

Good Grief

Five years after his two teenage children were killed by a drunk driver, Colin Campbell is finding new ways to grieve—while helping others deal with bereavement through his new book, support groups, and a one-man show he calls the “feel-bad story of the year.”

By Caren Lissner

Photos of Campbell's children Hart (left) and Ruby (right), with a portrait of Campbell painted by Ruby when she was 10 years old.





On a June night five years ago, Colin Campbell C'91 set out to drive two and a half hours from his family's home in Los Angeles to the area of Joshua Tree National Park.

He and his wife, *Black-ish* TV producer Gail Lerner, had purchased a family vacation home overlooking the desert only four days before. Campbell, a writer and theater and film director, had lined up meetings with contractors to see about building a pool and an extension that would give their children their own bungalow. The couple envisioned their 14-year-old son Hart playing video games and their 17-year-old daughter Ruby painting with views of the iconic rocks. It was an impulse purchase, and they all began to fantasize about "our wonderful future life, vacationing together in our favorite place," as Campbell put it.

He had initially intended to go alone, but Gail and the kids wanted to come along. So they piled into their Toyota Prius and drove into the twilight.

Meanwhile, many miles to their east, a 34-year-old woman named Nicole Packer was hurtling down the highway in the opposite direction. On probation for driving with a suspended license, she had a blood alcohol level higher than the .08 cutoff and a prior DUI on her record.

It had been dark for hours in the Mojave Desert when Campbell turned left into a Circle K gas station, a few stops before the Joshua Tree exit. That's when Packer's Ford Fiesta T-boned their Toyota, killing both Ruby and Hart, who were wearing their seat belts in the backseat, and sending Colin and Gail to the hospital.

They never saw the car coming.

In the five years since that horrific June night—including the pandemic lockdown and graduations of his kids' former classmates—Campbell has tried to cope by turning trauma into art. He published a book called *Finding the Words: Working Through Profound Loss with Hope and Purpose* (Penguin Random House, 2023) and starred in a one-man show called

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Grief: A One Man Show, which he calls the "feel-bad story of the year."

He and Gail also began fostering three teenagers (though the first teen opted not to continue the path toward adoption, something Campbell also grieves).

Now he's considering other ways to manage the kind of pain he believes we don't have the proper tools to discuss—while helping other grieverers do the same.

All About Family

Colin Campbell grew up outside of Philadelphia in Haddonfield, New Jersey, with strong ties to Penn. His father, the late Malcom Campbell, was an art history professor and assistant dean in the School of Arts and Sciences, and his mother Joan was an assistant dean at Penn's College of General Studies (now the College of Liberal and Professional Studies). His siblings also went to Penn: Cathleen Campbell C'83 GEd'85 GEd'98 and Christopher Campbell C'85 GAR'89.

"I have fond memories of being in an art museum, or a small church in Italy, with my dad talking to me about a painting or fresco, and invariably a crowd would gather to eavesdrop as he pointed out some fascinating detail," Colin says. His father "made art feel personal and full of meaning. ... I got to listen to a few of his lectures when I was at Penn and I think his theatricality and sly charm are qualities that I hope I inherited and display in my own work."

Campbell was also proud of his mom, particularly for advising students who took a nontraditional route to college. "I think my desire to help other grieving people comes from early lessons I learned from my parents about being of service," he says.

Campbell was a physical anthropology major at the University with a minor in theater. He met Gail while at graduate school at Columbia, and the pair headed to Hollywood to work in producing, directing, and teaching. Together, they wrote and directed the short film *Seraglio*, which earned them an Oscar nomination in 2000.

Meanwhile, they shared parenting equally, Campbell noted in *Finding the Words*. "I worked from home for most of their lives, so I was the point person when it came to the kids' schedules," he wrote. "I coordinated most of the birthday parties and playdates, the doctor visits and dentist check-ups. I was all in as a hands-on dad. And I loved it. I loved helping teach them to swim, ride bikes, climb trees, read, play cards, do pratfalls, and generally be ridiculous. And as they got older, my love for them only deepened."

