

**SUBSCRIBE TODAY**  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES  
Subscriber Services

Current: 67°  
81° / 53°  
Complete Forecast

Find the best sales at stores near you with **shopLocal**



Search  Recent News  Archives  Web for

Welcome **Guest**  
[Sign Up](#) | [Sign In](#) | [Member Benefits](#)

- [Jobs](#)
- [Cars](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Apartments](#)
- [Local Shopping](#)
- [All Classifieds](#)
  - Create an Ad
  - Find an Ad
- [Dating](#)

[Back to Home >](#)

Wednesday, Jul 05, 2006

## Entertainment XML

Posted on Mon, Jul. 03, 2006 [email this](#) [print this](#) [reprint or license this](#)

### Inside a lonely 'Planet'

#### Author shares some tough truths about sudden bereavement

By Jackie Burrell  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Gloria Lenhart was a happy wife and mother of two young sons on that rainy February day when her husband went for a morning jog. An hour later, she was a widow.

"I really didn't know what to expect," says Lenhart, from the comfort of her home in the Lafayette hills. "You think you'll get through the funeral and pick up life."

But there is no "normal life" after the death of a family member. It doesn't matter if you're Jackie O.; Queen Noor; or a then-42-year-old Lamorinda marketing consultant whose husband, Nick, has just had a fatal heart attack. Your new reality, says Lenhart, will hold endless, sleepless nights, a plethora of lasagnas sent by well-meaning friends, and utter and complete disorientation. It feels, she told one colleague, as if you've somehow ended up in some strange, alternative state.

"It's not just a state," he told her. "You are on a whole different planet."

Lenhart's recently published book, "Planet Widow" (Seal Press, \$14.95) just made the BookSense summer 2006 paperback picks list. It's not quite a memoir -- names have been changed, the friends described in the book are composite characters -- and it's definitely not the downer one might expect, given the subject matter.

What it is, is a poignant and often humorous tale of dealing with tombstones, broken gutters, bitter relatives and all the mundane details of life that don't stop just because your heart and spirit have been broken. It's a wake-up call, not for widows, but for the friends and families of the bereaved, and for procrastinating couples who haven't quite gotten around to making a will.

Life can change in the blink of an eye, Lenhart says, and if you're not prepared, the emotions, legal thickets and unbelievable paperwork will overwhelm you. Those who defer making a will because it reminds them of their own mortality might want to remember, she says, "that statistics show that 100 percent of people that don't have a will die anyway."

Everyone thinks it will never happen to them, but wills and life insurance are simple precautions that make a huge difference when the unthinkable hits.



Bob Pepping/Times

Author Gloria Lenhart wrote "Planet Widow" after her husband died suddenly.

- [Audio: Gloria Lenhart reads from "Planet Widow" \(MP3\)](#)

**Put your retirement dreams on paper.**

Then create a plan with one of our advisors to help you get there.

The Personal Advisors of **Ameriprise Financial**

Get to what's next  
Get started with a **FREE Dream Book™**

#### ONLINE EXTRAS

- [Past Articles](#)
- [Newspaper Ads](#)
- [Special Reports](#)
- [Multimedia](#)
- [Maps & Directions](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [Traffic Reports](#)
- [Yellow Pages](#)
- [Buy photos](#)
- [Career Fairs](#)

#### SITE SERVICES

- [RSS Headlines](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Site Map](#)
- [Advertise](#)
- [Subscriber Services](#)
- [Jobs at the Times](#)

#### PARTNER SITES

- [SiliconValley.com](#)

Most widows are 65 or older, but younger women are hardly immune to bereavement. In 2003, for example, there were 429,000 widows in this country younger than age of 45, according to U.S. census estimates, and 1.1 million younger than 55. (Statistics are significantly lower for men: 327,000 widowers younger than 55.) According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 800,000 women of all ages become widowed each year.

Lenhart has bad news for them, and she doesn't mince words.

"All those platitudes: 'God closes a door and opens a window,'" she says. "Every day is another disaster, where you have to redefine yourself. Not only will the other shoe drop, but all the other shoes will keep dropping. (Grief) doesn't heal the way a wound heals. It's a roller coaster and then the dips start to flatten out."

It's been eight years and that roller coaster still has its dips. But Lenhart has gained perspective and her story, told in 47 vignettes, bristles with self-deprecating humor. There's the day she stumbled out of her house, shell-shocked, short on tissues, and anxious only for the sheer normality of a supermarket, only to be confronted by well-intentioned people who cried on her shoulder or demanded to know what she was doing out when they had told her -- told her! again and again! -- that they could run errands.

There's the elementary school therapist who said she didn't "do grief."

The custody battle over her husband's 16-year-old son Nikolaus, whom she had raised for a decade but never adopted.

