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Call Express! Editor Laura Stuart
at 524-8300, ext. 126
lstuart@wjnc.com

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The longest journey

Laura Southwick took a long journey to China. Bill and Judy Southwick are taking a longer one—coming to terms with her death.



By **KEN TRAINER**

It's a long way to China, and Laura Southwick made the trip regularly for her job designing shoes for Kenneth Cole Productions in New York. She loved the job, loved the business, hated the travel.

Long flight, traveling alone, jet lag, working long hours overseeing production in factories where conditions left much to be desired in the industrial boom town of Dongguan in Guangdong Province, itself a product of the new global economy, had finally taken its toll, and she was ready to call it quits.

On her last trip in January of 2002, she took a few days to visit Beijing and the Great Wall, figuring she wouldn't be back. When she returned to Dongguan, she became ill. She thought it was the flu and kept working. The illness grew worse. When she fainted, the factory owner took her to the local hospital. On Wednesday, Jan. 23, she was found dead in her bed. Neither her parents in Oak Park nor her employer in New York knew she was in the hospital.

The autopsy attributed Laura's death to viral myocarditis, which can result in heart failure if not properly treated. She was 33.

Laura Southwick was, by all accounts, a real delight—adventurous to the point of mischief, creative and very funny. Bill and Judy say their daughter was an avid reader and journal writer growing up. Shy when she was young, she became positively gregarious as she grew older. An early beneficiary of Oak Park's diversity experiment, Bill says, she had a wide variety of friends as she made her way through our public school system, black, white, gay, straight, poor, rich. "She could talk to anybody," he recalls. Always shocked by instances of discrimination, "she was a real Oak Park kid—a genuine, authentic person."

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JOSH HAWKINS/WEDNESDAY JOURNAL

Terms Of endearment: Bill and Judy Southwick are coming to terms with their daughter's avoidable death and trying to raise public awareness about Americans who travel frequently to developing nations for their multinational corporations.

Journey

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After graduating from Oak Park and River Forest High School (1986), she attended Columbia College, where she studied interior design and multicultural literature. She landed several editing jobs and particularly liked the one editing high school textbooks at Houghton Mifflin in Evanston until Tommy Blacha, her boyfriend, landed a job as a writer with the *Conan O'Brien Show* in New York City. She moved there with him, and probably could have written for the show herself. O'Brien himself testifies that she was that funny. At her memorial service, O'Brien told Bill that she could walk into a room filled with comic talent and "crack them all up."

Taking a shine to shoes

She worked as a freelance editor until her boyfriend fell and shattered his leg in several places. Laura went a little stir crazy taking care of him, and one day, passing the nearby Parson's School of Design, she saw a notice for a shoe design class. Judy says her daughter always loved clothes and shoes, frequently raiding the Salvation Army discount store on Roosevelt Road among others to indulge her taste in second-hand chic.

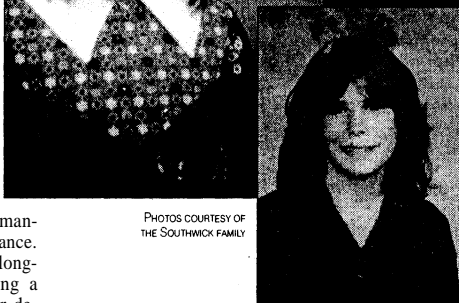
Her parents were a little surprised by her entry into the world of shoe design, figuring she was more of a wordsmith by nature, but she took to the business right away. After an internship and jobs with Dr. Scholl's and Nine West, she landed the designer job with Kenneth Cole.

By then she and Blacha had broken up, and she met Chad Pearson, with whom she was living when she died. Pearson was planning to ask Laura to marry him shortly after she was to return from that final trip to China.

Ultimately, says Bill, his daughter wanted to work for the high-end shoe manufacturers in Italy or perhaps France. Among the notes returned with her belongings, Bill says, Laura was considering a move to Christian Dior in Paris. Her designs, which always pushed the avant-garde envelope, were better suited to the European shoe companies, her parents say.