Both kids were beloved by classmates. Hart "was the consummate clown," Campbell says, "a nonstop source of jokes and absurdities. Ruby was hilarious and clever. She had an alter ego character, Sven, who was in the Russian Mafia. Sometimes you'd call Ruby and Sven would answer. Hart had characters, too. People would ask them to do them."

At one point, Ruby heard that the Eagles' song "Hotel California" was always playing somewhere, so she told her dad that someday she wanted to start a radio station to play it nonstop, just to make sure it was always on. (To this day, he sometimes whispers "Hi, Ruby" when he hears the song.)

Their lives weren't free of challenges. Ruby dealt with mental health issues, including OCD and suicidal thoughts. "By January 2019, it felt like we had turned a corner," Campbell wrote in his



book. “We had at last found the right medication for Ruby’s depression, and thanks to the right treatment, her OCD was firmly under control. She had become an outspoken advocate for others living with mental illness.”

That Nightmare Night

The night that Ruby and Hart were killed remains “a nightmare that never ends,” Campbell said in a hearing earlier this year where Packer was sentenced to 14 years and eight months in state prison for two counts of vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated. But he made a surprising admission in a 2023 essay he wrote for the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) website—one of the many pieces he’s published about his grief.

“I am glad I got to watch my kids die,” Campbell wrote. “To be clear, I’m not glad they died. I am heartbroken and devastated, and there is a never-ending hole of aching and pain in my heart. ... But I am glad that I was there. This might come as a surprise to many read-

ers. I think there is a widespread assumption that parents would prefer to be spared the sight of their kids’ deaths.”

After rescue workers arrived, according to Campbell’s account, they administered CPR to Gail in the middle of the highway. Colin was able to hold Ruby’s hand, but she was unresponsive. Gail wanted to see the children, but paramedics feared she had broken her neck. All four of them were taken to Desert Regional Medical Center. “I remember the ER nurses frantically insisting that our paramedics detain us outside,” Colin recounted in his MADD piece. “We waited for a long terrible moment in the parking lot, I in a wheelchair and Gail strapped to a gurney. I am certain it’s because Ruby’s corpse got there before us, and they didn’t want us to see her. They were once again trying to spare us the sight of death. We were in the ER for what felt like hours before a doctor finally came and told us that Ruby had died and that Hart probably wouldn’t survive. No one wanted to break the news to us, but the delay wasn’t sparing us any-

thing. ... Both of us eventually got to kiss Hart’s forehead as they took him off life support, but we never saw Ruby again. It’s been almost four years now, and to this day, Gail deeply regrets not being able to say goodbye to Ruby and touch her body one last time. She is angry with the nurse who so confidently declared that ‘moms shouldn’t look.’”

Both children were officially pronounced dead the morning of June 13. Campbell and his wife were sent home in “an hour-long taxi ride of horror,” he wrote in his book.

Over the next few days, Campbell says, “It was always the first thought waking up, the last thought before I went to sleep every night. Now it’s not, but I think about them pretty constantly. ... It was such a surreal time. I was angry at the universe for robbing my children of their lives.”

“A lot of early grief is scary,” he adds. “I was scared at the prospect of living my life without Ruby and Hart. I was scared that if I let myself start to weep,

I would not stop. I would lose my mind. I learned that's not true. I'm so glad that I'm not scared of crying now. I'm not scared of feeling all the feelings."

Some marriages falter after the death of a child. One parent can feel resentful or isolated if the other appears to grieve less, or differently. But Colin says he and Gail would sometimes "be literally thinking the same thought, at the exact same time. We'd take a walk together, talk about our grief. At times we were in a different place, but that's OK. We talked about it. I think it gets hard for couples who don't want to deal with it."

Still, he was "ill equipped" to deal with such a profound loss. He had mourned his grandparents years ago, which was "expected," and his father died in 2013 at age 78, having retired from Penn in 1996 ["Obituaries," May/June 2013]. But, he says, "I did not know much about profound loss and the grieving process."

He had extremely dark thoughts, which became fodder for his art. "Five days after the crash," he says, "I began writing what became my solo show, and that was born out of this need to express and explore these complicated feelings and thoughts I was having."

