

My name is Martha Ann Herrera and I want to share with you about my son Bryce Christian Herrera who was born on Christmas Day in 1991. I wished you could have known him.

Bryce died at his own hand at the age of 14 on September 28, 2006. When I am asked to share about my grief experience my first reaction is “I am not done grieving” and “what can I offer to someone else who is grieving?”

After much prayer I realized I will never be quite done, but what I could share is what God has shown and taught me. I feel like I have grieved over a lot in my life as many of you have as well. I have gone through a divorce after being married for 15 years, I have grieved over the loss of relationships but nothing has compared to the grief of the death of my precious blessing Bryce.

I have realized through this experience that grief is not something that happens and then goes away, like a storm. Grief is a journey. The ‘experts’ whoever they all are, say that there are five stages to grief – denial and isolation, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance. But it’s not like you go through each step, one at a time, in that order and it’s over. No, the stages come and go in no order, and it goes on and on, until you come to acceptance. I cannot say I am at acceptance yet... but I am getting there with God’s grace and support.

Bryce’s death has changed everything about me. This occurred during the time my church pastor had challenged us to 40 days of prayer. I had never been as committed to prayer as I was during that time. I was praying with my best friend over our children in the evening and with my co-worker regarding finances each morning. How could God allow this to happen to someone who has tried so hard to be a committed and dedicated Christian and good mother as I had been? I asked myself that over and over. I had to force myself many times to stop and see how God so carefully shielded me and prepared me for this tragedy in my life. After my divorce, I found myself needing to go back to work. I had not worked in years and yet God landed me a job with a group of people that were so gracious and wonderful to me during the time of the tragedy and still to this day. The kindness and love they have given me; one can only know that God’s hand was there.

After Bryce died and I met many other families who had walked this same path and I realized how God shielded me from walking in and finding a

gruesome site. I found Bryce looking so peaceful, no blood, no discoloration, no head swelling - just peacefulness. The hospital told us many things could happen to his body, but none of them ever did. I treasure that God shielded me from those things.

My church family stepped up and prepared meals for my family and me for months. My pastor emailed me regularly checking on how the boys and I were doing and asking if we needed anything. Another member stepped up and asked if she could do my laundry. I had prayer warriors from many bible study classes here at church who sent me notes, cards, and letters of encouragement. I had a wonderful lady who I had never met and on the Valentines Day after Bryce died she had put a beautiful and large bouquet of flowers on my front door step. One Bible Study class had a garage sale and put the profit made in Bryce's fund which helped pay for his headstone. Here God's grace was shown through my own church family and it was so wonderful.....His love flowing over from many whom I had never even met.

What I have decided is when Bryce died I had to come to terms with who I really was. Am I really a person who believes in God and all the truths as spelled out in the Bible and am I going to let God use me through this tragedy or am I a hypocrite and going to allow Satan to rob me of the blessings of my future and the future of my other boys. I knew without a doubt of Gods truths and even though this happened in my life I could not help but see how good God was to bring me to this point where I am today. God has allowed me to speak to kids, counselors, and parents about Bryce's death and the events that have surrounded it. Sometimes I am in awe when one of my kids say "even though we hate what has happened to Bryce this was suppose to happen because God is using you to help so many". If God would have asked me if He could take one of my blessings and make a difference in other peoples lives I would have said "no way"....God did not ask me, but I do have a choice whether I want to allow God to work through me to help others or just wake up each morning and cover my face and stay in bed. Don't get me wrong it is a conscious choice I have to make each morning.

In grief lots of things occur including relationships that end and change. Since Bryce's death there has been a strain on some of my extended family relationships and some have ended. When something like this happens everyone is so busy pointing fingers and trying to find out whose fault this is

that one can only imagine how much pain words said and things done can cause. I have had to shield myself from some who are suppose to love me the most because they too in reality are trying to deal with the pain that grieving can cause. What I have had to come to terms with is forgiving others for things said and done in an impulsive moment and also relationship restoration. They both don't have to come together. You can forgive someone for things said and done and choose to no longer have a relationship with that person. It is ok.

