

then there was light

—A story for anyone who needs a ray of hope

by Debbie Lavdas

Every day there are stories all around us. People who have lived more than their fair share of unkind fate. But we don't often hear their stories, because they're private, they're personal, they're no fun to share at the water cooler. So they remain untold.

Every once in a while, however, someone opens the door and lets us in, as they try to heal and help others along the way.

I opened the door to just such a story on a very ordinary night. Parked in the charmed artist's community of Laguna Beach, and with a few minutes to spare, I poked my head inside a new store called Pure Light. I was met by an array of candles, exotic Indonesian woods and Buddha-esque inspirations. But what stole my attention was a group of women toward the back, sitting underneath a tropical, festive bamboo lanai, having a party and making candles. They had presents, wine and were giddy like girls, as they sat there still in their business attire. I could almost see their shoulders relax, their to-do lists slip away, their family responsibilities subside. I wanted to be them—far away from their deadlines of tomorrow and overextended lives—just celebrating life and friendship. This store/candle studio/gathering place was owned by a woman named Judy Kelly.

Judy is a quiet, gentle soul—small in stature, but immeasurable in spirit. She lost her son, Tyeson, 25, to an accidental drug overdose just two years ago. He was her heart, and she was his hero. “Tye” would die the same day his life really started taking shape. It was the day his contagious charisma and creativity secured him a television show as a 20-something, tattooed,



enthusiastic chef. He signed the deal and was found dead later that night by his youngest brother. I learned of this very sad story online, days after visiting Judy's store of celebration and joy. And all I could think—as a woman, as a mom, a mom to a Ty of my own—was how in the world did this woman go from where she must have been to where she is today?

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It was a quiet Saturday afternoon at her store when Judy began telling me her tale. It started out like a story many of us know all too well. She was stuck in a job that she didn't really like, but stayed because it paid the bills and it helped her raise her three boys. She had dreams of doing more though, dreams inspired by a trip to Bali. So, on the side, she began planning for her future, putting pen to paper and crafting her ideas to bring Eastern philosophy to the Western world. She would bring gatherings, ceremonies and rituals to others. People would come to her store, celebrate a special occasion and then be blessed by friends and family. A charmed plan that came to an abrupt halt when she learned her son had died.

“I didn't know what to do, I didn't even know if I'd even be alive in six months,” she said, as her hands jerked up to the sky, as her posture deflated and as her eyes glossed. I hurt for her and saw a glimpse of the hopeless woman she must have been; a woman who tried to save her son from an addiction that began as a naïve teenage



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temptation. Judy continued talking and I continued listening, but I was distracted by the paradox that was all around us in this space she somehow found the strength to create. My eyes brought into focus the mantel over



her shoulder that read, "In everything, give thanks." The Zen-like music in the background seemed to get louder. The soothing scents of lemongrass and sandalwood seemed to grow stronger. And I saw patient water dripping from a fountain. Across the room, I noticed the shades of sea greens, earth browns and ocean blues that colored the walls up to a sky of airy bamboo. Then, I flashed to the image of those giddy, celebratory women whom I first saw at that birthday party.

It was surreal to me how Judy, with such real pain of her own, was running this store where people came to her for celebration, hope and joy. People like the mother of two autistic boys who caught her first break in five years as she celebrated her birthday on her first girls' night out at Judy's store. And the woman with cancer who was brought by those closest to her to support her struggle ahead in ceremony. And the couple who came to spend time together—without TV or other interruptions—but just to talk with each other, as they chipped away at chunks of wax, making candles and memories.

The reporter within me desperately wanted to ask Judy the all-too personal questions, but the writer within would quietly wait for the answers.

The more I returned to Pure Light,

the more the insights started to surface. There was the night I joined Judy in her "Release and Feel Peace" ritual—a ceremony held nightly where Judy, and anyone who wishes to join her, selects from a bowl of anonymous hand-written messages that customers have left, reads the message aloud and then burns it in hopes for a peaceful resolution. As Judy and I read these "worries of the heart" together, I noticed she read hers a little differently than I. Hers were voiced with a greater concern somehow, with truer hope and with a pain I realized she understood more than I did. That night I noted the importance she placed on letting go of what no longer serves you.

The next moment would come weeks later when someone was purchasing her favorite hand-carved mermaid teak bench. Judy has seen it on a trip to Bali and had asked the native artists to please recarve the mermaid's lips upward to give her expression more joy. As the customer left with her old mermaid friend, Judy said, "It's good," reassuring herself, "it's not about holding on, it's about welcoming the new." I saw her belief in looking forward.



Finally, there was the news of a fueling wax fire that flamed unattended at her store. After it had been put out, Judy confidently said, "Nothing would

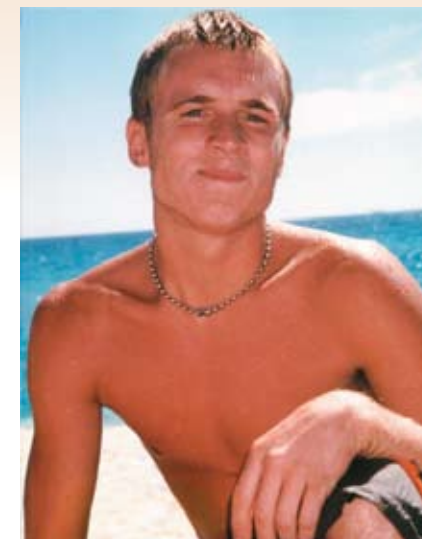
have happened. We're so blessed here. We're so protected." I saw her peace and faith in the future.

It was a combination of all these words and actions that I saw a window into Judy's world and understood the two crossroads she must have faced when her son died. In one direction was a life of overwhelming grief. In the other, a life that would survive and thrive. Judy chose to keep living, and with her choice came Pure Light—dedicated to moving positive energy, inspired to add to the consciousness of all things kind and peaceful, and devoted to keeping her son's creative spirit and light alive. What also came with her path of perseverance was the joy of being a grandmother to a young baby Tye, whose mother discovered she was pregnant just after



Tyeson died. Young Tye would be born early—sharing the same birthday as his father's brother, the brother who found Tyeson that tragic day. Judy believes this was her son's gift to his brother and his ultimate apology for finding him. She also recently started a foundation called The Lhyric Foundation; the name chosen for her son's love of music and his young son. She hopes to help future generations of artists take back their lives before addiction takes over.

I share Judy's story because it feels like there's too little inspiration in the world these days. No one wants to share their imperfect tales and so we think we are all on journeys alone—yet we never are. When one person opens the door, their honesty helps each of us to be a



little bit more compassionate and more open to telling our own struggles. It's then that we can begin to heal and start to see the light again.

Judy's story is about new beginnings and brighter tomorrows, both made better by what she's learned from yesterday and from her son's passion to live every day to the fullest. Stop in Pure Light on any given day and Judy will tell you about Tye, she'll share the pictures of him just above the register—pictures taken by a photographer the day he died—and as she tells you about him, she'll smile with pride, with peace and with a healing heart.

Now I know writers aren't supposed to get personally involved in the story. But I did. And I'm okay with that,



because I think I'm better for it. As I go about my life now, as I face my trials and tribulations, and as I tuck my Ty to sleep at night, I try to live a little differently. I try to let go a little more, look forward a little more, gather more when I want to retreat, and I try to believe. What will happen? I don't quite know. But these days, I'm open to the possibilities. ■

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Pure Light is a create-your-own candle studio, a nature-inspired store and a gathering place for celebrations and ceremonies. It is located at 821 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach, CA. For more information, call 949.376.7200, or visit PureLightCelebrations.com.

