

# A mother who always was, and will be, a great influence

## ENTREPRENEURSHIP 101

*"The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy."*

— Adrienne Rich, author of "Of Women Born"

Today is my mother's 99th birthday. But she will never be old in my mind. The year my mom died, she was giving her age as 50.

OK, she was almost 15 years older, but she looked so good that no one ever suspected. You have to give the lady a lot

of credit for pulling off that whopper before the invention of age-defying makeup.

A woman ahead of her time, my Irish-born mom operated a profitable home-based business for more than 10 years. A Gaelic spitfire, she has always been my entrepreneurial inspiration.

My mom's product was embroidery. Just last night, while leafing through the January issue of Entrepreneur magazine, I was intrigued by an ad seeking people to buy into a



new franchise. The name? EmbroidMe.

Yup, my mom sure was a visionary.

On a hot summer night in 1968, my mom died in a horrific car accident. I was still in college.

I didn't have a clue about

grieving for the woman who was, and still is, the most important influence in my life.

One reason was that, at the time, I thought people of my advanced age of 20 were not supposed to need mothering. Years later, I discovered that most psychologists believe adolescence lasts until 25. And the need for mothering? Forever!

Second, my mom died at a time when all my hippie-dippie friends could hardly wait to move into their own apartments; in fact, many envied the fact that I had no maternal controls. I didn't know a single

other unmarried person my age without a living mother.

A third reason I hid my pain was that I knew no other way. After my mom's passing, my father never again mentioned her name. He kept his silence for 27 years until his own death in 1995.

So I trudged on for a near eternity, denying the essential truth of my inner being. Simply put, my heart was ripped into jagged pieces.

It has begun to heal only in the past decade. New consciousness of mother-loss has

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greatly lessened the feelings of craziness and isolation I endured for my entire adult life. I have found peace in oddly serendipitous ways.

My first bit of relief came about 10 years ago from publication of a book called "Motherless Daughters."

Author Hope Edelman notes in her seminal work that the college years are a particularly traumatic time to lose your mother.

I also got consolation in the late 1990s from reading interviews with entertainers such as Madonna, Rosie O'Donnell and Mariska Hargitay. All three said their mothers' deaths all but killed them, too.

But the most helpful — and most recent — self-awareness came to me in an advertisement run by Maybelline New York cosmetics, of all things. It was a tribute to four women chosen as winners in a company contest called "You Make a Difference."

Two of the people came from California, one from Texas and one from Pennsylvania.

The last was Laura Munts, a lawyer who lives in Downingtown. And guess what she won for? Serving as the president of an organization called Mommy's Light Lives On. The ad said the Munts' group's sole purpose is to bring "joy and comfort to maternally bereaved young people."

I ran to my computer to open the Web site [www.mommyslight.org](http://www.mommyslight.org). I was thunderstruck by the way it spoke to me so many years after my mom's death. Its discussion of a young person's experience described mine exactly:

"If your mom has died, you might feel like your world is shattered," says a Web page speaking directly to children. "Broken into so many tiny pieces that your life can never be put back together..."

Contrary to my usual habit of skimming information, I read and reread every page of Mommy's Light Lives On.

On almost every page, I shed a long overdue tear.

But I also smiled, particularly when reading biographies of a long list of directors, advisers and contributors.

Why the positive reaction? Many of Mommy's Light Lives On are movers and shakers in the entrepreneurial world of Chester County and beyond. Among them: Joan Kistler of Chester Springs, owner of Wealth Alliance; Ellen Langas Campbell, founder of NouiSoma Communications and a former QVC host; and Bernie Robbins, a jeweler with stores throughout the Delaware Valley.

Depending on my mood, I wish some days that I had been able to resolve my maternal bereavement earlier so that I could have become more successful as both an entrepreneur and as a human being.

On other days, I'm grateful I was able to become as street-smart and sensitive as I have considering the pain I dragged behind me for decades.

On all days, one thing I know for sure is that I don't want anyone else to carry around a childhood grief so heavy and debilitating that it can destroy your adult marriage, your job, even your own business.

Although my story is about yearning for my mother, I suspect many of you have felt similar grief with other kinds of losses. And it is problematic in a society where we're supposed to get our acts back together in rapid-fire fashion.

But how do you let grief out and still function professionally? Here are some thoughts:

- Ignore the three-day rule. All you can do during the typically short authorized bereavement leave is buy a black outfit, bury your loved one and arrange a post-funeral luncheon. According to every psychology book I've ever read, the average person needs about two years for grieving a major loss.

- Let it all hang out at home. Set up a private place to cry, rant and wail for as long as you need to. When my dad died in 1995, my growing intuition told me that the longer I bottled up my sorrow, the longer I would feel it. Letting out tears for the first time ever without shame made room for joyful memories of my dad to come in.

- Do your best at work. But don't expect perfection. If you're self-employed, try to delegate tasks that require an extraordinary amount of focus. If you work for someone else, consider taking that person into your confidence. It's not asking too much to express the need for a little understanding as you work through this difficult time.

- Take advantage of the high touch element of high tech. When I typed "death of a mother" into my computer search engine, I got more than 20,000 hits, including [www.missing-mother.com](http://www.missing-mother.com). Amazon.com alone has hundreds of relevant books, including "Grieving the Death of a Mother" by Harold Ivan Smith; "The Loss That Is Forever: The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father" by Maxine Harris; and "Remembering Mother: A Journey of Love and Self Acceptance" by Patricia Cummins.

- Join a support group. Although I have never experienced the death of a child, I have witnessed the aftermath of this tragedy in several close relatives. If you are immersed in grief about the loss of a son or daughter, you may want to look into the services of Compassionate Friends. It focuses specifically on the unique

needs of bereaved parents.

- Stay connected with your loved one. Mommy's Light Lives On does this by arranging for children to participate in events once done with mothers. These activities range from planting in the garden to attending ball games. Even at this late stage, I intend to take up embroidery.

- Know that certain holidays and events will churn up your emotions. Obviously, Dec. 18 is filled with poignancy for me. To keep myself centered this morning, I plan to go to the supermarket and buy some coffee ice cream – my mom's favorite. I also intend to order a small sheet cake. The inscription? Happy Birthday, Mommy!

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