The grieving process for me, my other four children, my extended family and of course Bryce's friends has been a very difficult journey. My boys have each grieved in different ways at different times and they are also still grieving. For them, it's me and you, who have to show them God and help them see Him in all of this. One of them journals, - it has been a very good outlet and opportunity for him to grieve and still stay connected. One of them is less demonstrative in his feelings, but pays tribute to Bryce on my space. One of them, the youngest, is afraid of forgetting his brother so he loves to hear stories of him. Our family does not want to forget Bryce. We talk about Bryce and remember him daily.

Loss is an inevitable part of life and grief is a natural part of the healing process. Bryce's death was a sudden/shocking loss and there was no way to prepare for it. This has challenged my sense of security, confidence, and predictability of life. I have experienced sleep disturbance, nightmares, distressing thoughts, isolation and severe anxiety.....to each of those I have had to take before the Lord and work on my self talk to regain some sense of stability back in my life. In the past I would have been described as a strong, level headed, very predictable and stable lady. Now I'm just not the same, I am air headed, absent-minded, very forgetful and quite disorganized so yes everything about me has changed.

I now realize that the "experts" are right. There are many stages of grief – denial – there are many days that I still think Bryce is going to walk in the house with his big blue eyes and say "hey mom", anger – I have been angry with God and Bryce for what has happened, bargaining – if only Bryce would have survived I would have done this or that, depression – this is something I have to work on everyday so that I don't fall in the pit and stay - and acceptance – as I said in the beginning I am not there yet but with Gods grace I will eventually get there. You cannot imagine when something so

tragic and quickly occurs how you believe you are living a nightmare. After Bryce's death I went from burying my son to being served custody papers from my x husband suing me for custody of the other children. I had no time to absorb the loss of Bryce then I had to fear losing my other kids. I went to my garage many nights and just screamed at God.....shouting and telling him how angry I was. The good news is He loved me and understood.

What I have learned about grief is it's a time to grow closer to the Lord and allow Him to use you. This does not mean you have feelings of growing closer to the Lord, I felt very far from him many times. I felt abandoned, alone and forgotten by God. I don't believe God killed Bryce. I believe God gave my son a free will and God allowed this to happen. I have the choice as well to allow it to destroy my life or use it for His glory. I want to use it for His glory. There were times when I could not even pray, could not see where His glory was at the moment. Even now, sometimes I feel so broken and ignored by God. Those are feelings that come and go, but the truth of who God is does not change. Very recently I was crying out to the Lord and said I hate that I have lost my son...I heard Him so clearly saying "You have not lost him, you know exactly where he is" It is true. I am completely at peace knowing without a doubt that Bryce is sliding down rainbows and with God. I also know that I will see my son again. It does not take away the pain because I am selfish and miss my son's physical presence so much but it does ease it some.

In closing I want to say the thing that is the most difficult for me is when I am around someone and they feel uncomfortable or don't want to mention Bryce's name. You see, as a mother, I would much rather cry because someone cared to ask about Bryce and acknowledge his life and memory than to cry because no one wants to talk about it and just pretend he did not exist. Bryce was here and if his death goes without speaking than he would have died in vain. By speaking about Bryce and his death it allows me to go through the grieving process and help remember the 14 years and 10 months of his life and not the last few seconds and minutes that took him to his death. I want to encourage you - It's better to feel nervous and awkward sitting with a grieving friend than to not sit there at all and if you are grieving reach out to friends, family, or church members who want to make

an investment in just sitting and listening but most of all reach out to God because He is wanting and waiting for you.

Whatever it is you are grieving allow God to walk you through it. God knows how to handle and love someone who is too bruised to be touched which is how I feel. God loves you so much and wants to be a part of your grief recovery and He wants to show you how to use the sadness in your life that you are living for His glory.