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## MISSION

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**Soaring Spirits** builds community. We create, and maintain, innovative peer-based grief support programs for widowed men and women that serve a worldwide population. Based on the powerful connections created by shared experience, we endeavor to ensure that no one need grieve alone.





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## FOUNDER

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**Michele Neff Hernandez** is the founder, and Executive Director of Soaring Spirits International. Ms. Neff Hernandez has been featured on numerous local, national, and International broadcasts for her work with Soaring Spirits, and the widowed community. Michele also inspires people as a motivational speaker, freelance writer, and is a member of the Bereavement Training Team for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. Michele has contributed to over 100 different websites, blogs, and publications for single project work.

Michele has been honored with: Special Congressional Recognition, the Simi Valley Hospital Foundation's Woman of the Year award in 2014, Ventura County Star's Woman Today award in November of 2011, Simi Valley Community Foundation's Humanitarian of the Year award in 2010,

and she represented the Southern California region as State Farm Insurance's Embrace Life Award Honoree in 2009.

Ms. Neff Hernandez is a resident of Simi Valley, California where she lives and laughs with her three amazing children,

and is newly married to an amazing Aussie who supports and encourages her work with the widowed community. An avid runner and outdoor enthusiast, she actively encourages others to embrace the life they are given.





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## HISTORY

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**Soaring Spirits International was founded on May 27, 2008 by Michele Neff Hernandez.** Widowed at 35, with three young children at home, Michele felt alone in the unknown widowed world thrust upon her after her husband, Phillip Hernandez's death in a cycling accident.

As the days after her Phil's, death marched on, Michele became desperate to find other widowed people. She wanted to know how long they wore their wedding rings, and what they did with their rings if they removed them. Did they sleep on the same side of the bed as they did when their person was alive? What did they do with their loved ones shoes?

Armed with 50 practical questions about widowed life, Michele began a journey interviewing widows across the country. Over the course of one year, Michele completed 30 interviews with widowed

people from all walks of life. The people she sat down with were widowed from 9 months to 21 years, and ranged in age from 22-83. Each story was unique, and yet Michele found a point during every interview when she and the widowed person with whom she

was speaking completed each other's sentences.



**For the first time since Phil's death, Michele felt deeply, completely understood...and in the process of traveling from home to home with her handheld tape recorder, she accidentally created a community.**



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That community became Soaring Spirits International,

and has grown to include six innovative peer-support programs designed by widowed people for widowed people, and has touched the lives of over two million widowed men and women around the world.





## DEMOGRAPHICS

Soaring Spirits International serve a diverse community. Our programs are secular and inclusive. **We employ a broad definition of the term 'widowed': married, never married, planning to be married, divorced at the time of death, people of all sexes and genders, straight, LGBTQ, religious, not religious, widowed folks with kids, and those without kids, complicated or conventional relationships...** anyone who has outlived the person with whom they'd planned to spend the rest of their life fits into our definition of widowed.

- Average age of our program participants is 47
- 53.1% of our community members parent minor children
- There are approximately 900,000 women and 400,000 men widowed in the U.S. every year (US Census Bureau 2009)
- 154,700 men and women will be widowed before the age of 55 in the U.S. annually (US Census Bureau 2009)
- As of the 2013 U.S. Census 800,000 widowed men and women between the ages of 25-54 are living in the U.S.



# PROGRAMS

Soaring Spirits offers the following programs that connect widowed people around the world. We provide both online and in-person opportunities for finding peer support.

You can access our programs from the comfort of your own home, or you can meet up with other widowed people in person... whatever works best for you.

**Every Soaring Spirits program is inclusive, secular, and life affirming.**

- **Camp Widow®**, Soaring Spirits' signature program, is a weekend long event, hosted three times a year that brings together widowed people from around the world to celebrate the healing power of community. The focus of Camp Widow® is recreating the future, while honoring the past. The weekend is packed with useful tools, reliable resources, and the invaluable experience of being surrounded by peers in this unlikely, but incredible, community.
- **Regional Groups** provide an opportunity for in person gatherings with other widowed people within local communities for understanding, friendship, and peer-support.
- **Widowed Pen Pal program** will match widowed people with each other for one-on-one supportive e-mail correspondence.
- **Widow's Voice Blog** is written by eight different widowed people who share the ups and downs of their own widowed journeys, as they live them. The blog features a new post every day.
- **Widowed Village** is an online community that provides access to other widowed people around the clock, each and every day from the comfort of home.
- **You Are Not Alone:** Easy to carry business cards designed to quickly share Soaring Spirits program information with any widowed person you meet.



# EFFICACY OF PROGRAMS

Soaring Spirits' assessed program effectiveness in a survey of 877 widows and widowers. Respondents who used Soaring Spirits' programs reported higher levels of each of the following when compared to respondents who do not use any Soaring Spirits' programs.

Resilience

Hope

Personal growth since the death of their spouse

Self esteem

Respondents who had attended at least one Camp Widow reported significantly better scores in these additional areas:

- Self-esteem
- Feeling listened to by others who understand
- Feeling loved
- Social support received from widowed peers, online support, and overall social support.
- Confidence in ability to set personal and professional goals
- Confidence in ability to maintain a healthy weight
- Confidence in ability to speak with children about a deceased parent.
- Confidence in ability to find and keep a job
- Confidence in ability to accept him or herself as a widow(er)



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# BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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## PRESS SAMPLING

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**Health News Florida NPR:**

<http://health.wusf.usf.edu/post/love-air-camp-widow>

**Camp Widow Trailer:**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPdPhfeq3Lo&feature=youtu.be\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPdPhfeq3Lo&feature=youtu.be_gdata_player)

**USA Today:**

[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/2010-08-11-widows11\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/2010-08-11-widows11_ST_N.htm)

**Camp Widow on KPBS:**

[https://youtu.be/\\_KfIEY62TzY](https://youtu.be/_KfIEY62TzY)

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## MEDIA INQUIRIES

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For media requests, please contact our Public Relations Firm  
TBM Associates, Terry Marvin [tmarvin@tbmassociates.com](mailto:tmarvin@tbmassociates.com)

