



A refuge for unborn-newborn babies and little children who will die and those who love them

NEWSLETTER

FALL 2019

EDITORIAL

Dear Friends of Alexandra's House,

Welcome to our Fall Issue 2019. In this issue, we will have the privilege of hearing from two women, whom in the course of their creative professional activities, have sought to bring healing to mothers facing early losses. I got to know Rene Kurz whilst living in Philadelphia in 2018 when she was earning her Master of Arts Degree in Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling from Drexel University. Now she serves as a movement therapist for young mothers recovering from addictions. Colette Waters is a portrait and fashion photographer here in the Kansas City area. Through experience of her own losses, she has found meaning in telling the narratives of loss and hope through her powerful imagery of femininity.

Alongside, these two women, we profile the Rev Fr Richard MacDonald, who together with his parish have been magnificent supporters of Alexandra's House through the years. Here, he looks back into his childhood memories and tells us why it is that the House's mission strikes a chord with him so very deeply.

As ever, we are deeply grateful to all our families and friends for their extraordinary support throughout this season, and we wish you all a happy Thanksgiving and Christmas season.

—Hilary Stroh

How did you come to Alexandra's House ?

I first learned about Alexandra's House after my first miscarriage over Mother's Day weekend in 2017. A friend mentioned them to me and invited me to their 2017 gala. About a month after that gala, I had my second miscarriage.

I was very early along in my pregnancies but the losses still broke me. Since they happened so quickly, it was hard to validate my feelings to myself and others. I luckily have a great support system but nobody else felt the bond that I did since I shared about the pregnancy and the loss in the same breath. I wanted something physical on earth to honor my babies. I didn't want them to be forgotten.

As a portrait photographer, you began to think of a creative way to honor and remember: can you tell us more about this?

My mind always leans towards photography, so in January 2018 I styled and photographed a photo shoot I titled 'The Birth of Spring.' As I was preparing for the photo shoot, I was reminded what a stranger said to me in May 2017, a few weeks after my first miscarriage. He said God had told him I was in a dark place—a season of winter—but that he saw me walking in fields of flowers. God saw me and my pain, and spring was coming. I wanted to symbolize the beginning stages of the end of winter and start of spring. Thus, I had a model symbolize the season between winter and spring in the photographs. It snowed the morning of the photo shoot which made the whole experience even more therapeutic and fulfilling. I felt like God knew I needed that snow and He provided for me.



How did you think this might be of service to other women undergoing the 'hidden' loss of miscarriage?

After the photo shoot, I realized I wanted to do more of these meaningful fine art photo shoots but instead of

using models, I wanted to immerse myself and other women who have experienced loss into the photographs. I want to validate women's feelings and do something tangible here on earth to honor all of our babies in Heaven and the women who have experienced loss and heartbreak whether from the loss of a child or the emptiness caused by infertility. My babies matter. I matter. So do you and your babies—whether they are here on earth or in Heaven, or still within the desires of your heart.

Your path to healing was once again cut across by tragedy. Can you tell us about baby Bennett?

I started dreaming up photograph concepts and my husband Michael and I thought our "spring" had come when I found out I was expecting again in 2018. Michael and I were excited for our 20 week ultrasound. While lying down with warm gel on my belly, we quickly saw Bennett's head and spine on the screen. I felt a wave of relief. After a few seconds though the nurse excused herself out of the room. I felt like I was going to be sick as we prayed out to God that Bennett was ok.

But he wasn't.

Our world came crashing down as our doctor confirmed his little heart was no longer beating. Our baby

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was gone. I just kept thinking, "This can't be happening. Please God no." Lying on the hospital bed and crying with Michael is one of the most painful and surreal moments of my life.

The next morning we headed to the hospital to induce labor. We had been praying for a miracle so when we arrived we asked our doctor to do another ultrasound to confirm that Bennett was really gone. We thought, "This can't be our story. 2017 was our year of loss and 2018 is supposed to be our year of happiness." We held our breath as our doctor took her time checking over Bennett's body but she sadly confirmed his soul was no longer with us.

In the early morning hours of October 19th, I gave birth to our Bennett. Worship music played while Michael held my hand, gave me kisses and whispered over and over, "I love you" and "I'm so proud of you." We spent the day holding and marveling at Bennett. By evening we were ready to be home but we did not want to leave our Bennett. Walking out of our hospital room was one of the hardest things we've ever done.

We celebrated Bennett with an intimate graveside service. My sister said the night before she had a dream

that I was in the hospital having heart surgery. She had to tell everyone that my heart had broken in two and the doctors were trying to mend it back together. That's exactly how I feel. My heart has broken. It is still broken. I know God is already piecing it back together but it is so painful.

