

MEMORIES :





Sharese Maybery's expression is ageless. Her face reveals a full spectrum of emotions: the eagerness of a child, the optimism of an adolescent, the cautiousness of an adult, and the mature confidence of the older woman. There is profound sadness and hope in her eyes, and to glimpse the world as she does is both heartbreaking and inspiring.

THIS YOUNG WOMAN has been through a lot in her life, too much, some would say, and on many days Sharese would agree. At other times, however, she grasps onto the most painful of her memories and uses them as a force to compel her to move forward. "There are times when I still think I cannot go on," she admits, "but deep inside I know I need to keep moving forward with my life. I am learning to use my memories to help me to do that."

On October 26, 2003, Sharese lost her mom, Sheryl Maybery, to cancer. At the time, Sharese was 14 years old. "The first year after my mom passed away had been so hard," she recalls. "At home I did not feel comfortable discussing my feelings with my brother and sisters, and at school I felt alone, different from everyone I knew."

In the fall and winter of 2003 Sharese found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on her school work. In class she would daydream about where she would be and what she would be doing if her mom were still alive. At night she would lay awake in bed turning over in her

head the frightening possibilities of a life that she had not prepared for. Instead of doing her school assignments she would write in her journal everything that came to her mind; the things she felt, the things she feared, the things that were tearing her up inside. These were pages no one else saw. Sharese did not share her writing or her feelings with anyone. Soon she became, in her words, "completely unable to function," and so, she stopped coming to school.

She recalled; "I just couldn't keep going on with a regular life, couldn't keep doing what I've always done in the past. I had so much build up inside of me, and it hurt so much. I had no way to let any of it out. I felt trapped."

"Remembering what Sharese was like then and seeing her now is like night and day," marvels Maria Silva, the clinical social worker at Hill Regional Career High School (CHS), school-based clinic in New Haven, who counseled Sharese in the months following her mother's death. Together with Alison Moriarty-Daley, an assistant professor at YSN and the director of the school-based

clinic at CHS, Maria worked with Sharese and other CHS students in the months immediately following their loss of loved ones. For several years Maria and Allison had discussed the difficulties they experienced in reaching these kids on an individual basis, and shared a vision of a group bereavement program for teens that would help these students better process their grief. "Numerous students at CHS had experienced loss in their families," explained Alison, "but it was in talking with Sharese that we decided that we really needed to do something now."

Alison and Maria knew that art therapy for adolescents in a group setting had been shown to have positive outcomes and in the spring of 2004 they were finally able to realize their vision. They called the program "Memories," and asked Sharese whether she thought this type of an activity would help her to process her grief. Sharese urged them to move ahead with this project and agreed to participate. She was joined Natasha Clark and Sheila Gomez who had also recently lost loved ones.

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From left to right: Sheila Gomez, Maria Silva, Alison Moriarty Daley and Natasha Clark during a Memories group weekly session

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 Encouraged by Maria and Alison, these young women identified the materials they would need to create scrap books that would honor the memories of their loved ones and help them to cope with their loss. With funds from the Yale School of Nursing and the Yale Office of New Haven and State Affairs, they bought scrapbooks, poster paper, stickers, scissors, pencils and markers. They began to fill their scrapbooks with family mementos, photos, drawings and writings that they never before dared to share with anyone. In a room at the back of the CHS school-based clinic, round a table piled high with supplies, eventually they began to trust one another and to speak out about their feelings.

The group met once weekly during lunchtime. Using their artistic talents and the supplies available to them, the students found creative ways to address each week's new theme laid out for them by Maria and Alison. The students answered such questions as, "The world would never be the same because...; The one thing I will never forget is...; This person gave me my..."

"We were trying to get them to open up," explained Alison, "but it wasn't easy going at first. They were reluctant and needed a lot of prodding and encouragement to help them to share their feelings."

"But then," she recalled, "a miraculous thing happened—they just started talking! It was like a well of emotions had burst." In hearing the experiences of others in the group, these young women learned that they were not alone in how they felt. Understanding that their peers' emotions were similar to their own is an idea, according to Alison, that would have been much more difficult for an adult to convey to them in a one-on-one situation. "This understanding enabled them to talk openly about their own grief with us and with the other students in the group," she said.

