

Grieving piece by piece at a mosaic studio in Seattle

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“Mosaics are very easy,” says Claire Barnett, here in her Seattle studio. “You can create very slowly and quietly and painterly. ... It feels like the right thing to be doing.”

Claire Barnett compares the loss of her two daughters to carrying stones. Every day since Coriander, 8, and Blake, 6, died with 86 others...

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By

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Claire Barnett compares the loss of her two daughters to carrying stones.

Every day since Coriander, 8, and Blake, 6, died with 86 others in the 2000 crash of Alaska Airlines Flight

261, another stone has been added to the weight on Barnett's emotional and spiritual back.

That's more than 3,800 stones now.

But Barnett has found a way to grieve and memorialize her girls; to keep breaking pieces and putting them back together in a beautiful, lasting way: mosaics.

Barnett has opened Seattle Mosaic Arts, a Wallingford studio space where people can create art — and memorials — with bits of broken glass. Tiles for the garden, wall hangings, tables, altars, anything. The studio will celebrate its anniversary June 6.

(www.seattlemosaicarts.com).

“We spend all this effort and energy around birth and death, but there's very little to help with bereavement,” Barnett said the other day. “Counseling can help, but there's very little to talk about. You are simply, deeply, slowly grieving the person who's gone.”

And so some people come here and might not talk at all. Just break glass with a tool called “nippers,” and then place them on a sticky page — one little piece at a time.

Best, there is no push to create the perfect thing in honor of the person you've lost.

“When you're thinking about a memorial, the brain goes blank,” Barnett said. “You ask yourself, ‘What was their favorite color?’ You get overwhelmed by the weight of it.

“But mosaics are very easy,” she said. “You can create very slowly and quietly and painterly. It's nonverbal. It feels like the right thing to be doing.”

Barnett, 48, chose mosaics as a way to mark her daughters' birthdays, starting two years after the crash, which also took the girls' father, David Clemetson, 40; his second wife, Carolyn, 31; her son, Miles, 6; and the girls' half-brother, Spencer, 6 months.

She settled on making mosaic tiles for her garden. The glass-breaking was therapeutic for her, but so was the group of friends who came to sit with her, drink wine, and piece together tiles.

"Every birthday," she said of her friends, "They just show up."

Memorial Day started at the end of the Civil War as a way to remember those who died in battle. But for some of us, it can stretch over years. What do you do when every day feels like a battle all your own?

Barnett wants people to know that there is a place for them.

The studio is in the former home of Avast Recording, where such artists as Soundgarden and Fleet Foxes have recorded.

"The space has a nice feeling," Barnett said. "So much music in the walls."

Barnett doesn't want to sound like she's "marketing" this place; she doesn't want to join what she calls "the industry about bereavement."

But there is so much effort and energy around the birthing process: Midwives and doulas, steady streams of friends and family eager to help. A baby to take home.

It's the same when someone dies. There is palliative care, funeral directors, mourners and casseroles to reheat.

But then? “You just wake up every day and move through time,” she said.

Now, maybe those who grieve can move to the studio, take a seat and, literally, try to piece themselves back together by putting pieces of glass in a row.

“There are very few safe places to be sad,” she said. “What we do here is help people do what I did: Start a garden. A steppingstone.”

Wherever it leads, their load can only feel that much lighter.

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Maybe something with a fleur-de-lis.

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