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'Creative Healing': How Kennedy native Hayley Wilds is helping mothers grieve pregnancy loss

BY ABIGAIL HAKAS ON OCTOBER 3, 2024



Kennedy native and art therapist Hayley Wilds.

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Editor's note: On Thursday, Oct. 17, halfway through Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, Kennedy native and therapist Hayley Wilds will be holding a free [online workshop for grieving parents](#) from noon to 1 p.m.

When Hayley Wilds learned she was pregnant in 2017, she was ecstatic, but her happiness quickly turned to grief when she discovered she had a miscarriage 15 weeks along. As a therapist, she thought she knew how to handle it. She took the weekend off and then went back to work.

A few months later, she realized she felt angry and irritable all the time. When she heard about someone's baby shower, it devastated her, and she realized she needed to allow herself to properly grieve.

"It was a really intense grief experience because I really had not experienced grief and loss that close to home before," she said.



October is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month.

While miscarriages affect around 10% of all pregnancies according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Wilds found that support resources were limited.

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A year later, she and her husband had a rainbow baby, a term for a child born after the loss of a child. When she went back to work, she was overwhelmed with unresolved grief and decided to see a therapist.

It was a difficult pregnancy for Wilds; she constantly checked the baby's heartbeat to make sure she hadn't miscarried again.

“I was so naive with that first pregnancy because I come from a big Irish Catholic family,” the Kennedy Township native said. “It was just assumed I was just going to have a baby, and it was going to be great, everything was going to be fine, and then it didn’t happen that way.”

The doctor who delivered her daughter was the same doctor who performed Wilds’ miscarriage procedure.

“She looked at me, and she was like, ‘Boy, we’ve come full circle, huh?’ and I just bawled my eyes out,” she said. “It was very emotional and powerful and holding her, when they put her on my chest, all of that, it was just everything you could imagine times 100 because I was so grateful.”

After having her daughter and suffering several more losses because of secondary infertility, Wilds, now 43, and her husband made the difficult decision to stop trying to have more children.

Today, she helps women through the same experiences she struggled through.

After having her daughter, she decided to open a solo practice in Pittsburgh, the Center for Creative Counseling, in 2022. Some of her clients have also lost babies, but many come to her for support in every part of their journey as mothers.

“People don’t really like to talk about pregnancy loss, so a lot of people come to me because it’s been weird for them to try to share their grief with their close loved ones. They don’t often have the words at the ready to tell their story.”

– Hayley Wilds

“I really already, because of all the tough experiences doing crisis work with families, I already had, like, an affinity for moms,” she said. “How completely amazing they are to be dealing with all these stressors and still just be loving to their kids, they’re just like superheroes.”

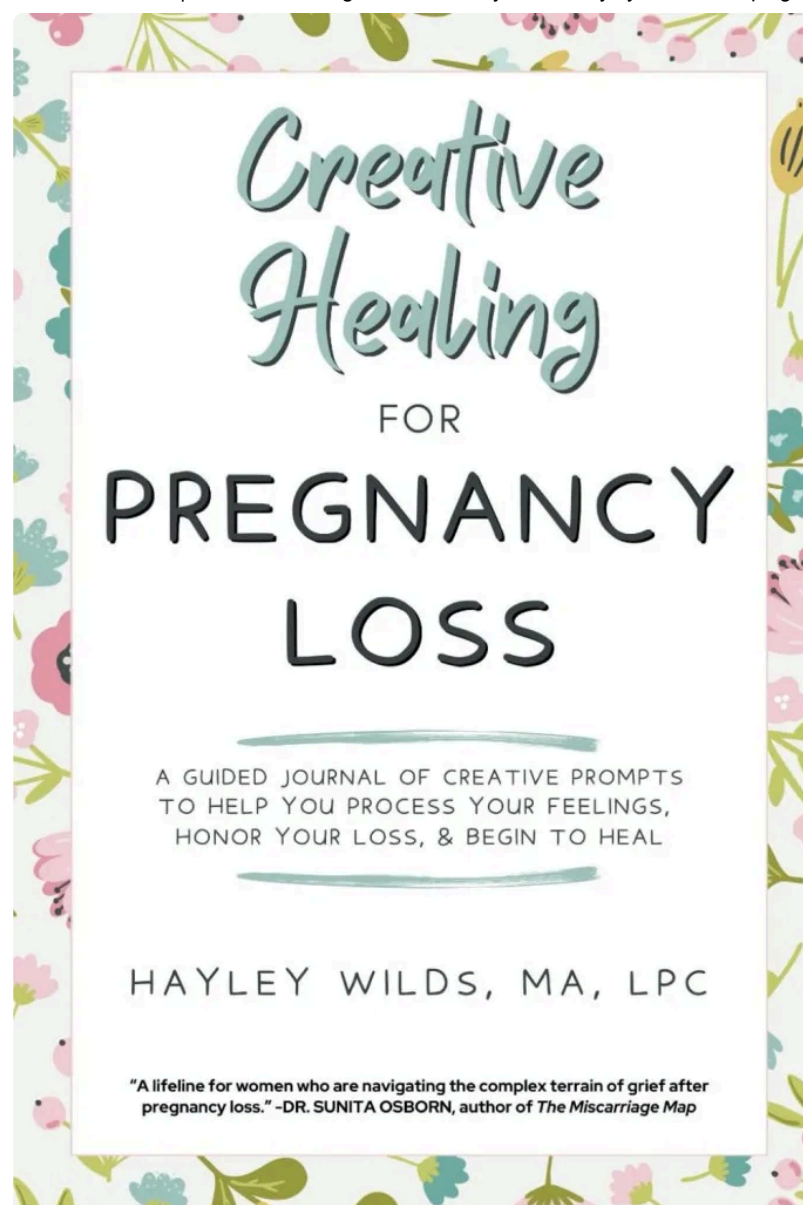
Wilds had been working at Wesley Family Services for two decades doing in-home family therapy for high-crisis families. In 2010, she got a master’s degree in art therapy from Seton Hill University, pulling that into her family work.

