

Secrets, Scars and Heart Shaped Jars



The loss of a marriage. The disease of addiction.
The death of a son.
Believing for hope and resilience
in the face of heartbreak.

Pattie Vargas

The loss of a marriage. The disruption of life plans. A family torn apart by the disease of addiction. The death of a son. Secrets, Scars and Heart Shaped Jars is the story of one woman's resilience in the face of heartbreak and hope.

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By Pattie Vargas

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Praise for Secrets, Scars and Heart Shaped Jars

"Pattie Vargas has a message for every woman in America: never give up. Through unimaginable pain, Pattie has found a way out---and a path forward to help others. It's not just a journey in her shoes, but a roadmap to keep living."

Ryan Hampton

Addiction Recovery Advocate

Bestselling Author of *American Fix & Unsettled*

"It has been more than seventy years since I was liberated from the concentration camps of the Holocaust. What happened can never be forgotten and can never be changed. But what I have learned over time is that I have the choice on how to respond to the past – I can allow it to define me and direct my every action or I can recognize that bad things happen to everyone. Suffering is universal but victimhood is optional.

My friend Pattie Vargas has learned that victimhood is an inside job, and she shares her journey out of that prison in this beautiful book. The things that happen to us don't have to be the final chapter unless we choose to let it be so. Her insights on maintaining an overcomer mindset are necessary to anyone seeking freedom from the past and hope for an empowered future."

Dr. Edith Eva Eger

Therapist | Speaker | Educator

Bestselling Author of *THE CHOICE: Embrace the Possible*

“Does it feel like life continually pummels you? An imaginary cloud always looms overhead? You can't seem to catch a break on the job, in your marriage...in life? As a pastor and counselor for over 20 years, I've heard those words, sometimes phrased differently, but always with a sense of hopelessness and pain! I've known Pattie Vargas for more than 18 years and I've watched firsthand the loss and pain she has experienced. I've also witnessed her rise above her circumstances with an attitude of purpose that far outweighs most peoples' response to adversity. She has redefined what it means to refuse the victim role and choose to have a thriving life and career. You'll be encouraged and inspired by Pattie's story and you too, will learn keys to navigating your circumstances and living a fulfilling life.”

**Pastor Pam Ingold. Family Life Pastor
The Church at Rancho Bernardo**

“Watching a loved one struggle with addiction is heart wrenching. Families feel powerless, overwhelmed, scared and often have no supports or resources in how to best help them. Many families refer to their stories as the same chorus, different verse. That chorus refers to the paralyzing pain, fear and hopelessness felt by families and the painful journey families travel in trying to find help for their loved ones only to learn that so often there is no help. That chorus also refers to why so many families begin to lose hope – lack of support, judgment, shame, the ‘one size fits all’ advice to let go and let their child hit rock bottom.

I often refer to the silver lining on this journey as “the people we meet, the stories that change us, and the friendships that will

last a lifetime. When I think of this silver lining, my friend, fellow advocate, and coach, Pattie Vargas comes to mind.

Pattie's passion, dedication and heart in helping families with Substance Use Disorder coupled with her fierce advocacy work is helping to change that "chorus" today. Through her lived experience, knowledge and passion she is helping families step out of their own shame, fear and judgment so they can best support their loved ones.

I first met Pattie during a parent coach training offered by the Partnership to End Addiction. I was the coach mentor for this training and knew instantly that Pattie was special and would be a gift and mentor to the too many families coming through our doors desperate for help. There is something about our parent coach training in that we truly become an extended family - there to support each other and our work. Pattie's selfless work, leadership and huge heart helps to personally fill my gas tank (especially on those days when the work we do can have us feeling defeated) to keep on hitting that pavement for change.

In addition to being a Peer Parent Coach at the Partnership, Pattie is also a facilitator within our Online Support Community, a media spokesperson, and recently shared her story in the Partnership's YouTube Series Recovering Together.

Pattie is a voice for the voiceless and her voice has been instrumental in changing the conversation. When we change the conversation, we begin to change hearts and minds and help to

dismantle the negative stereotypes associated with Substance Use Disorder, addiction and recovery.”