And the business meeting with new clients that quickly devolved into a series of probing personal questions about Lenhart's insurance, house payments and sons' college plans.

"I've never seen those guys so shaken up," her friend and colleague Doug says in the book. "It's like they think they might be next."

That's the big fear, says Lenhart.

"The overriding message is people react to death in different ways," she says. "You're a reminder to them of mortality. It's perfectly understandable. That's why a lot of people don't do wills."

The book opens with "The End," the day of Nick's funeral, and closes as life slowly returns, not to normal, but to something hopeful -- a beginning.

Reach Jackie Burrell at 925-977-8568 or [jburrell@cctimes.com](mailto:jburrell@cctimes.com).

#### **BEYOND THE CASSEROLE**

It's natural to feel helpless when tragedy strikes a friend, but here's how you can help:

- Reach out. Even if you are only a casual friend or business acquaintance, call or send a card as soon as you hear about the death. It means a lot. It means even more if you can share a memory -- a cherished recollection, your enjoyment of his goofy laugh or the retelling of some funny experience brings welcome relief in the midst of sorrow.
- Don't offer advice. This is not the time to advise the widow or widower on selling the house, giving away clothes or dating online.
- Send flowers, not plants. Flowers bring cheer and require no maintenance.
- Bring comfort food, especially if there are children in the house. But think chicken soup and homemade mac and cheese, not jalapeno casserole.
- Offer specific help. Someone has to make calls to friends and relatives, and someone has to make hotel arrangements for people coming in from out of town. The dishwasher needs to be unloaded, the porch swept and groceries stocked -- not just milk and eggs, but easy-to-forget items like tissues and toilet paper too. And someone will have to coordinate the post-funeral reception or hire the caterer.
- Keep in touch after the funeral. Call to see how they are doing. Stop by for coffee, offer a ride to church, ask them to dinner. Let them know they're not alone.

-- Excerpted from author Gloria Lenhart's Web site, <http://planetwidow.com>.

#### **PLANNING FOR THE UNTHINKABLE**

Flowers and candy are lovely gestures, but planning for the unthinkable -- a major injury, serious illness or death -- is a much more meaningful way to show your family how much you love them, says author Gloria Lenhart.

- Sign an advance health care directive. No one likes to think about the possibility of getting into a serious accident or having a major injury, but an advance directive allows you to designate a person to make medical decisions for you and lets you state your "end of life" wishes concerning pain relief, prolonging of life and organ donation. The

state attorney general has a page devoted to the topic (including sample forms) at [http://ag.ca.gov/consumers/general/adv\\_hc\\_dir.htm](http://ag.ca.gov/consumers/general/adv_hc_dir.htm).

- Save your loved ones incalculable time and stress by listing your assets on a single sheet of paper. Include account numbers, contact names and addresses, and approximate values for the family checking, savings and investment accounts, retirement plans, partnership agreements, real estate holdings, etc. Consider consolidating your accounts so you're only with one or two banks or brokerage firms.
- Keep beneficiary forms up-to-date, especially if you've divorced, remarried, have children or your children have grown up.
- Review your life insurance coverage. Life insurance pays off almost immediately and it pays in cash, which is critical if your family wants to avoid having to sell off the house or other investments in order to pay the bills. If you think you don't need life insurance, get a minimum policy. If you have kids or it takes two incomes to maintain your lifestyle, get more insurance than you think you need. And if you are lucky enough not to collect on the policy, chalk up the expense to the cost of living.
- Update your will or trust. Seventy percent of Americans don't have an updated will, probably because they don't like to think about death and don't like paperwork. Simple will forms are available online, but Lenhart thinks it's worth it to spend the time and money to get a lawyer, who will make sure the will is legal in your state and that it is properly signed and witnessed. The cost is comparable to a fine piece of jewelry, but it will provide vastly better protection for your loved ones.

-- Excerpted from <http://planetwidow.com>.

**Recent Comments**

Very good article. Need more articles like this in the CCT.  
»[Read More](#)

**Post Your Comment**

Name:



| Ads by Google  |
|--|
| <p><b><a href="#">Volunteer Ringtone</a></b><br/>Send this ringtone to your phone right now, at no charge!<br/><a href="http://dada-mobile.net">dada-mobile.net</a></p>                        |
| <p><b><a href="#">St. Jude</a></b><br/>Children's Research Hospital Finding cures. Saving children.<br/><a href="http://www.stjude.org">www.stjude.org</a></p>                                 |
| <p><b><a href="#">"Be A Mentor"</a></b><br/>Be a friend to a youth at risk and help change a life for the better.<br/><a href="http://www.friendsforyouth.org">www.friendsforyouth.org</a></p> |

