

The Circle of Life

Survivor's Film Explores Mother's Suicide; Life Begins Anew with Baby

By Heather Legg

Dara Berger, 33, is a new mother of beautiful baby Dylan. She is like any new mom—awe inspired by her remarkable infant, finding sleep when she can and trying to establish a new routine and lifestyle. She also is now living a role that has been absent from her life for 20 years—that of mother.

Berger's mother, Paula, died by suicide when Berger was 13 years old. She and her father found Paula after she hung herself in their family home. Berger knew that her mother had suffered from a mood disorder and, in the three weeks prior to taking her life, Paula had attempted suicide several times. That did not ease the shock or the pain of finding her mother and the aftermath of a suicide. Berger suffered from nightmares, mild depression and weight loss.

Paula's suicide was not spoken about; Berger's father, brother, neighbors and friends seemed shut down. She felt as if her mother never existed. Only because of her weight loss, was Berger urged to go to a therapist for an eating disorder. While attending therapy, she realized the amazing healing power of talking.

Suicide is one of the most complicated of all types of deaths and many people are afraid to talk about it. Berger used the example of murder—it is so much more horrific, yet people feel so much more comfortable discussing it. As Berger continued her therapy, she saw more need to erase the stigma of suicide and encourage people to open up. She found that once people knew she, a survivor, was comfortable with it, they would talk for hours.

As an adult, Berger continued on her journey of healing and promoting awareness of suicide. In 2002, she produced and directed, *A Secret Best Not Kept*, a film exploring the impact of suicide on a myriad of levels. Not only does Berger speak openly of her own personal loss and experience in her film, but she also interviews people who attempted suicide and survived.

Berger hopes her film will bring awareness and education to the public about suicide. She began showing *A Secret Best Not Kept* within the suicide community and hopes to soon have it available on a larger scale, to high schools and college campuses for needed awareness on those levels. Her intention is to get it out in the public eye as much as possible. She welcomes visitors to her website, www.sayitoutloud.com, where she maintains up-to-date information about her film, including screening and purchasing information.

Not only is Berger working hard to promote awareness, she also is fighting the stigma and secrecy of suicide. As cancer used to be the “c” word, “suicide” is often said in muffled tones. Berger, however, has made it a point always to be truthful about how her mother died. Openness and honesty are key to fighting the depression and suicide battles. The analogy of prejudice is one Berger used when discussing suicide. Children learn from their parents and pass that along to their children.

Another myth she works hard to dispel is that people who take their own lives do so for one specific reason—getting fired, a bad relationship, whatever is easy to blame. She found it is easier for most people to “compartmentalize” and blame one thing than to admit that a loved one had depression or another serious mental illness. Most often the case with suicide is a mixture of many issues, frequently a combination of external and internal factors. One of the attempters Berger interviewed in the film speaks of the “tunnel vision” she felt before trying suicide. Through interviewing people who tried to take their own lives, Berger presented a new understanding of the pain and uncontrollable feelings felt by people who both attempt and die by suicide.

While making the film, a multitude of emotions visited Berger. The nightmares came back a little, she felt the grief again in retelling her story so many times, but most importantly, she also felt the enormous gift of healing and peace. She had no idea of the gift that *A Secret Best Not Kept* would bring her.

“It was good for me on a personal level, and very healing to talk with others,” she said of making the film. She used the word “uplifting” to describe her film, though it is hard at first to imagine because of the subject matter. Yet a light exists at the end of the tunnel; hope and healing are there, waiting to be found.