Denise Mariano
Director, Family Support and Advocacy
Partnership to End Addiction

“I first met Pattie at the inception of our Mobilize Recovery Conference in 2018 and since then, Pattie has graciously volunteered her time with the community organizing efforts of the Recovery Advocacy Project. The Recovery Advocacy Project (RAP) is a network of people and organizations across the country advocating for addiction recovery policies. Pattie has turned the grief of losing her son to substance use disorder (SUD) into purpose and advocacy, helping to end the silence and stigma that so many families experience when a loved one struggles with SUD.

Over the past few years Pattie has worked with community organizations, advocates, and policymakers, to not only reframe how people view those struggling with SUD, but also advocate for communities to change into a system that can provide an end-to-end continuum of care for all. From advocating for reform in the recovery housing & treatment industry, to pushing for new policies around Fentanyl test strips and Naloxone access, to working with community leaders, to opening new Recovery Cafes across the state of California, Pattie’s tireless work will help ensure that fewer families in the future experience the loss her family has endured.

Substance Use Disorder impacts millions of families across our country. Without the experiences of people like Pattie who bravely step out into the world and talk openly about the impact SUD has had on their family, many people would still be silent and quietly hiding in the shadows. There is collective power in our stories and experiences, and both can create meaningful sustainable change in how our country views and treats SUD. Pattie is a shining example of how one person's voice can erase stigma, raise awareness, educate others, and change policy.”

Garrett Hade
Co-Founder at The Voices Project
Recovery Advocacy Project

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About This Book

The first part of this book was first released in April 2018, under the title “The Resilience Factor is Your Super Power!” The intent was to tell a victorious story of how, in the midst of a long-term marriage, my world was suddenly upended, and I had to find my way forward in an unwanted new normal. Even the title was meant to inspire images of overcoming, strength, growth and “girl power.”

Seemed like a good idea at the time.

But as preparations were being made for the release and all the fanfare and hoopla that goes around all that, my son died.

Suddenly all the bravado, the funny stories, the “Super Power” stuff seemed just so wrong. I was so fresh and raw in my grief it was hard to even express why I felt such animosity towards the project. You’ll learn more about the grief journey in the coming pages but back then I was vacillating between barely able to get out of bed to manic actions just to prove I wasn’t dead. You’ll also learn in the coming story how my “modus operandi” is to just put one foot in front of the other and move – believe me, that is a character trait I am doing my best to modify. Long story, short, we published the book, it hit Amazon Best Seller designation the first day due to the number of downloads and orders, and I did the usual speaking gigs around it. Every time I stood on a stage talking about my victory over a sad divorce I felt like a fraud. Everything inside me screamed “They don’t know about Joel!”

So, I’m doing a do-over.

The first part of the book is important. It speaks to women who have been cast aside and made to feel worthless and encourages them to forge a new path for themselves. I wish this book had existed when I

was going through it. Many, many, many people have written to me sharing how much it helped them recover and I want to be there for others who find themselves in that situation.

But now I want the story of what we were going through with family addiction to be a part of the story, too. I want *those* mothers to see themselves in this book. While I was dealing with such a painful blow to the status quo of my married life and family, my son began to experiment with drugs and eventually became a slave to them. It wasn't something I talked about much. And I sure didn't talk about what it was like to have *more than one* person in your immediate family struggle with substance use. My story now isn't just about how to survive a shitty divorce, it's how to survive shitty circumstances period. It's about finding a way to continue living when you just want to die.

I hope you like it.

I hope it helps you.

I hope it changes your mind about some things.

And I hope you share it.

Chapter 1: The Wake-Up Call

It was August of 1995, a Saturday. I'd taken a drive to check out a house my husband and I were considering buying to embark on our quest to make money in real estate. He had stayed home with the kids, ages 15, 13, and 9, who were busy doing all the things kids do on a Saturday. I agreed to call him from time to time to check in and discuss the house.

Now, this was before most people had cell phones, so "checking in" meant I had to find a pay phone, pull over, and make the call. Except he didn't answer. I called numerous times, and he never picked up. Annoying—super annoying.

I finally decided to just head home, where I found him sitting in the back patio, drunk and upset. It was decidedly strange for him to be inebriated in the middle of the day—especially when he was the only parent on duty. I asked him what was wrong and...just like that, nothing was ever going to be the same.