The name of her practice is a nod to her use of art in sessions. While not all of her clients want to use art therapy techniques, those who do are guided through journaling, writing letters and other techniques to process the grief.

“People don’t really like to talk about pregnancy loss, so a lot of people come to me because it’s been weird for them to try to share their grief with their close loved ones,” she said. “They don’t often have the words at the ready to tell their story.”

Wilds knows it best herself. It took her many years to figure out how she wanted to communicate her story of loss to others. Art, she said, is a way to communicate those feelings without needing words.

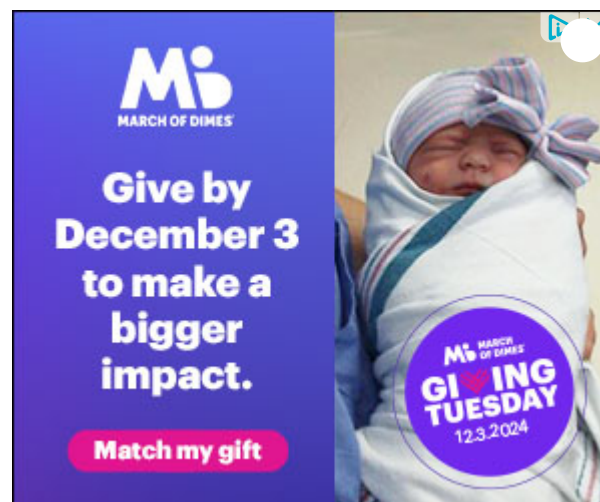
It’s something she incorporated into her own grieving process. After her loss, she decided to get a miscarriage tattoo, a memorial for a lost baby. She created a design of the Orion constellation because she and her husband planned to name her lost son Orion and had it tattooed over her heart.



Hayley Wilds' guided journal to help process grief was released in June 2024.

In sessions, she isn't interested in the aesthetics of her clients' art, but rather the meaning behind it. Her prompts are open-ended; she asks them to "draw the anxiety" or "draw the circle and fill it with sadness."

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She started to make handout packets for her clients with guided prompts that they could take home. Slowly, she started adding research and information about the effectiveness of art therapy, building it up until she decided to make a book out of it.

Her book, "Creative Healing for Pregnancy Loss," came out in June. It's something of a guided journal for mothers who have lost their babies, each section targeting a specific part of the grieving process: dealing with stigma, expressing emotion and moving forward, to name a few.

On Oct. 17, halfway through Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, Wilds will hold a free [online workshop for grieving parents](#) from noon to 1 p.m.

Wilds will speak about pregnancy loss and grief, the importance of art and creative expression as a coping mechanism and guide attendees through an art activity.

It's a continuation of work she's already begun. A year ago, she presented on the power of art for pregnancy loss grief to a group of around 40 women at the American Art Therapy Association's annual conference.

Wilds said it was one of the most moving experiences in her career to work through an art prompt with the women, many of whom had experienced pregnancy loss.

For those who have lost a pregnancy and want to begin the steps toward healing, Wilds recommends three things: getting a therapist who personally understands the loss, journaling and finding a supportive community of people who have also lost a pregnancy.

“It’s good to be an active griever, and not that you force yourself to grieve, but that you don’t just sort of let it happen,” she said. “If you engage in activities that allow you to express it, you’re going to have an easier time dealing with your loss.”



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