As Bennett's service started, rain began to fall. When the last song played, the rain stopped. We felt God crying with us as our tears mixed with the rain. Oh how Bennett is loved. As I touched Bennett's tiny casket one more time before leaving him to be buried, I quietly thanked God for the short time we had with Bennett and that we are his parents. I find comfort knowing I literally carried him for his entire life. Our baby went from being safe and warm inside of me and hearing our voices, to opening his eyes for the first time and seeing our Lord God and meeting his older siblings. After Bennett's service and the rain had cleared, a rainbow shone brightly in the sky. God is good.

You've found the strength to carry on through it all, and pursue your mission even more courageously than before. Tell us about 'Seasons of Hope'.

Even though the heartbreak is overwhelming, Bennett's life has shown us how much we can love and how much we and Bennett are loved. It is true that there is a time for laughter and a time for tears. As I healed physically and emotionally from the trauma of losing Bennett, I kept feeling God bringing up the idea for the photo shoots again. I started taking self-portraits that helped me cope and feel validated. Earlier this year I gathered the courage to ask another mama if she would be interested in taking part in the series. She said yes. I have since named the series "Seasons of Hope," and currently have the fourth woman lined up to have her photo taken in honor of her child in Heaven. Each photo shoot is personalized to the woman and her story. We incorporate the "season" she is in, with flowers and other symbols that are important to her, like when we added butterflies because they were symbolic to the woman.



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In our picture-perfect world of social media, many people would prefer to repress these losses and never 'show' them, but your point is to allow women to hold both the pain and the joy at once, by honoring their motherhood. It's pretty counter-cultural: do you find it challenging to explain to people?

There is a hard balance between acknowledging the pain and grief but also showing the joy in life and hope in God that has been challenging but fulfilling to visualize and photograph. I literally could not take these photographs without God and the help of my amazing team (hair and makeup stylist Michele Taylor and assistant Laura Campbell). It is a blessing that this series is com-

pletely volunteer based. I am sharing a few sneak peek photos online but my goal is to share the final photographs and the women's stories in a gallery show.

If you are interested in seeing more about Seasons of Hope, or taking part yourself, you can go to the Seasons of Hope section on my website: www.colettewaters.com/seasonsofhope

On Facebook, I am Colette Waters Photography. On Instagram, I am @colettewaters.



Dancing from Death into Life : Renée Kurz, MA, R-DMT

Our body is the cooperator with grace and thus bearer of new life, made in the image of God, the source of all life. Our body is distinct yet inseparable from our mind and soul, a complete and necessary embodiment of our unique, never to be repeated self. For a mother and child, the body is the vessel—the medium—for the most intimate bond. This bond forms before birth, wherein the beating of the mother's heart and the movement of her body comfort and hold the child in a symbiotic dance. Death cannot destroy this bond, no matter how many earthly days the two lived together. Death will attempt, though, to stop the mother's dance from carrying on. Pain, confusion, sorrow, and at times anger towards the body bring movement to a halt. The movement of life and of hope halts in the wake of the stillness of death.

The quest for meaning in suffering is often deeper than words can relate. The language of movement gives voice to the soul when words are not found, allowing the body to speak from the depths and reveal one's innermost feelings. Dance/movement therapy upholds the dignity and purpose of our body as a resource, a guide, and a vehicle of transformation uniting mind and heart/soul into one expression. Dance/movement therapy approaches the healing process from an understanding that our experiences are first felt and understood through our body and then integrated with our thoughts and emotions.

The American Dance Therapy Association defines dance/movement therapy (DMT) as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual". While the formal profession of DMT began in the 1960s, its roots are traced

back to ancient healing practices from around the world, which utilized communal and personal dance as sacred expressions forging connections to the spiritual realm. The use of dance was especially common in ancient times, and still alive today in some cultures, for mourning rituals. Social connection and memorialization of the deceased through dance and movement was and is still seen as supporting the natural grieving process.

While not a mother myself, I have witnessed the profound grief of friends whom have suffered the loss of a child before birth. In those moments, I experienced a call in my heart to bring healing and hope to these mothers. This call took on a more crystalized direction when I entered the field of dance/movement therapy after years as a modern dance performer and dance educator. I soon discovered that there is little information or research on the value of utilizing creative and embodied approaches for perinatal grief and bereavement therapy. Desiring to learn more about healing the grieving heart and body of a mother through the vehicle of dance/movement, I conducted a small study during my Master's Degree work asking the question: What are the embodied experiences of women who have had a miscarriage or stillbirth? My hope was to learn more about the body-felt sensations and symptoms of this form of grief so that I could develop a framework for therapy, along with best practices and body/movement-based interventions.