Performing and Writing

Envy was among the first thoughts Campbell found himself wrestling with. When reading grief memoirs or talking to other bereaved parents, he'd become jealous if the parents "only" lost one child. That idea would become "the darkest part" of *Grief: A One Man ShitShow*.

In the 75-minute autobiographical show, which he performed most recently in November in Los Angeles, "I start complaining that I was reading all these grief books, but the author has other living children, and they talk about needing a purpose—and it's like, 'You have living children,'" Campbell says. "I get very frustrated [in the show]. ... I start to get angry at people who lost 'only' one child."

Campbell admits to worrying "that people who'd come to my show, who'd

"One person said to me, 'They're in a better place,'" he says. "That's definitely not true. A better place would be here on earth."

lost one child, would be upset that I was making fun of them. That's not how they reacted. I've only had positive feedback from people who experienced child loss."

Campbell likens the performance to a journey. "I start off very angry. Then I try to get help from other people. I start to analyze all these thoughts comparing loss. I think of all the ways I'm fortunate, all the kinds of child loss that I wouldn't trade places with."

The show, and his subsequent book, were early attempts to find a new purpose—a way to transform his experiences into advice. "It's a very raw show," he says. "I talk about honoring everybody's grief. *Let's not compare our grief*. And to learn to live with the pain. I tell the audience they'll probably be freaked out. If you're laughing, someone else is crying. It's OK. I give permission. It's OK to feel whatever."

Besides performing the show, Campbell has been speaking to loss groups who contacted him after reading *Finding the Words*. The book aims to help both grieving people and those who want to understand how to talk to them. After the tragedy, Campbell says, some of his acquaintances made comments he found offensive. Comments about heaven, fate, and the like weren't helpful, as he's not religious.

"One person said to me, 'They're in a better place,'" he says. "That's definitely not true. A better place would be here on earth. I haven't heard many people say things that are upsetting, because they know better. Or they read my book or my articles. I do encounter some things like 'It was meant to be' or 'Everything happens for a reason.' I used to believe that: If something's difficult and you overcome that struggle, that it was meant to be. I don't believe that now, and I find it offensive. It implies my children were supposed to be killed by a drunk driver, and that's not true."

He says some people avoided talking about his children, which also wasn't helpful. "What I needed in my grief was to have conversations about Ruby and Hart," Campbell says. "I didn't need to talk about the weather or politics. And if people were too scared to mention Ruby and Hart, it wasn't going to work. Friends felt relief at that instruction."

Considering how easy it is to say the "wrong" thing, there's risk in urging people to broach the subject of loss with someone who's grieving. But Campbell's book is meant to help. "Trying to cheer up someone who's grieving isn't appropriate," he says. "They want to be allowed to feel their feelings, and to have them validated."

Old and New Friends

Campbell says it was helpful when friends asked him what he needed, but even more helpful when they made a specific offer, such as to deliver a meal, or take a walk. "In early grief, you don't know what you want, and it changes moment to moment," Campbell says. "I appreciated concrete offers. 'Do you want to go for a walk tomorrow morning? I'm free.' I don't have to think about it. I could just say yes."

A common theme in memoirs of child loss is the difficulty some bereaved parents experience being in the company of old friends who have living children. In 2015 the New York City-based journalist Jayson Greene lost his 2-year-old daughter, Greta, when a brick fell from a build-

ing and struck her on the head while she was sitting on a bench with her grandmother. In his 2019 memoir *Once More We Saw Stars*, Greene wrote that early in his grieving process, he told a friend, “We are going to have to find friends with dead children.”

Similarly, author Anna Whiston-Donaldson, whose 12-year-old son drowned in a creek while playing with two friends during a storm, wrote in her 2015 memoir *Rare Bird* that she and her husband eventually moved out of their home after she kept seeing the two other children happily playing nearby. She, too, needed to be around people who understood.

Campbell says he found some relief in meeting parents who had lost children, rather than only people who couldn’t relate. In fact, one organization, Los Angeles-based Our House, places people in support groups with others who’ve experienced similar losses. The Campbells were placed in a group for parents who’d suddenly lost kids age 14 and over within the last year. “I did a lot of grief groups,” he says. “I met a lot of parents who’d lost children. It continues to be helpful having those people in my life.”