But she never got that chance. After she was found that morning, the factory owner called Pearson in New York, who relayed the painful news to Bill and Judy in Oak Park. Cole himself called later that night to express condolences and offer to fly the Southwicks to China if they wished. Cole immediately dispatched a company attorney to handle the return of her body and belongings.

The autopsy was a more complicated issue. The Chinese bureaucracy went into hyper-cautious mode, considering it a high-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE SOUTHWICK FAMILY

Well heeled: Laura Southwick was adventurous, creative and funny and her life ended much sooner than it should have.

profile case. And it happened just before Chinese New Year, when the country pretty much shuts down. The U.S. Consulate was, Bill says, "very helpful," but to get the results of the autopsy released, the Southwicks were required to sign a letter stating they would not contest the results. The typed version wasn't acceptable. They wanted it handwritten.

The entire process took a month. A minister at the Chinese Bible Church of Oak Park helped with translation. Dr. Ron Siro-

ta, at that time the head pathologist at West Suburban Hospital (he's now with Lutheran General) acted as liaison and studied the results. Chinese authorities sent photos instead of slides taken through the microscope, so the resolution wasn't optimal, but Sirota basically concurred with the findings.

Obviously, the recent outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in China has made the Southwicks and their friends wonder whether her illness might be

related. Bill says her condition definitely had a respiratory dimension, which is why she thought she had the flu, but an EKG taken at the hospital showed her heart had already been damaged by the time she was admitted. The evidence, though, indicates that doctors never saw the EKG results until after she died.

Increasing anger

As Bill and Judy learned more about their daughter's case, their anger increased. "We found out so many things we didn't know," Bill says. For instance, Laura didn't have a satellite cell phone, even though she had requested one from the company previous to the trip. The company did not have any real evacuation plan for employees who became ill during overseas trips. Until the previous year, Laura had always traveled with another designer, but the company wanted to shave expenses by splitting them up. Hong Kong was only an hour's flight away, and the medical treatment there would have been far superior.

By contrast, a company like Motorola, a friend told Judy, informs employees that if they fall ill overseas, they are to fly out immediately. No such provision can be found in the Kenneth Cole personnel manual.

Bill says employees need to know who to call in emergencies. They also need better information on immunizations and health warnings issued about the countries they are about to visit.

And to his horror, he discovered that U.S. Fair Labor Practices law deliberately exempts employees of American companies when they're working abroad. Regulations involving working conditions, which we all take for granted here, don't exist for Americans abroad.

"Thousands are traveling to Brazil, China and other developing countries where the conditions are rough," says Bill. "They face some real dangers. This is a global economy. These are multinational corporations. It's a big world out there. If they

can get tax advantages from going overseas, they can afford to take care of their employees."

Laura's brother, Dan, was furious and took to the Internet to see if public awareness on this issue could be raised. He contacted *Vanity Fair* magazine, which put him in touch with freelance writer Elisabeth Franck, whose article, *Far and Away*, appeared in the March 10, 2003 issue of *New York* magazine, telling Laura's story and detailing the conditions which led to her death.

When Kenneth Cole got wind of the fact that an article was being written, he called the Southwicks to see if they were cooperating. He chose the first anniversary of her death to call. "[The company] did some good things for us after Laura died," recalls Bill, "but they also did some things that were unbelievably insensitive."

Currently, the Southwicks have a workers' compensation claim pending, which is routine in cases like this, but they aren't planning litigation. Even if they won a case

'She could talk to anyone. ... she was a real Oak Park kid, a genuine, authentic person.

◆ Bill Southwick

against the hospital, Bill says, it's not likely they could collect.

But Franck's article was some consolation for them. Judy says they had some misgivings about going public and being so exposed, but when she saw the final result, it helped her accept the reality.

"We only saw Laura about three times a year," Judy observes, "so I kept thinking, 'She's coming back.'" But when the article came out and she saw it in print, it sank in. "It's final," Judy thought. "She's dead."

