

A Place to Begin

The Grievors Library Offers a Biblio-Lifeline Built From Loss and Love (and Cookies)



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Belyea installed a Wind Phone in the Crown Hill Cemetery. The line connects to nothing, encouraging people to talk to their dead. Credit: Billie Winter

Pamela Belyea didn't set out to build a library so much as she set out looking for one.

After her 23-year-old son, Ben, died by suicide in January 2020, the Seattle architect and Gage Academy of Art cofounder started doing what many newly bereaved people do: search for answers. Therapy helped, even though it was eye-wateringly expensive. Gardening helped, too. As did journaling—nine notebooks worth, written every morning before she got out of bed.

But again and again, Belyea found herself returning to books written by other grieving people, looking for reassurance that the strange and awful territory she'd entered had a map, that it was survivable, even though her heart hurt so much it had turned into a donut.

Finding good grief books turned out to be difficult. At the time, the Seattle Public Library listed more than 1,600 titles under “grief,” but the first two were a thriller and a murder mystery. (The list is now nearly 2,600 titles long, heavy on novels.) Many of the books Belyea found most useful were self-published, out of print, or unavailable at the library. Buying used copies online meant waiting weeks for each arrival. Meanwhile, Belyea says, she was “numb and dumb,” cognitively impaired by loss, as were the people in her grief support groups.

“People in grief have no idea what hit them,” she told me over Zoom. “They have no idea how to cope, are not getting enough support, don’t really know where to turn, can’t afford the fucking therapist.”

Instead of continuing to journal about Ben, Belyea found herself sketching plans for something else entirely: a small, free library devoted exclusively to grief. Today, the Grievors Library consists of 10 free public collections scattered across the Puget Sound region: three large “Mama” Book Boxes that each hold 65 books, five smaller “Baby” Book Boxes holding roughly 30 books each, and two indoor bookshelves—including at Zeitgeist Coffee in Pioneer Square. Other locations include Crown Hill Cemetery, Bonney Watson Funeral Home in SeaTac, and Saltwater Bookshop in Kingston.

Together, the Grievors Library distributed more than 2,100 grief books in 2025 alone. Each is adorned with a series of colorful dots that indicate the category and subcategory—a system that allows grievors to find the books most relevant to them after, say, the loss of a child or a spouse, or as a queer person or a person of color.

Belyea sees the project as “a biblio-lifeline,” a form of “love medicine.” In fact, the whole project is built on love. Also, cookies.

To build the first of the library’s boxes, Belyea walked into lumberyards, hardware stores, and painting contractors carrying two things: a one-page proposal and a tin of cookies baked that morning. “The only currency we have is love,” she’d tell managers, sliding the tin across the counter and asking for hundreds of dollars of materials.

It worked (perhaps in part because the tins qualified for refills). Nearly every component of the first generation of library boxes arrived as a donation. Volunteers baked, built cabinets, painted the royal purple exteriors, created artwork to discourage graffiti, and assembled the boxes at community work parties. Even today, every book is cleaned, color-coded, and catalogued by hand before it goes out into the world.

The organization remains entirely volunteer-run. “It’s refreshingly non-commercial,” Belyea says. The website doesn’t sell books or link readers to any booksellers. Instead, it links to public libraries through WorldCat, allowing anyone, anywhere, to locate copies nearby. University of Washington Library Sciences students have helped create the taxonomy for the books and the online WorldCat lists, which are also available in Mandarin and Spanish.

But the project’s biggest hurdle wasn’t finding the right books, or getting the boxes built. It was finding the sites to host it. Belyea’s first idea was simply to install a grief library in her own driveway.

Her late husband, artist and Gage cofounder Gary Faigin, vetoed that plan. “He said, ‘I’m not coming down the stairs to find a griever crying in my driveway,’” she recalls.

She next approached the city, hoping to put boxes in front of community centers. They declined, telling her it “wasn’t appropriate.” After other local bureaucratic refusals, she emailed then-President Joe Biden. “I knew that he knew the deepest, most horrific grief. And I asked him to tell the mayor of Seattle to get with it.” She never heard back. “I’m the only person on the planet who would escalate it that high, right?” she says.

Seattle officials ultimately explained that placing privately operated boxes on public land raised First Amendment concerns. If the city approved Grievers Library, it might have to permit any other private group—including extremist organizations—to install boxes alongside them.

Belyea accepts the legal reasoning. Still, the repeated refusals stung. She was also turned down by churches, businesses, libraries, and local nonprofits. She calls it our “cultural allergy to grief at work.” We tend to treat grieverers like they’re radioactive, she points out. It’s as if we might avoid it if we don’t look it in the eye.

The project continues to evolve. She’s worked on a Wind Phone Lending Library that allows the bereaved to borrow a backpack with a rotary phone to speak to their dead. (Think of it as a kind of therapeutic play-acting, inspired by the first Wind Phone that went up in Japan in 2010. It also includes a stationary Wind Phone beneath a cedar tree at Crown Hill Cemetery.)

Next, Belyea hopes, is music. After leading a workshop on music and grief at a bereavement conference this spring, she left convinced that playlists belong alongside books.

Her own song, the one she listened to after her husband died, is Bruno Mars’s “Talking to the Moon.” After he died in 2025, Belyea built a memorial garden for him outside the house, and installed a Grievers Library in the middle of it.

Looking back on how the project began, she says there came a point when she realized she’d stopped writing in her journals only about her own loss.

“Now I’m inching out of my pain into this new place,” she says, “which is the compassion that you can give to all the others.”