The women that engaged in my study shared about what they felt after having been guided through a movement experience to process their loss. The women all

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shared that they were able to feel more in touch with their emotions and how they 'really' felt, thus able to better acknowledge and validate their needs. They all described a sense of experiencing a weight on their shoulders, which was able to feel lifted during the movement process. The experience of having to push the body forward because it felt stuck and frozen was also very prevalent. The women also spoke of their grief not feeling valid and that moving their story gave them a sense of empowerment, feeling seen and heard.

Re-connecting mind-body disconnections, reducing tension through relaxation and stress management techniques, processing trauma memories through embodied expression, creating rituals and supporting memorials, increasing social support and a sense of community are all potentialities of DMT for individuals suffering a perinatal loss. My future hope is to offer DMT for perinatal grief in a range of settings in order to offer mothers, fathers, and families an opportunity to engage in DMT services: a support group for women, private practice therapy implementing the treatment model proposed through my research, and teaming up with other organizations currently offering perinatal grief and bereavement support.

My Catholic faith plays a large role in this work, in that I carry the eternal perspective and value of life with me into every encounter. I feel especially drawn to the Blessed Mother as she stood at the foot of the Cross of her Son. I pray to unite with her as I bring consolation and hope to the cross of grief. My faith in Jesus helps me embrace the Cross of others, and encourage them to do the same, finding meaning and value in the pain and mystery of loss...to bring the hope of resurrection, transform darkness into light, and restore meaning in the wake of earth shattering mystery that only Heaven can hold. May we all dance from the darkness of death into the light of Life!

To find a Dance/Movement Therapist in your area visit: www.adta.org

Rev. Richard MacDonald, Pastor

Everyone has a distinct path that draws them towards the work of Alexandra's House. The Reverend Fr Richard MacDonald, pastor of Holy Angels Catholic Church in Basehor has been impressively active in fund-raising, and has sent many families to Patti for her care.

I got a chance to catch up with him in October. What was it about his own background, I asked, that made him particularly sensitive to this particular ministry in the church?

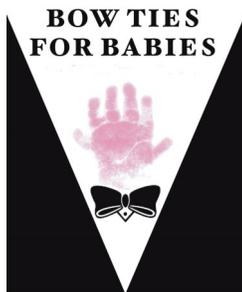
He talks, affectionately, of a brave and faithful mother, who suffered multiple miscarriages, but finally welcomed him into the world, after months of enforced bed-rest, a beloved only child. Worriously for her, his health was deeply compromised at birth, with an abdominal wall defect, and situs invertus – and it was touch and go whether he would make it or not, but he did. A lot later, it stuck with him something an older cousin said to him 'you are a miracle baby, and you should never forget that'. This has made his sense that life is a gift of God especially acute. 'Every child is irreplaceable – you just think of all the wonderful things that come from a child'.

That makes the tragedy surrounding perinatal death cut so very deeply: 'that the child hasn't had a chance to live, to laugh, to be known. And instead of being thankful for their health you can't.'

He remembers also other relatives, an aunt and an uncle, who had six healthy sons (like brothers to him), but lost their one-day-old only daughter, Mary Angela. How well he recalls how his uncle, the manliest of men, whenever he would visit her grave, would cry each time right to the end of his life, up to nearly 60 years later. His aunt still does.

But even in the midst of the tragedies that he now sees first-hand among the families in his parish, his response is grounded in a sense of providential faith, that each life is loved by God. This is something that once again, he learned deeply from his mother. He recalls that she made of point of seeking to baptize her miscarried baby. I mentioned that it was perhaps somewhat unusual of his mother to be so open about her early losses, in an era when a lot of people hid it away, as something shameful. He recognizes the truth of this. Clearly his mother was different. 'How can you grieve if you aren't allowed acknowledge your loss? Yes, it's tragic, but you must claim it: it's still your baby'.

Bow Ties for Babies 2019



Our chairman, Tricia Clement, an Alexandra's House mother of Lexi and Zoe, and her Friends of Alexandra's House committee hosted another wonderful occasion to support the work of Alexandra's House on 4 October at The Venue in Leawood. Patti presented news of updates at the House, and our guests enjoyed mingling with old friends and making new ones. The committee implemented a new form of bidding which seemed to make the check-in and out process more efficient and expedient for our guests.

Dear Patrons, Friends and Parents of Alexandra's House,

The 'Friends of Alexandra's House' wish to thank you once again, for your generosity and attendance at this year's event. It was an event blessed with joy in celebration of our babies as expressed by our speaker, Katrina Apley, who shared the story of her life, struggles & challenges, her beautiful son, Malachi, and daughter, Layla, and how she is so appreciative of the services of this ministry.

We are pleased to announce that we have already raised \$40,000 in our preliminary count and are still awaiting future donations. We look forward to seeing all of you next year along with some new faces.

May God's blessings be upon all of you.

The Friends of Alexandra's House.



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Alexandra's House

