



Allison Gilbert of Irvington with photos of her parents.

Seth Harrison/The Journal News

Losing both parents

Her own grief inspired author to seek others who shared the same experience

Heather Salerno
The Journal News

Allison Gilbert was devastated when her mother lost her battle with ovarian cancer in 1996. But it was her father's death five years later that sent her into a tailspin.

She was profoundly shaken and couldn't understand why. After all, she was 31, a married mom and successful investigative news producer at WNBC-TV. And clearly, she'd gone through this sort of grief before.

Gilbert looked for something in her local bookstore to help explain her emotions, but nothing quite fit.

Everything was about losing one parent or written by counselors who seemed detached from the experience.

"I think there's a societal expectation that your parents are the ones to go first, so you just pick it up and move on," she says.

"I wanted to learn that I wasn't alone. That I wasn't the only one so unsettled by the deaths of my parents."

Gilbert wanted to read about others who'd experienced this double loss, too. She couldn't find a book like that, so she decided to write one.

In "Always Too Soon" (Seal Press, \$14.95), Gilbert offers up a literary support group: a collection of compelling interviews with celebrities like Rosanne Cash, Ice-T and Yogi Berra, as well as people who lost their parents in tragedies like 9/11, the crash of TWA Flight 800 and the Oklahoma City bombing.

Now 36 and living in Irvington with her husband, Mark, and two young children, Gilbert spent three years compiling these intimate stories, which are raw, heartbreaking and powerful.

But Gilbert wanted them to be something else, too: Inspiring.

"If I did my job right, each chapter will clearly elucidate what helped that person get through, what made them stronger and what was empowering to them," she says.

One of Gilbert's contributors, Brian O'Hara, was 12 when both of his parents and 14-year-old sister were killed aboard TWA Flight 800 in 1996. O'Hara and his twin brother, Matthew, had opted out of the trip to France and remained behind in Irvington with their grandparents to at-

tend basketball camp.

Before Gilbert contacted him, O'Hara says he had never spoken publicly about their deaths.

"Even privately I don't speak about it often," he says. "I figured I've got to start sometime, so why not start with a book that I hope will help other people?"

O'Hara is now 23, lives in Manhattan and works as a sales assistant for ABC Television. He's only recently begun discussing memories of his lost family members with Matthew.

As a child, he says he was numb to the tragedy. The aunt and uncle who raised them took the boys to a psychiatrist, but O'Hara hated to go, so they didn't force him to continue.

O'Hara says that the deaths didn't really hit him until nearly 10 years later. He was studying abroad in Denmark when a good friend suddenly died of a heart attack.

That was when all of his buried thoughts boiled over. He started having anxiety attacks, so he went to a psychiatrist again. He says it's helped a lot.

He thinks talking about his family more when he was younger would have helped, too.

"Communication is a big thing," he says. "Talking to somebody, letting everything out there. If I'd known that, I'd have been better off."

Like O'Hara, others in Gilbert's book say their parents' deaths — however upsetting — made them the people they are today.

Geraldine Ferraro doesn't believe she would have become a congresswoman or run for vice president if her father hadn't died when she was 8. Rosanna Arquette says losing her mother, then her father three years later, pushed her into becoming a director. Mariel Hemingway says

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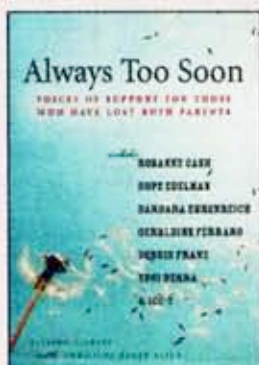
Brian O'Hara was 12 when both of his parents and his 14-year-old sister were killed aboard TWA Flight 800 in 1996. The family lived in Irvington.

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Book deals with losing parents

GILBERT, from 1E

her father's death gave her the "courage to be the person I am meant to be."

Gilbert was devoted to both of her parents, but she felt it was important to include some people in the book who didn't have such "love-dovey" relationships.

"Because that's not everyone's experience," she says.

So she pursued interviews with "Law & Order: SVU" star Ice-T — who was orphaned at 11 and raised by relatives who didn't really want him — and country singer Shelby Lynne — whose father shot her mother and killed himself when she was 17.

Neither one had ever discussed the matter in such length and detail with a reporter.

"That was a real honor to have them be so willing to share," says Gilbert.

Ice-T, whose real name is Tracy Marrow, says that he got his nickname because he developed a cold personality after having a loveless childhood. Lynne states frankly that she doesn't believe in therapy, and will never marry again or have children because you "can't depend on anybody or anything."

Still, both say their struggles allowed them to become artists.

Before writing the book, Gilbert says that she'd thought people who had conflicted relationships with their parents might feel somewhat liberated when they died.

She soon discovered that those with fractured ties often have a more difficult grieving process.

"It's grief, plus guilt," she says.

"There's a lot of shoulda-coulda-wouldas and a lot of regrets. Because you can't go back and repair that damage."

Gilbert says she also had the misconception that those orphaned as children have a more painful experience.

While kids endure many hardships, she says, adults face a range of emotional issues that their younger counterparts don't. Adults often encounter probate problems or have to sell a childhood home, and they're the ones who usually sift through their parents' belongings.

And sibling relationships sometimes change.

An unexpected source of pain for Gilbert was not being able to talk to her brother, Jay, about their loss — even though the two are close.

Gilbert says she's more vocal about her emotions, but her brother keeps his feelings to himself.

She had to learn that "while he misses them as I do, he goes about it in a different way, which is fine."

She also found that she re-evaluated her priorities after her father died.

Gilbert is now a freelance producer for CNN's "American Morning," which allows her more time with her family. She's found satisfaction in her book projects, too.

"Always Too Soon" is her second book; her first was "Covering Catastrophe: Broadcast Journalists Report September 11." She's still deciding on a topic for her next work.

So, like many of those she interviewed for her latest book, she found that losing her parents gave her the opportunity to reinvent herself.

"While you don't welcome this milestone in any way, shape or form," she says, "it gives you the platform to move in a new or different direction, or to move on with a stronger conviction."

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