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Words That Change

Our World One book that brought comfort and hope to Lafayette parents

By Lou Fancher



Lamont and Sheila Gilbert, with their son Nicholas.
Photo provided

The influence of a piece of literature, whether it arrives in printed form, or on the many mobile screen devices now available, is undeniable. Founders of international humanitarian organizations, battered women's shelters, groundbreaking chefs and restaurateurs, professional athletes and artists, Silicon Valley startup entrepreneurs and a host of other people trace their origins to the pages of a novel, a collection of poetry, or a non-fiction narrative.

In the months ahead, Lamorinda Weekly will introduce a local person and the book that blossomed into significance in his or her life. The degree of sharing will depend upon the interviewee. Not everyone will want to be as open as Lamont Gilbert, but then, not every book has the profound position of oracle he and his family have assigned to "The Next Place."

For Lafayette residents Sheila and Lamont Gilbert, author/illustrator Warren Hanson's "The Next Place," is a beacon of light, a remembered smile, and a golden handprint partially filling the permanent void in their hearts. The parents of four boys, the Gilberts lost their youngest son, Nicholas Colby, when he succumbed to acute lymphoblastic leukemia, on May 25, 2006. A book, created

by a man they have never met, represents a most intimate journey to healing.

"We were in Denver, Colorado, for experimental treatments," Gilbert says. One month prior to the anniversary of what would be Nicholas' 14th birthday on Jan. 27, his recall is crystal clear. "Nicholas came out of his hospital room and said, 'I want to go to Heaven.' That was the first time I realized he wasn't going to live."

Dr. Lia Gore, the pediatric oncologist treating Nicholas, gave the Gilberts a copy of Hanson's book. Too concerned with getting their son home - the rare request of a child more prone to giving away his toys to fellow patients than to asking for anything - the Gilberts tucked it in their luggage. Arriving at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital in Stanford at 3 a.m., family and friends, numbering close to 100, rotated in 20-minute shifts. Nicholas was never alone, never without a warm hand to hold one of his own. Shirley Bacchus, his Diablo Valley Montessori teacher, offered to read to him. The Gilberts saw a gentle smile filter across their son's face as she read, "I'll glide beyond the rainbows. I'll drift above the sky. I'll fly into the wonder, without ever wondering why."

Reached at his home in Texas, Hanson was touched by the attention. "Obviously, the book was created to bring comfort at times of loss," Hanson writes in an email. "When it's the loss of a child, it still always makes me sad. I am rarely aware of how the book gets used, but I'm always grateful to hear about it."

"After he passed, going through the book," Gilbert says, "it was like Nicholas was reaching out to us. It wasn't just a book, it was God comforting our hearts with something tangible that we could see and feel."

Three paragraphs from the book are embedded in the marble memorial honoring Nicholas' life at his private Oakmont Memorial Park estate in Lafayette. But the book's resounding message of love and laughter - never erased by individual mortality - didn't end at Nicholas' grave. The Gilberts created The Nicholas Colby Fund (NCF), a nonprofit charity providing personalized experiences like a luxury suite viewing of a Golden State Warrior's game or Disney on Ice at Oracle Arena for child patients and their families.

"The book is so uplifting, and that is a characteristic of our fund," Gilbert says. Children who are guests of NCF are given backpacks filled with donated toys and food and every January, Nicholas' beaming face and a special message light up the Jumbotron at a Warrior's game. "Never gone, never far, in our hearts and souls forever," will announce Nicholas' enduring spirit on Sunday, Jan. 26.

Gilbert's dream is to someday have a NCF suite in every NBA arena in the country. It's a vision that may have to wait until he retires from his job as a leadership and executive development consultant at CSAA Insurance Group, a AAA Insurer, but he's already making strides. His company's "Community Safety Foundation" recently made a "significant contribution" in memory of executive Mike Bregante, who died in November 2013. Gilbert says website donations have subsequently ramped up ("Ten times what we typically receive," he says), and running the fund continues to engage and warm his heart.

To learn more about the Nicholas Colby Fund, visit www.nicholascolbyfund.org. To find "The Next Place," visit <http://www.amazon.com/The-Next-Place-Warren-Hanson/dp/0931674328>.

Lou Fancher is a journalist who, over the course of her career interviewing a wide variety of people, has been struck by how often a book has influenced the local life and purpose of her articles' subjects. If you have a book that

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has been important in your life and are willing to share your story with Lou - it requires only a 15-minute phone interview - please email storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com and include "Words" in the subject line.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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