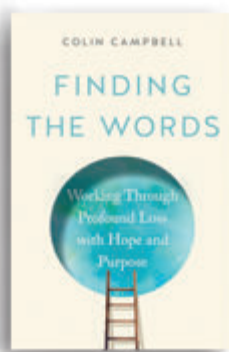
But Campbell says that despite an “emotional chasm” between him and friends who have children, he found it important to stay connected to people he knew before. “It was helpful to be able to talk to Ruby and Hart’s friends and their parents and participate in things, not act like all of it was over,” he says. “A lot of things are helpful: community gatherings, walks with friends, private rituals. I’m drinking out of a mug from Bryce Canyon right now, where we went on our spring break, our last trip together. So I’m thinking about them and this trip.”

Hart’s former school now gives a “Kindness Award” named after him, Campbell says, a practice he hopes will continue. And he notes in the book that friends of both kids raised money in their honor for the Trevor Project, which works to

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A Shattered Identity

When Ruby and Hart were killed, I no longer understood who I was. I had thought of myself first and foremost as a dad to two wonderful kids. It informed every aspect of my identity. All my hopes and dreams for my future were intertwined with their futures. I took for granted that they would always be with me for holidays and vacations for the rest of my life. I looked forward to helping raise their children. Toys and books from my childhood were carefully stored in the attic in the hopes that one day I might share them with grandchildren.



And now, the life I had is over. My old identity is gone. So who am I now? Mourners are all faced with a version of this crisis. How are you still a spouse if your spouse is gone? How are you still a sibling if your sibling is gone? How are you a child if your parent is gone? I had become a man with two dead kids. That is my reality. I can’t deny it. I need to reorganize my identity and define how I plan to live as the father of children who were killed on June 12, 2019. This is part of the work of grieving.

What makes this grief work so hard is that we don’t want to do it. We desperately don’t want to integrate this loss into our identity. We want to still have the future we used to have. We want to keep moving forward in *that* life. Our heart resists the work of change that we must do. This resistance makes your grief work even more difficult and exhausting.

I need to take my shattered identity and put it back together, piece by piece—but different. I have a new relationship to everyone in my life. I used to walk into my local Jersey Mike’s sandwich shop and the person behind the counter knew my order by heart—two turkey sandwiches, one with American cheese and lettuce, the other with Swiss cheese, lettuce, and tomato. Sandwiches for me and Hart. Now I only get one sandwich and I ache for Hart and everything he and I have lost. I get together with friends who have kids, and our dynamic has changed. There is pain, loss, and yearning everywhere I turn. This is true for all of us in grief. If you lost a spouse, how do you now fit in with all those other couples you were both friends with? Do you still get invited to their dinner parties? If you lost a sibling, how do you now function in a family with a gaping hole? If you lost your closest friend, or a soldier who fought by your side, how do you relate to all the people who can’t fathom your grief? We need to redefine our relationships to everyone and everything in our lives in order to put our identity back together in this new reality.

Denial urges me to avoid this process of reintegration. And denial is tempting. It sounds like it might be nice, imagining that Ruby and Hart are still alive. But it’s not. Because it is not true, and I can’t actually trick myself into believing that it is. So instead, it feels awful and unsatisfying. I can’t wish them back to life.

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prevent suicide among LGBT youth. (Ruby was gay, Campbell notes in the book, and Hart fiercely defended her.)

So while it has helped for Campbell to connect with other parents like him, he found comfort in maintaining friendships with those he and his kids knew before the tragedy. Campbell’s book also details some quieter ways of coping. He didn’t particularly like “grief yoga,” he notes, but he greatly benefited from journaling.

Fostering Teenagers

As Colin and Gail found ways to work through their losses, they looked into the foster care system, feeling a “desperation” to parent again. (Couples are required to wait at least a year after a loss to begin the fostering process, something Campbell understands.) Adopting new children after a loss may seem “radical,” he wrote in the book, but he and his wife see it as just adding to the family.