"Hearing about what others in the group went through was like a huge weight being lifted off my shoulders," said Sheila Gomez, whose uncle, Feliciano, passed away in 2004. In the months following her uncle's death, Shelia experienced similar emotions to those of Sharese Maybery's. She found it difficult to control her frustration and melancholy, and soon lost her ability to concentrate on her school work. "The most difficult thing before I joined Memories was not being able to talk to anyone about how I felt," Sheila said. "I didn't know that others felt the same things I did. It would have helped to know that."

Proudly Shelia reveals the contents of the scrapbook she is compiling to commemorate the memory of her uncle. She turns each page carefully until

she comes to one with a photograph of Feliciano's 15-month old son. "He had just been born when his father died," she explains. "For a long time I could not bring myself to talk about it." Next to the photograph is a poem Shelia wrote for her nephew about his dad. When asked to read it aloud, she hesitates. Then she slowly nods her head and begins to read. Aside from her softly spoken words, the back room of the school-based clinic is silent. This is the first time since her uncle's death that she has gathered the courage to read this poem aloud.

After the scrap book is complete, Shelia will give it as a present to her grandmother. "My grandma loved her son so much," explains Shelia. "I hope it will help her as it has helped me to keep some of the best memories of Feliciano alive."

When asked if she has found this group's activities helpful, Shelia readily agrees. "Being part of this group taught me that it's okay to feel certain things—angry, frustrated, scared and sad—and that others feel them too. It is all part of accepting what happened and moving on with your life."

Natasha Clark, the final student in the group, echoes Shelia's remarks. "Talking one-on-one about my loss was hard," she explains. "I felt like all the attention was on me, and that I was the only one going through this. I could not get comfortable enough to talk



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as my angel,”

honestly about how I felt. But I trust this group,” she adds. “I feel as if they really understand me because they went through it too.”

With Maria and Alison’s encouragement Natasha has worked to compile a scrap book that honors the memories of several family members and friends she has lost recently. “In our group I learned how important it is not to keep my feelings inside. Instead, I put them all on paper,” she explains. “All my anger and sadness goes into these pages,” she says, flipping through her scrap book of poems, drawings, newspaper clippings and photographs. “It helps to keep me sane...to look ahead instead of always wishing things in the past did not happen as they did.”

Alison says, “These girls, who did not know one another before the Memories program began, have grown to trust one another and are now there for one another on the most difficult of days.” As an example of that support, she points to the fact that these students, of their own accord, have decided to share home phone numbers. Natasha explains: “In case one of us feels really sad at home on the evenings or weekends, we always know there is someone we can talk to who will understand. This is a good feeling to have—just knowing someone is there—when I feel especially sad.”

Tears well in Alison’s eyes as she describes the overall experience: “It has been an interesting, often difficult, but overall, a positive and an incredibly rewarding trip for me and for these young women,” she says. “We’ve watched each other laugh and cry. In the process these girls learned a lot about themselves; they now realize that there are a variety of ways to handle grief and bereavement; and they have compiled

beautiful books to honor the memories of people they love.” She adds, “I truly believe this has helped them to move in the direction of dealing with their loss and to see that there is a whole life ahead of them.”

Looking ahead, Sharese Maybery plans to study child psychology at a university in Virginia following her graduation from CHS next year. “Children out there need people to talk to,” she says. “They need to know that others have been through similar experiences and that they are not

alone. I want to help them to do that as Alison and Maria have helped me.”

Sharese opens to a page in her scrap book where a drawing in colored pencil reveals her mom as an angel in the foreground. “This is how I think of her now, as my angel,” she explains. She points to the drawing and then to her heart. “She will always be with me in here,” she says. “I am brave and determined, as she was. This is the best gift that she left me.”

Four additional CHS students joined the Memories program in the spring of 2005.

God's Love A POEM GIVEN TO SHARESE MABERRY BY HER MOTHER

I asked God to take away my pain. God said: No.
It is not for me to take away, but for you to give up.

I asked God to make my handicapped child whole.
God said: No. His spirit is whole, his body is only temporary.

I asked God to grant me patience. God said: No.
Patience is a product of tribulations; it isn't granted, it is earned.

I asked God to give me happiness. God said: No.
I give you blessings. Happiness is up to you.

I asked God to spare me pain. God said: No.
Suffering draws you apart from worldly cares and brings you closer to me.

I asked God to make my spirit grow. God said: No.
You must grow on your own, but I will prune you to make you fruitful.

I asked God for all things that I might enjoy life. God said: No.
I will give you life so that you may enjoy all things.

I asked God to help me love others as much as he loves me.
God said. . . Ahhhh, finally you have the idea.