A longer journey

But grief is an even longer journey—one without a clear and final terminus. Bill and Judy Southwick, both age 64, have lived in their house on South Cuyler Avenue since 1971. Bill is an ordained Presbyterian minister who served as executive director of Youth Outreach Services, a program for teens, for 31 years with the YMCA. He's retired now—semi-retired, really. He still goes in half days and helps with grant-writing. Judy worked for Literacy Volunteers of Illinois, training tutors and starting new programs, including a few in prisons. She's a Hemingway Foundation docent and serves on the board of Ekklesia at St. Giles.

The couple is very active in the Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ, where they have been members for years. Bill is the chair of the church council, which caused a stir since he's an ordained Presbyterian.

They're involved people, in other words. So they benefited from a strong and wide-ranging support system. In addition, Laura made friends easily, and she stayed in touch with them, including the one who came up for the memorial service from Terre Haute, Ind. whose family had moved from Oak Park after kindergarten. An avid letter writer, Laura kept in touch through the years. They even got together with the Moens family of Winfield who befriended Laura at the Great Wall, and reported that she seemed in fine health at that point.

With all the people contacting them, the Southwicks found themselves in the position of offering consolation as often as they accepted it.

They also had each other. Bill says after so many years, couples tend to read each other non-verbally. You do so much side by side that the face to face feels unfamiliar. "We practically read each other's mind," Bill observes. "When it comes to talking about it directly, that can be hard." But they did some of both and can't imagine what it's like for a single parent who loses a child. Judy says they were close anyway, but this brought them closer.

They've been through "lots of stages." At first, of course, everything went numb. "The human psyche can only take so much

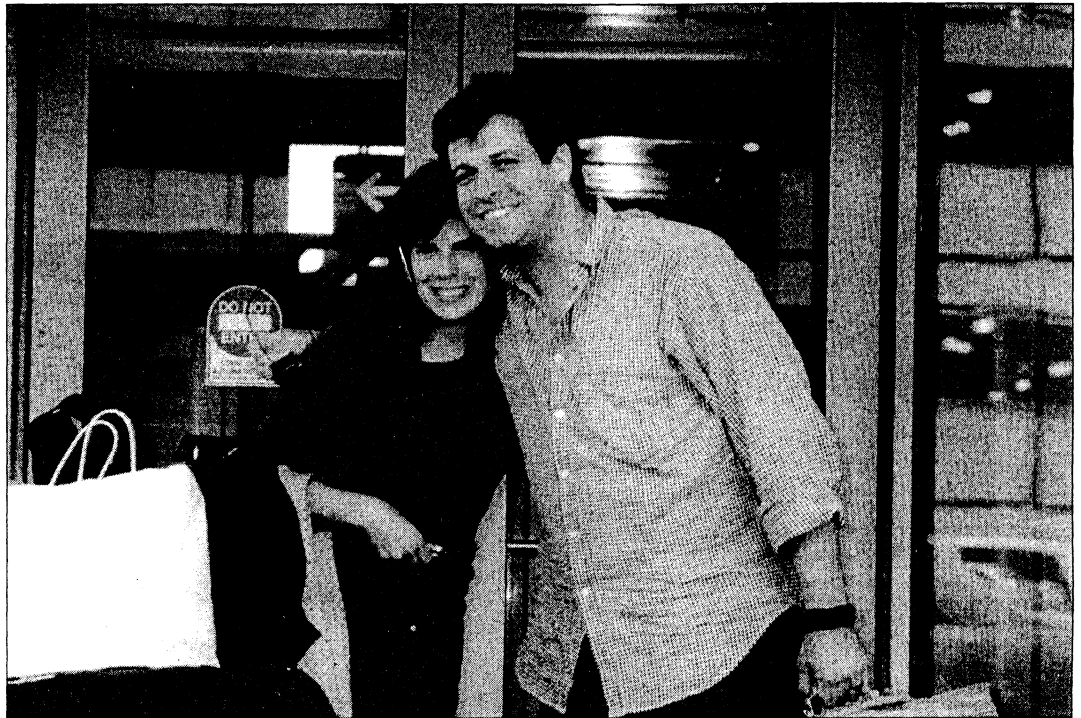


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOUTHWICK FAMILY

Homeward bound: Laura Southwick loved her home in New York City and her boyfriend, Chad Pearson (above), but travel kept pulling her way.

pain at one time," Judy says. "It was a big shock."

