospital),



Marc, Brady and Kelly Weglowski

they almost always say yes."

The first black tie event at the Whaling Museum three years ago was a huge success. "What I've learned is that people are just amazing. Amazing," she says, with the same sort of unrestrained passion I heard in Gretchan Pyne's voice, that passion of the pure of heart.

Healing a Little Heart

"It just blows me away. When people hear Brady's story, and I tell them about Children's Hospital, it seems like everyone has a connection (with the facility)." And when people see the kids in various states of recovery, it humbles and softens even the hardest heart.

Brady sees the event as a "Fun-raiser." During the gala, guests can often spot Brady by the chocolate fountain, or hear him make a short speech at the microphone.

"He's totally into it," says his mom. He knows the auction items are not for him, but last year he asked his dad to "high bid, often" on an item that really caught his eye.

And yet, even now, Brady's heart valve is leaking. He will be getting a lung scan soon, which will determine how far away Brady is from his next open-heart surgery. Kelly of course hopes it is later rather than sooner. She is inspired by her son's courage. "He is a champion," she says. "All the kids are."

The third annual Healing Little Hearts Gala will take place on March 6, 2010 at the New Bedford Whaling Museum. Black tie. Join sponsors such as Baby Blanket Suncare, Marion Pediatrics and Atlantic Cape Fisheries, and donate to the Weglowski's cause. It will benefit babies all around the world; look for details on the website: www.healinglittlehearts.com

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