

The Legacy of Suicide By Lorraine Viade

I had the honor to attend a tribute concert for the late Ronnie Montrose. I did not know anything about his music, but as I spent the night listening, watching and learning about his great talent it took me by surprise when his brave and powerful wife, Leighsa took the stage to talk about his life and his death by suicide. My visceral reaction was to go on to the stage and hug her. Not out of sympathy or empathy or compassion, but out of sheer admiration that someone who experienced such a great and tragic loss could be so willing to share her experiences with others in the hope that something about her lived experience will serve as a light for others to reach out, speak up or take action. Often, despite our most valiant efforts as family, friends and lovers, we are not able to get there on time, change a tortured mind seeking relief or stop the path of self-destruction that has taken so many artists and loved ones from us. But what is it that is left behind? What happens after the fact? How do people go on after such a tragedy? For most of us, we suffer privately and with any luck, we have support to make it through.

But for those whose lives are on public display, it is very different. Their loved ones belong to the world and that can add an additional layer of loss and grief that never ends. But it can also remind us all that each famous person had people who loved them privately. And the legacy that their suicides leave behind can be a source of pain or an opportunity for healing and celebration of life, recovery and resilience. I set out to meet this woman who lost a great musician, lover, husband and friend and find out how she managed to get through it all. I imagined that she might call security on me, being a stranger and all. She and her mother spoke about Ronnie so tenderly that I figured the risk was worth it. I got out my business card with my Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health logo and followed her into the thick and heavy crowd as she left the stage. I asked if I could interview her with the hope that I could tell her story. I gave her the card and asked her to contact me if she was interested. I expected nothing.

To my surprise, she sent me an email and said she was willing to talk with me. We exchanged personal information. My intent was to send the article to our Public Information Officer for distribution and to Leighsa to use in whatever way

she pleased. Not knowing where the story would land, I just wanted to hear her story, tell her story and share it with the hope that others would be inspired by it.

So here goes. A very small part of the story of Leighsa Montrose. Friend, wife, Lover, survivor, helper, creator, inspiration and so much more than what this article could ever cover. I sent Leighsa some basic questions and she was kind enough to answer them. We just hit it off. I felt a connection to her that I wanted to nurture.

Leighsa had seen Ronnie perform many times but at an acoustic-electric show in 2004, her heart and soul were moved to tears in reaction to the depth of his music. Their connection was like no other and Leighsa felt treated by him with pure kindness. In the surreal moment where eternal bonds are formed, she realized that he was the love of her life. His proposal was simple and straightforward, like his music. They eloped and when Leighsa shared her plan with her mother, who said she was happy because she knew how loved Leighsa was by him. And that it brought her great joy.

Leighsa had her own identity as an event floral designer and her passion led her to her own independent success. Ronnie did all the cooking and it was important to him that they share every meal together. Ronnie and Leighsa laughed and loved and lived the kind of relationship that everyone looks for but that few find. Ronnie with his sharp wit and biting humor, enjoying their dog Lola and keeping Leighsa laughing. Ronnie used the same precision with the day to day that he showed in his music.

He knew exactly how something should be played and the exact way something should be done. With the mind of an engineer, he could pick apart each component of a song or a task. That of course can be a blessing or a curse depending on the situation. But his brilliance and intelligence were always front and center.

Ronnie Montrose was kind, loving, funny, and supportive in all of Leighsa's endeavors and perspectives and an amazing cook. He had a great love for Thanksgiving and for Leighsa as his sous chef. That is how their relationship was. The perfect compliment. Synchronicity personified. He sang to her every day. Among the private performances were A Song for You / Leon Russell, You're the

Top / Cole Porter, Baby, We're Really in Love / Hank Williams, People Will Say We're in Love / Oklahoma! Pretty Women / Sweeny Todd, Something's Coming / West Side Story.

And then, the moment that it ended. The moment of silence over a cell phone. The moment of finding his body. Here, in Leighsa's own words: "When I found his body, I remember hearing his words, "My wife's grace under pressure and you do not let this get the better of you". His words played over and over, even today in my mind. I knew if I did not get help, I was going to be a shell of a human being for the rest of my life. I have done so many types of grief support: tapping, grief groups, trauma debriefing, de-escalation, yoga for grief, one on one grief therapy, eating well, choosing not to drink alcohol, reading everything I possible could about grief, suicide, trauma held in the body, and public speaking on the subjects of grief, suicide and resiliency".

And so then, what is the legacy of suicide? What is left behind? For Leighsa Montrose, it was keeping the memories of her relationship intact, yet making new ones in the context of her loss and grief. It was learning how to let go. Not to move on, but to move forward. To become a new version of herself. But to always keep the experience of her life with Ronnie alive. A relationship does not end because the person is no longer alive in their body. But at first, it is hell on earth.

Leighsa describes her experience. "I cried so much that I literally had a pain in my chest, it is confusing, one feels abandoned, and the shame that my loved one did this. Then the guilt for not seeing it coming. Years afterwards, unless one can truly grasp that as deeply loving as your relationship was, the act of suicide is personal only to that person and has nothing to do with us and we must do our best to get that. And to empathize as to how it is to live in a body, soul and mind that is wracked by depression. How painful. And then for the one still here missing their physical presence, understand that energy is never destroyed and they are truly "right here".

The world knew Ronnie Montrose and his musical legacy and his family knows his personal legacy of memories, but suicide leaves a different legacy of unanswered questions and unresolved issues. Leighsa provided the perfect response to this. "Though if we take the time to understand the makings of suicide (the mental and physical goings-on), how one's behaviors that become

traits, the cause and effect of a lifetime of unresolved, suppressed painful issues or trauma and how that can lead to mental illness and substance abuse, then I believe it is quite easy to understand how someone would take their own life". I agree. It is easy to understand why someone would commit suicide. What is not easy is preventing it or living with the aftermath.

Leighsa describes their relationship as kind, treasured and deeply loving. We realized and would say, "that no one is promised tomorrow." With that we realized every moment is precious and loved our life together...even the simplest of days.

That truth that we are not promised tomorrow if it is acknowledged and appreciated can help. So can the memories. For their first wedding in Kauai, it was too windy to be married on the beach as they had planned. The morning of their wedding they went to the beach and brought bags of sand to the home we rented in Haena. And scattered sand under the biggest plumeria tree Leighsa had ever seen. Then they hung lush plumeria garlands all throughout the tree branches. For the ceremony they stood barefoot, together in the sand. The smell of plumeria flowers still brings him close to her. So do the pieces of his clothing that comfort and calm her.

Last words can be so powerful. In his will, Ronnie Montrose said, "Please tell them, I did my best." That is all any of us can do. Those who lose loved ones and those who try to prevent more suffering and loss. Somehow, I know after spending time listening to Ronnie's music and writing this, that Ronnie and Leighsa will be reunited and that she will say to him, "I love you. You are so loved. All that we shared together "there" got me through till now."

As I finished this article, I heard Ronnie play *Soul Repair* and I was moved to tears. The legacy of suicide is simple. It is love. Love that is shared, love that remains, love that endures and love that remembers. Thank you Leighsa Montrose for sharing the love of your life.