Fostering had actually been Ruby's idea, years ago, he says. "She said, 'We have so much love in our family and there are kids in need. Let's share the love.' It seemed so beautiful. But we already had two children."

The couple became involved with Kid-save, which brings teens together with adult volunteers to play games. After the games, the teens can fill out a form indicating which adults they connected with, and adults do the same.

The Campbells took to one 13-year-old girl who was "smart, funny, engaging, and eager to play," he wrote in the book. "After each event, we circled her name and she circled ours. It was a match!" The teen moved in with them, but ultimately she decided not to continue the path to adoption. Even with ample counseling for all of them, she didn't change her mind. "It continues to be a difficult loss," Campbell says. "I mourn that loss as well. I worry about her. She's not in a good place, trying to age out of the foster care system all by herself. She chose that, but she's just a kid."

Currently they're fostering a 13-year-old girl and her 14-year-old brother. The siblings have already lived with the couple for a year, and they're continuing the adoption process, Campbell says. It involves twice-monthly visits from social workers, lots of counseling, and much paperwork.

Campbell says he knows that some people might believe they're "replacing" his children, but he pushes back against that characterization. "We're raising two children who need a family," he says. "It doesn't make me think less about Ruby and Hart. It makes me think about them more."

Still, he does feel guilt. "It's been difficult to allow ourselves to find joy when we're grieving," he says. "I think we all struggle with a certain amount of guilt that holds us back. We struggle with, 'What are the ways in which we can give ourselves permission to be in this world and in this life, when Ruby and Hart are not?' It doesn't feel like I ever have pure

joy. It's always joy mixed with grief."

But with his foster son and daughter, "We talk about Ruby and Hart. We talk about our grief. And we've modeled how to find joy again."

"Every child in the foster system system has experienced a tremendous amount of loss," he continues. "We know what it means to lose a sense of self and identity and stability. I really do think we are good models. We are modeling 'good grief,' in a way."

Just before the start of 2024, Colin and Gail revived the traditional New Year's Eve party they used to hold before their children died. They had put it on hiatus since then, instead asking former attendees to email them memories of Ruby and Hart. "It was an emotional challenge and a milestone for us, because it was so difficult, the idea of having a party," he says. "We had had the party every year, with Ruby and Hart's friends, an all-ages party. It allowed us to talk about Hart and Ruby, so there was joy and pain mixed together. Five years after the crash, Ruby's friends are about to graduate from college, and Hart's friends are going to college. It was a party that mixed our worlds. We invited our foster kids' friends as well. It was a nice mix of our two lives."

Looking to the Future

As Campbell finds ways to move forward, he's been responding to grieving parents who reached out after reading his book. Recently, he says, two parents on Long Island, whose 18-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a car, flew him out to talk to their religious community. Some 150 people showed up for the talk.

"It was very meaningful for me," Campbell says. "A lot of people felt empowered after reading my book, empowered to reach out and ask for what they needed in their grief. People on the other side felt empowered to reach out to their friends in grief, make that phone call, reconnect in a meaningful way."

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Recently, he says, he gave advice on a podcast. "I did an interview with a woman in Australia. She said that when she was a teenager, a dear friend of hers had passed away. This was 40 years ago. She thinks about this young boy. I said, 'Does his mom know?' I said, 'Please reach out. It would be meaningful.'"

But what if reaching out will only ignite the mother's grief? "Grief doesn't need reigniting," Campbell insists. "It's already there. You're not reigniting it. You're validating it and telling these parents what they most want to hear, that their child is remembered and still having an impact on the world."

Five years after that dark night in the desert, Campbell is still seeking ways to cope with his loss, honor Ruby and Hart, and work on creative projects about the grieving process. Frustrated about how grief is often portrayed on screen, where characters and their friends seem afraid to talk about their lost loved ones, he's writing a screenplay about parents whose child is killed by a drunk driver.

"I just think it's helpful to normalize it," he says. "The more that all of us can talk about grief and grieving, the more that it will seep into society that it's OK to talk about, that it's not so scary."

Caren Lissner C'93 is the author of the novel *Carrie Pilby*, which was adapted into a Netflix film, and is working on a new novel, *The Queen Of Impossible Crushes*.