

HERE ONE DAY:

ELIMINATING STIGMA

ONE HEART AT A TIME

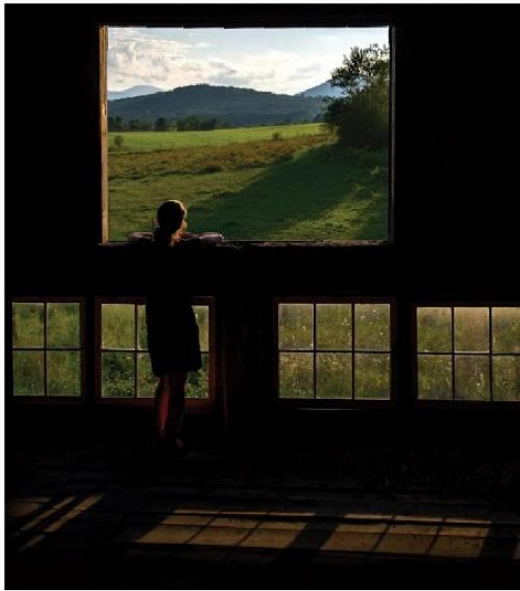
BY HEATHER HIGH-KENNEDY

Kathy Leichter, a filmmaker and social activist, was 28 years old when her mother, Nina, a brilliant, caring educator and reformist, and wife of New York State Senator, Franz Leichter, died by suicide in her New York City apartment. Over the next two decades, Kathy's grief led her on a journey that culminated in her evocative and important film, *Here One Day*, which, through her mother's alluring character, sheds light on the urgent - yet often taboo topics - of mental illness and suicide, and exposes the concealed reality that mental illnesses are rife and nondiscriminatory, aggressively impacting millions of individuals and the people who love them.

Born on August 20, 1931, Nina Williams Leichter was an extraordinary woman, who excelled at every attempted endeavor from art to drama, science to education; moreover, her charismatic personality drew people from all walks of life in such a way that – even decades later – they instantly remember her with fondness and admiration. It was Nina's innate sense of humor and social responsibility, as well as her personal drive, which attracted the attention of the future State Senator, Franz Leichter, when they were both students at Swarthmore College.

Kathy says with a laugh, partly in remembrance of her mom's character, yet also due to the irony of the situation, "My brother told me that ... he met someone who went to Swarthmore during that era, and he kind of expected the person to say, 'Oh, I remember your dad,' because my father became a politician, but the person kind of (questioned), 'Hmm, Franz Leichter?'. Then (my brother) said, 'Well, do you remember my mother, Nina Williams Leichter?' and the person lit up. 'Oh! I remember Nina. She was like a lightning bolt! She had such amazing talent.'"

Nina became an English teacher in the New York City public school system, quickly advancing as an educational leader, highly active in the teacher's union and eventually becoming an elementary school administrator in Queens, where, despite great cultural differences between her and her students, she was adored, ever regarded as the "cool" Assistant Principal. "She was the one that the 'disobedient' kids would always want to hang out with," recalls Kathy, with pride.



For a woman so intelligent and internally motivated, who was naturally drawn to leadership positions, squeezing into the mold of Senator's wife and mother of two – especially before the women's movement had made its more profound effects on the role of women in society - was a particularly difficult feat, and over time, the effects on her mental and emotional well-being began to surface. "Things got harder for her in her forties. I mean, there were a few (lesser) periods of depression before, but there were (more) pressures on her... her mother died and that was very hard on her. I think it was a combination of factors," Kathy says of her mother's progressive state. As a result, Nina began taking medication to treat symptoms of bipolar disorder, and help diminish the manic episodes. In her gripping documentary film, *Here One Day*, Kathy recalls Nina's behavior during these episodes that would leave her and her younger brother, Josh, upset, confused and frightened. Nonetheless, Nina's case was considered mild, and Kathy accepted it for what it was – her mother's

struggle with a condition that was categorized as a mental illness. "When I was a child, I thought, 'Well this is the mother I have.' I didn't sense her as being sick." Through it all, the mother-daughter bond proved resilient, and their relationship – though

affected by Nina's symptoms – was strong. "For all the difficulty we had, I miss her spirit," says Kathy, in the film.

While Nina struggled to hold it together for over two decades, after her retirement, when she lost solid structure to her days, her mental and emotional health drastically deteriorated, and episodes of depression really took hold. Always aware and accepting of her bipolar diagnosis, Nina embraced the function of social advocate for the mentally ill, participating in support groups and working on reform of policies and the elimination of stigma that plagued victims and families of these maladies.

Nonetheless, Nina's own condition continued to spiral out of control, to the dismay of her children, husband, sister and friends. Franz Leichter comments at one of the most poignant moments in the film, "Everything just conspired like a Greek tragedy, just pointing inexorably towards that end," but the family remained hopeful, and unsuspecting of the threat of suicide. "It's hard enough to even consider, let alone act on," Kathy comments. At one point institutionalized, Nina also endured unsuccessful changes to medication and Electroconvulsive Therapy, but her family, while severely strained, remained hopeful that her condition would improve. Says Kathy, "(The episodes) never felt permanent; it only felt permanent once I got that phone call."

In February of 1995, Nina stepped from the ledge of her 11th story apartment window, and ended her life. Following the call that informed her of her mother's death, as in every case of suicide, unanswerable questions ensued. Was the medication to blame? Could it have been prevented if A, B or C had or had not occurred? "The doctor changed the medication right before he went on vacation, and

nobody stepped in to take charge," Kathy's aunt comments in the film. Kathy recounts how hard the physician took the news about Nina. The answers to the innumerable questions, though longed for, didn't matter - nothing could change what had happened. Through her experiences with her mother's condition, and in her own grief, however, Kathy realized that for millions of people, many things can be changed, such as society's unaccepting view of those suffering from

mental illnesses, the elimination of social stigma, and an improvement to the support system available for those contemplating suicide.

Though it was never Kathy's intention to create a film specifically about Nina's story, the work evolved over time as various components shaped the project. While she viewed the film as a vehicle in which to travel on her journey through grief, the reaction from the public showed her something unexpected. With mounting enthusiasm, Kathy explains, "I started showing the trailer... and so many people were saying, 'Oh my gosh... this is incredible.' ... Only then did I realize I had this piece that can do this community education, challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma, melting away the taboo. I didn't know the film would have that power, and it does, and it's so exciting because it melds this passion I have for media and social change, with my own story."

There are many organizations in addition to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, that are working on anti-stigma endeavors in systematic ways, such as Bring Change 2 Mind, which was founded through the partnership of celebrity Glenn Close and an organization where she started as a volunteer, known as Fountain House, as well as a highly innovative group called The Icarus Project, which is challenging the traditional view of mental illness, posing questions about illness vs. brilliance and creativity. A universal commonality among the organizations is a goal of supporting people with mental health issues, and eliminating the stigma which so often creates seemingly insurmountable barriers for suffering people who need to reach out for help.

Kathy learned through the experience of showing her film hundreds of times that her mother's story, one she originally considered too personal to be of interest to audiences, is the story of countless others. "It's so many people's story. So many people have these stories of mental illness and suicide, so many people feel alone, and so many people feel isolated." With a new sense of purpose, she is bringing her film to college campuses, medical and social work schools, support groups, film festivals, houses of faith, and to any other group where people can see the movie, feel things, work toward change, and get help if they need it. "I'm working on change in a one heart at a time sort of way."