He told me he had been seeing someone from work.

The air was sucked out of my universe as I struggled to comprehend words I never expected to hear. These things happen to other people—not me; not us. After all, we'd been married almost 23 years; we had major history together. He'd been the love of my life since I was 15 years old. Not to mention we were up to our eyeballs in debt, we had family responsibilities—and we were Christians, for God's sake!

This can't be happening! I thought.

Then he told me who it was.

Sucker punch to the gut. *You can't be serious.*

Not two weeks earlier he had been complaining to me about her: her work ethic, her loose morals, her mothering techniques. Somehow, something had changed; now she was his “soul mate.” To add insult to injury, now that he knew what love really was, he wasn't sure he had *ever* loved *me*.

I'm conditioned to solve problems so, faced with the mother of all problems, I went into solution mode. And because he was accustomed to me filling this role, *he* asked *me*, “What do we do now?”

“I want you to leave her and stay with us.”

We'd been together forever and had children to consider, so I couldn't simply accept that it was all over. But his leaving her was a nonstarter. He said he loved her and couldn't see a life without her in it.

The next week is a blur—yes, just one week. Seven short days later the kids and I were living in another city, where I rented a small condo and enrolled them in a new school.

Why did I leave instead of him? There were lots of reasons—some of them make sense to this day. I didn't have a manual for how to proceed when your world falls apart. The kids and I were all going through our own stages of grief, loss, and mourning, and I was adjusting to a significantly reduced income, smaller living space, and the need to ask for help from time to time.

I found myself defending my ex to our kids in order to maintain some semblance of family status quo—this, despite the reality. One interesting fact came to light, though. Being in a long-term, committed

marriage, I just assumed I still loved him. I assumed the character traits I had ascribed to him over the years were accurate. I assumed he was still a decent human being. Big surprise when the realization hit that there was a *big* difference between like and love—and I no longer *liked* him at all.

Chapter 14: Oh, Those Unexpected Ambushes

I've never been the primary responsible party when someone died so I had no idea that a Medical Examiner's Report wouldn't show up for months and that Joel's ashes would fit in a box the size of my Keurig coffee order.

The box was dropped on the porch and, when I saw it, I had no idea that's what it was. Joel was 6'2" and the box seemed so small – but it was heavy. It wasn't until I looked at the return address that I realized what I was holding. Shock, horror, sadness, all the emotions washed over me, and I put it in the closet and left it there for a few days – unsure what to do. I knew I didn't want an urn sitting on the mantle but beyond that, I didn't have a clue. It was just so wrong that my beautiful boy had been reduced to something that fit inside a plain cardboard box.

So, there it sat. On the floor of the closet in my office. Behind some boxes and equipment.

No one told me that the Medical Examiner's Report would be 13 pages long, with a narrative from the responding officers, an even more detailed Investigative Narrative from the Medical Examiner, the Autopsy Report and finally, the Toxicology Report. It was like reading a story that you knew had a terrible ending, but you couldn't stop yourself; it was brutal, factual, heartbreakingly black and white.

I also wasn't prepared for the cruelty of Joel's financial obligations and the lengths creditors will go to collect a debt. One creditor told me, "Well, he may be dead but he still owes the money" to which I retorted, "Well, good luck collecting it" and then bawled my eyes out when I hung up. The medical device company that had supplied the

external defibrillator vest Joel was supposed to be wearing couldn't understand that 1) he was dead, 2) we didn't live in San Diego and had no idea where the vest was, and 3) they were talking to a mom who had lost her son. They continued to call and harass us telling us how much the device cost. When I threatened to report them (to whom I don't know) they stopped calling me and somehow tracked down my daughter in law through social media. I couldn't believe how crass and unfeeling they were in the face of our grief. Contrast this, though, with the kindness of someone in the San Diego Sheriff's department when I contacted them about an open warrant Joel still had. When I explained his death and that I could supply a copy of the death certificate he walked me through the process and then emailed me proof that the warrant had been cleared. This was to be expected as good business process, but he closed his email with a heartfelt message of condolence – *that* I didn't expect, and it moved me to tears.

So, what to do with his ashes...

