

Published March 30th, 2022

## Two local authors address grief and loss through the written word

By Diane Claytor



Mike Bernhardt signs copies of "Voices of a Grieving Heart" to be sent to poetry contributors. Photo Yvonne Lefort

It's a universal emotion. No matter who you are, where you live, or what you do, you will experience grief at different times and in different ways. It's the natural response to loss - the loss of a loved one or pet, a relationship or job, financial stability or health.

These past two years, when everyone was dealing with the pandemic and fears of COVID, grief permeated our lives. Our routines changed drastically, we were isolated and scared, lonely and sad; we longed to hug a friend, see a smiling face not on a computer screen or covered by a mask.

We dealt with these feelings in different ways. Two Lamorindans - a retired IT network engineer and a now-12-year-old middle schooler - each processed their feelings of loss by writing and self-publishing a book, expressing their grief through the written word.

Moraga's Mike Bernhardt originally published "Voices of the Grieving Heart" in 1993, two years after his young wife unexpectedly died. At the time, Bernhardt was completely overwhelmed with emotion and began searching for books that expressed the feelings he was experiencing. "I wasn't looking for answers," he explains, "I was looking for honest experience and validation." He found none that spoke to him.

To deal with his grief, Bernhardt began writing poetry, a medium he found healing and meaningful. "There are no rules when writing poems," he says. "You simply write what pops into your head."

Finding no poetry books that addressed his feelings, Bernhardt decided to create the book he'd been searching for. He placed ads in various publications asking for submissions of poems dealing with the personal loss of loved ones. "I wasn't interested in literary prowess," he says, "but wanted contributors that were speaking from the heart."

He received hundreds of submissions, choosing 65 poems that moved him the most. As Bernhardt writes in the introduction, "'Voices of the Grieving Heart' is a collection of poetry that shares the pain, growth, changes, healing and gifts that can come when people we love die."

Bernhardt began healing. He remarried and had a son. As the 30th anniversary of his first wife's death approached amid the pervasive grief surrounding COVID, Bernhardt's second wife encouraged him to republish "Voices of the Grieving Heart." "There's so much need for it," he remembers her saying. He again requested submissions, this time seeking poetry related to deaths during COVID and the isolation and grief surrounding the pandemic. Several hundred poems arrived; nearly 80 were added to the second edition, published last year. One reader wrote, "Thank you for giving voice to such heartbreak, especially across the world at this time."

Five miles down the road, then-10-year-old Stella Ciarlantini was enjoying her best life. She loved school, had great friends, a boy she liked and had just landed a lead in the school musical. Then COVID hit, school went online and she felt her friends slipping away. "Contact and communications were so different," the outgoing, precocious Ciarlantini says. They gathered over ZOOM but "friendships slowly deteriorate when that's the only way to see each other. It was really hard," she continues.

Her whole world turned upside down. Admitting that she was upset and having a really hard time processing her emotions, Ciarlantini reached out to her fourth-grade teacher, with whom she had a special bond. "My teacher suggested I start writing about my feelings and my experience through this. I think she meant it as journaling," Ciarlantini recalls, "but I thought perhaps I could turn my writing into something more."

"The Story of Stella," was born. Rather than write a journal, which she says is written for the author, Ciarlantini elected to write a memoir, which, she explains, is written for the readers. "I knew I was struggling a lot," she reports. "I figured others were also. So many times, children's voices are not heard. I really thought this could help show other kids that they have a voice, they can express their thoughts and feelings because they matter just as much as anyone."

"I know the pandemic deeply affected so many. We didn't see people for two years of our childhood - that's

a big chunk of time in a young person's life," Ciarlantini says. She hopes that some day her book, which she said was extremely healing for her, may serve as a "story in history."

"The Story of Stella" has been used as a read-aloud book in several elementary school classes and Ciarlantini did a reading and book signing at Lafayette's Bel and Bunna's Books. She is now a happy, vivacious sixth-grader working on another book - this one realistic fiction. She acknowledges that as difficult as the pandemic was for her, "I would not be who I am today if it weren't for the quarantine. I grew so much as a person. I felt grief and pain but also hope."

Both "Voices of the Grieving Heart" and "The Story of Stella" may be purchased on the authors' websites: [mikebernhardt.net](http://mikebernhardt.net) and [stellaciarlantini.org](http://stellaciarlantini.org) as well as on Amazon; "Voices" may also be found at Reasonable Books in Lafayette and Orinda Books.



Stella Ciarlantini, author of "The Story of Stella" Photo Diane Claytor

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[back](#)

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