

New book explores the world of the "Replacement Child"

By: Susan Corica, Correspondent in Newington Town Crier 10/9/2009

"I was born of fire," begins the prologue to Judy Mandel's new book.

"The flames licked my mother's kitchen clean.

It happened at 3:45 p.m. on a foggy winter afternoon - Jan. 22, 1952."

It sounds like the beginning of a thriller, a work of fiction, but the book is entitled "Replacement Child - A Memoir" (Schlesinger Books).

Mandel herself not was actually born till a few years after the American Airlines plane crashed into her family's apartment building in Elizabeth, N.J., just three short miles from Newark Airport. The crash killed her sister Donna, aged 7, and nearly killed her other sister, 2-year-old Linda. And as Mandel grew to maturity, she came to realize that she herself would never have come to be, if not for that horrifying tragedy.

She was a "replacement child," born to ease her parents' sorrow over their loss.

Now a Newington resident, Mandel said she started to write her book after her parents died in 2004. "I actually felt I had some responsibility to tell the story," she said. "I had always felt that way, but with their passing it really came home to me that I needed to do it."

Her parents had left her an archive of notes and newspaper clippings about the crash, she recalled, so it was like they wanted her to write about it. After all, she was a professional writer, having worked in journalism, public relations, advertising, and corporate communications.

So she began to write. "I'm not sure it's the book they had intended for me to write, but I try to be true to the story," she said. "I think the piece of it that they would not have anticipated was the 'replacement child' piece."

They would probably argue about the idea that she was a replacement for her dead sister, she acknowledged, noting that she did not make up the term "replacement child," which is a recognized syndrome.

In her research into the topic, she finds that parents in similar situations generally don't like the term. But the children, usually adult children, don't have a problem with it, she said.



When she started examining her own family's history, she realized that although her parents had considered their family complete, it was almost inevitable they would have another child as part of their healing process.

"My mother was very depressed of course, after losing her daughter and then her other daughter was very badly burned, and they had nowhere to live for a while. To get her out of her depression, and this was before people went through therapy back then, her doctor suggested 'why don't you have another child?'"

"I don't think my father wanted to. I think he thought it was like tempting fate, but they did obviously, and here I am," she said. "That's the thing with replacement children, they know that they wouldn't be alive if it weren't for the death of another child."

The parents feel that idea somehow lessens the value of the new child, she noted. "Certainly it can be a road block for some people throughout their lives, and it was a struggle for me."



People feel like they have to live up to the memory of the lost child, to fulfill that child's lost potential, and there can be survivor's guilt, she said.

Her own parents had a memorial wall to Donna, including an enlarged photograph of her looking mature beyond her seven years. They also had their youngest daughter's hair styled the same way as the girl in the photo had it, even though young Judy recalls that she hated it.

"I don't think I realized for years the meaning of it all," she said.

Writing the book helped her come to terms with the situation. "I felt a responsibility to tell it right," she said, "a responsibility to my parents and my sister, and my other sister who just passed away this summer. I'm really grateful that I gave Linda the book to read and get her input in it before she did pass away. She was glad I wrote it. She didn't actually get to read the last version, but she did get to pick the cover. She had a huge part in it."

Linda didn't remember the actual crash, Mandel noted, but she was very badly burned and spent the next 18 years undergoing a series of reconstructive surgeries. "So that was part of my journey too. My sister needed a lot of care, and that affects your family. It was like growing up with a special needs child in the house, which a lot of people can also relate to."

So now the book is in print, available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble

online, and soon in bookstores too. Mandel will have her first book signing on Saturday, Oct. 24, at 2 p.m., at Borders Books in Farmington.

She notes that it's not actually her first book. A few years ago, she self-published a small humor book called "How To Take the Down Out of Downsized," about life after the corporate world. She also has her own marketing firm.

Mandel is also working on an in-depth article about the replacement child syndrome, although she does not yet have a publication slated for it. She's been seeking out others who grew up in these situations. There are a lot of similarities in how they feel about it, she said. "I think it's very interesting that there are people out there who can relate."

For more information, visit www.replacementchild.com.

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