I dedicated a corner of the garden to Joel and everything in it has special meaning and nurtures my heart. Our pastor suggested a formal dedication so he and two musicians from the church came over to celebrate Joel's life with us and memorialize this little patch of beauty. Bekah helped me choose the music and, although I had asked everyone in the family to say something, I was the only one who did. The pastor gave a moving message and then we sprinkled some of Joel's ashes throughout the garden. In preparation for this, I had purchased a number of heart-shaped glass jars and filled them, then tied them with green (his favorite color) jute ribbon. Everyone had a jar to open and spread and I saved a jar for Stephen, Rebekah and Tony and I to keep, along with a few extra for future use.

One of those jars ended up being spread over the ocean at the Pacific Beach Pier, a place he had spent a lot of time and had performed at

several clubs there. It was just after Christmas and the wreaths that are annually placed along the pier were still up. After we sprinkled his ashes we left the jar tucked in one of those wreaths and imagined what people would think when they collected the wreaths and found it. Another jar was given to his fiancé, Cori, and the remaining ashes were made into stepping stones for the garden.

Heart Shaped Jars

Filling little jars with the ashes of your child was not in the mom job description. Anywhere.

But what else to do and who else to do it?

I'm reminded that Mary likely helped prepare her son's body for burial - a final gesture of love and tenderness to the son she assumed was gone forever.

From the beginning it was my job to love you.

To stay up with you with colic (like there was a choice.)

To patch up your bruises and scrapes and broken bones.

To yell at you when you took unnecessary risks on your roller blades or skateboard.

To hold you when you confessed how lost you felt.

To do my best to keep the lines of communication open.

To make the final decisions in a way to best honor you.

So - yeah. I guess this was in the job description.

Your ashes, your bones, not a task to outsource.

My job.

A final gesture of love and tenderness towards the son I know is waiting for me.

Blog, 2018

It's always jarring when I think I catch a glimpse of him – and then remember afresh that he's gone. I was leaving the Sacramento airport one day, stopped at a stop sign, and saw a grounds caretaker taking a cigarette break. He was long and lanky, about Joel's age, and leaning on his rake - but he held his cigarette just like Joel used to. I froze – unable to stop looking at him – until he finally glared at me, probably thinking I was going to report him for something. I took a shuddering breath and moved on, but I really wish I had stopped and talked to him – told him how much he looked like my son.

One day I was in the kitchen and out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw Joel move around the corner. It was a funny thing to imagine because Joel has never been in this house, but I chalked it up to how often I think of him and how sometimes my heart just conjures up a vision of him. Once in a while I see him in the faces of my granddaughters – frequently see him in his sister or brother – always with a bittersweet joy that he lives on in all of us.

There are good ambushes, too, maybe ambush is the wrong word. It's when one of his friends reaches out to check on me or to share a Joel memory – and it reminds me how much he was loved and that he made an impact on others' lives. Those are happy ambushes, although they come farther apart as the years roll by. You see that is the reality of losing someone at such a young age. Time moves on – people age, circumstances change, friends marry and move away. That's just how it is – my loved one was a *key* component in my identity, my world, my future hopes and dreams – but he was just a *temporary* component in theirs. Their relationship with Joel was a point in time – for me, I knew him his *entire life* – and his death did not end the relationship. To be honest, it's hard to not feel bitterness sometimes about people moving on, although I wouldn't want any of those lovely people to be stuck in their grief. I rejoice when they do well but with it there is an acute reminder of everything Joel never had the chance to experience. It is a complicated feeling, to say the very least.

People in my social circle tend to forget, too, as the years go by. The first year there were many check-ins, notes, text messages and social media memes and memories. The next year not as many, and then fewer each subsequent day, month, and year. Now it's been more than four years, and outside of our family I can count on one hand the people who remember his birthday or the anniversary of his death. If I memorialize it in a Facebook or Twitter post there are always responses, but I have wondered who would remember at all if I didn't mention it. I don't want to know. Besides, as his mom, it's my job to honor him on the important days. But until you've walked this journey, you don't understand that the important days are not just his birthday and the day he died, but it's the day he won a skate competition, it's the day he got his drivers' license, it's the day he graduated high school, it's the day he proposed to his beautiful fiancé, it's the last day I saw him alive. All the memories and points in time that make up a life-long relationship that are still a part of me and always will be.

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