

Life After Stillborn

Alumna, adjunct professor and inspiration for a recent Lifetime movie, Kiley Hanish launches holistic retreats for mothers grieving from the devastating loss of stillborn.

BY JAMIE WETHERBE MA '04

There was a time in 2005 when Kiley Hanish MA '02, OTD '11 and her husband seemed to have the world at their feet.

The couple had found success professionally—Sean Hanish as a television commercial director, and Kiley Hanish had recently graduated from USC with her master's in occupational therapy.

The pair were also expecting their first child, and with the due date weeks away, they were deep into the excitement and anxiety of preparing for the baby's arrival.

Then, at about 35 weeks into her pregnancy, the couple were leveled by the devastating news that their son, Norbert, was stillborn.

Sean Hanish penned and directed the movie, *Return to Zero*, which premiered on Lifetime May 17, based on the couple's experience.

"It's watching the worst time of your life on film," said Kiley Hanish, an adjunct professor of clinical occupational therapy at USC. "I'm so private. It's pretty vulnerable."

The drama featured a star-studded cast—Minnie Driver, Paul Adelstein, Alfred Molina, Sarah Jones and Kathy Baker—and earned critical acclaim, including an Emmy nod for Minnie Driver, whose character, Maggie, was based on Hanish.



Neigh-masté—Horseback yoga is one of many healing activities that take place at the *Return to Zero* retreats.

Despite the strong performances, Hollywood was reluctant to sign on to a film about this complex issue.

"People in this society don't talk about death in general, especially this type of death. It's such a difficult subject matter that no one wants to touch it," Hanish said. "The fact that the film was made and aired was a miracle."

Return to Zero was fueled in part by a strong social media drive with 130,000 users pledging to watch before Lifetime picked it up. Post-production was crowd-funded, and the closing credits included 700 baby names purchased to support the Kickstarter campaign.

"It became a movement not just a movie," Hanish explained. "All these people who feel isolated could be a part of a group ... this happens to a lot of people, unfortunately."

In the United States each year, about one in 160 pregnancies ends in a stillbirth (often defined as when a fetus dies at 20 or more weeks of pregnancy), which amounts to about 26,000 nationwide, according to the National Institutes of Health.

And like Maggie in *Return to Zero*, many mothers suffer in silence.

Following the film's success, Hanish, now a mother of three—including Norbert—has developed the first occupational therapy-based retreats for women who have suffered a stillbirth.

Launched in July, the *Return to Zero* retreats focus on holistic practices, including physical movement (like yoga) and nourishing food, connecting with your child and finding community.

"It's creating a very sacred space for people to work through their grief," said Hanish, as well as a safe place to share common fears.

"People will say, 'Every time my kid gets sick, I think they're going to die,'" she said. "That's not a normal thought, but for this group of people it's totally normal."

Retreat participants also pen the story of their child's death and life, even if he or she was only alive in the womb.

This OT-based tool allows the women to separate the trauma from the joy, Hanish explained.

Like *Return to Zero*, Hanish has found there's a need to share these stories. So far, she's led two retreats, and next year she has three scheduled for Seattle, Vermont and Australia. She recently went on sabbatical from USC to focus on her growing practice.

By lending her experiences to *Return to Zero* and the retreats, Hanish says she's found unexpected healing in her own life.

"I lost my son in 2005, but of the last 9 years, the most change has come in the last eight months," she said. "By talking and connecting with other people, trying to get out of my isolation, that's where the healing came."



Kiley Hanish MA '02, OTD '11

Learn more about the Lifetime movie at mylifetime.com/movies/return-to-zero.