The realization was a hit-and-run proposition. "There were times when I would think about it," she recalls, "and it felt like a kick in the stomach. I had to catch my breath. I never realized grief could be so physical."

For Rev. Southwick, it caused "a tremendous crisis of faith. It took me down to the basics. What is there to believe?" He describes the process he's gone through as "peeling back the layers of the onion, one by one, to the core—till you get to the point where there's nothing left ... but God."

His struggle has been "trying to get to the point of seeing that whatever is given to you—good or bad, even the worse thing—comes from a loving God. I'm not there yet," he admits, "but that's the spiritual journey. Probably always will be."

Judy says she still believes in God. "People have been so good to us," she notes. "In a way they act as a mirror of God."

Bill agrees and says friends and neighbors have been amazingly thoughtful. Somebody on the block waited two months and sent over a basket of food and wine, saying, "We figured you probably needed this about now."

"Simple kindnesses have meant so much," he says.

"And the constancy of friends just being there," adds Judy.

The experience has brought them closer to their son, Dan, and his family and in-laws. Judy says, "It's really nice to be able to focus on a 4-year-old granddaughter."

Bill notes, "It's hard not to be obsessed by grief. Your focus is internal. There's a whole world out there, but it's hard to see your pain in a larger context. In grief, you become very self-centered. You have to fight and resist that."

To resist it, the Southwicks decided to take a planned trip to Paris the spring after Laura died. The first night at dinner, Judy kept seeing young, slender girls walking by the restaurant. "I cried through the whole meal," she recalls. The trip, however, did them a world of good.

The first anniversary of her death was tough, but looking back over the past 15 months, both say they've learned you can't set a timetable for grieving.

"Do it at your own speed," Bill says. "Different people do it in different ways."

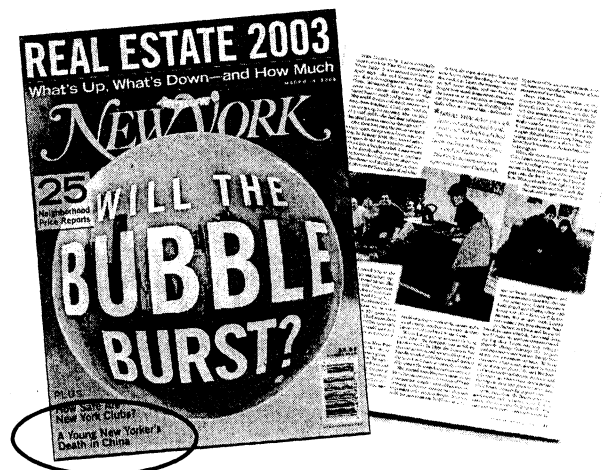
Bill, for instance, is more garrulous than Judy by nature and tends to mask his pain with humor. Judy relies on friends and family, going out to lunch and taking advantage

of close relationships. The important thing, both say, is not to get isolated.

In the middle of Holy Week, it's tempting to ask an ordained minister if any metaphorical "Resurrection" has come out of all this. Has anything come alive, or are they still at the stage of "The Tomb?"

"The journey through Lent," Rev. Southwick replies, "doesn't end with the flash of Resurrection. The journey's course goes on. I have a belief that it will be there, that it will come. But it's a 'becoming,' not a 'happening.'"

"As a friend once told me, eternal life doesn't begin when you die. It starts when you're born. The Resurrection starts when you're born."



The article "Far and Away," by Elisabeth Franck, appeared in the March 10 issue of New York magazine and raised issues about the health and safety of American workers overseas.

'I'm trying to get to the point of seeing that whatever is given to you—good or bad, even the worse thing—comes from a loving God. I'm not there yet.'

• Bill Southwick