

Laura Clemenson and Bess Welden

Interview

Karen Wyatt: [00:00:00] Today I'm very happy to welcome two special guests to the podcast, Laura Clemenson and Bess Welden. Bess is an award-winning playwright, performer, and theater educator based in Waterville, Maine. She spent a year as a National Art Strategies Creative Community Fellow, developing her work at the intersection of art and social change.

As the founder of Death Wings Project, which offers creatively compassionate community art making and storytelling programs about loss and grief, Bess led a team of over 20 Maine-based artists to bring performances of her play "Death Wings" to production in 2023. And you can find out more about Bess's work at her website, bessWelden.com.

And Laura Clemenson, is an Inelda trained end of life [00:02:00] doula, founder of the Pre-Dead Social Club, a TEDx speaker, and a member of the New Hampshire Healthcare Decision Coalition. Through a wide variety of secular community-based programs, including consistent monthly dialogues, die spelled D-I-E, I love that, roundtable discussions, and hands-on workshops, Laura recognizes she is building a gym for death, I also love that, where people strengthen the confidence, clarity, and language needed to navigate dying, caregiving, and loss before the crisis hits, and you can learn more at the website predeadsocialclub.com.

And together, Bess and Laura have created the Death Wing, Death Wings toolkit and ongoing workshops that we'll be talking all about today. So welcome, Laura and Bess.

Bess Welden: Thank you. Thanks for having us And

Karen Wyatt: you.

Bess Welden: Yeah. Thank you, Karen.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, I was really excited to hear about your project just 'cause it's [00:03:00] something so unique and creative, and I love it anytime we apply the arts and creativity to the subject of death and dying.

I think that's really powerful, so I'm so excited to hear about what you do. And, maybe we could start with, telling us your story, and Laura, maybe you could tell us a little bit about what led you to become a death doula and- Sure ... everything you're doing now.

Laura Cleminson: Cool. so I think my, death doula story is probably not dissimilar to a lot of people.

There was a important person in my life that was dying. It was my mom, and, it wa- she was actually, the way I look at it, giving us a master class on how to, leave this world with quality and quantity of life. She had stage four ovarian cancer. [00:04:00] this was about nine years ago, and I realized ... So she's there out in the Midwest, I'm in the East Coast, and my dad, my sister, my mom and I, we all were navigating this death, very uniquely.

and I realized, "How is it that I don't have any skills?" And I was in my 50s. I'm like, "How did I get to be so big and I don't have any skills?" It's because, a couple things. Everybody in my family died instantly. We are, like, statistically weird that way. and this was the first person that had a, an illness they had to navigate.

so after my mom died, my dad's health started to change, and I thought, "Great. We just had this master class. We know what we're doing. We know how to talk about this," and that wasn't the way, it unfolded. [00:05:00] And, th- this is the very abridged version, that I, said to my partner one day, I'm like ... I told Jeff, I go, "I'm done.

I'm done trying to talk to my dad about the things that are important at end of life." And he goes, "Really?" I go, "No, I just ... I need different skills, and I don't even know what those are." because as we all know as a society, it's not kitchen table conversation. so I discovered there was this thing called the death doula.

did a bit of research, took a, a course, and, when I went out into my community and started working with people, I quickly- Confirmed or realized that I probably will get burnt out like a lot of medical professionals 'cause we're starting from

ground

zero so much. people are in denial and so unprepared, that I decided in, in, in [00:06:00] parallel to start a social club to talk about death, and try to make it

fun, Pre-Dead Social Club. I'll just do this gratuitous thing. It's got a little Venn diagram here. keeping the dialogue alive. It's s- supposed to be fun.

And I sent a letter to 200 people that I knew, and I said, "I'm starting this social club, and that we're gonna do Death Over Drinks once a month. I, hope you show up, and in December I'll evaluate, whether this is a go or no-go. We'll see if anybody shows up." So the first year, 145 people showed up in person.

Karen Wyatt: Wow.

Laura Cleminson: I know. And so that was exciting. and that was also how I met Bess. that was con- tangential. but fast-forward to today, three years later, and, we, get together. We still do Death Over Drinks, which are community [00:07:00] conversations. It's a spin off of a death cafe with, we have more structure involved.

we do round tables. We do workshops. We invite conversation. We don't give presentations. And last year, just in my little area alone, we hosted 29 events, and we filled 1,200 seats.

Karen Wyatt: Wow.

Laura Cleminson: So Karen, I have to back up. It's like you were the inspiration. one of the first podcasts I listened to, there was something that you had said, "Hey, this is for..."

in your kind, so encouraging way. You're like, this is... If you have a little bit to offer, you could go out and do a little something in your community." I think I listened to that, three times. "What is she saying?" And, honestly, you gave me the, nugget to yeah, I, I can go out into my...

I can go out into my community. I am part of this community. [00:08:00] So now the Gym for Death comes from all these people that I meet on a monthly basis. Like tomorrow we have Death Over Drinks and we have 50 people attending, and we've got six facilitators. So I tell them, I go, "I'm training right alongside you," 'cause I'm learning all the time.

so that is where my passion is this Pre-Dead Social Club, culture. and that is how I met Bess. One of my friends, two months into the Pre-Dead Social Club, she sends me this, email and she goes, "Hey, there's a play happening in Portland an hour away. It's called Death Wings. I think you'd like it."

I go, "Right up my speed." And that's my- Quick version, if you will. and actually I will just also say is nine years, six years later, my dad is, talking to [00:09:00] me about end of life, often. It's like we've made... I'm so grateful for the runway that we've had, 'cause this takes hundreds of conversations.

Little kind, kindly conversations. so anyhow, I had the pleasure of meeting the fabulous Bess, seeing her at her play. I'll let you kinda pivot right here, Bess.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, Bess, you're next. Tell us your story.

Bess Welden: About, uh, let's just say, the, the year before my father started dying, which is now over 11 years ago, I started writing a play called Death Wings.

and I'm a playwright by trade. I'm also a performer, and I teach theater. and, I like to write play ... I often say I like to write plays about things that people don't wanna talk about. because as an artist, I'm really interested in asking the big questions [00:10:00] and, and, using, theater and creativity as a way of opening up conversations that might be difficult.

it's a ... I think I have a pretty good track record of that, but Death Wings might be the pinnacle, so far. anyway, I started writing this play, and the main character is a woman named Grand, who has an invented end-of-life ritual during which she... so when somebody in her community is dying, she goes to them and she asks that person to tell the story of their life in five sentences.

And then she listens to their story, and then goes about their, home, their space, wherever they are, and collects, paper, fabric, fibers, the artifacts of this individual, unique human life. she cuts all of the material up, into feathers, and assembles, a l- like human-sized set of wings, that she really believes [00:11:00] helps that person, go from, pass from this life to whatever comes next.

And this is a, a, a flight of fancy, something that, I downloaded from the great creative collective unconscious. Death Wings, isn't something that I had ever encountered before. it certainly draws upon other types of end-of-life or grief rituals that, different cultures have.

But as, as far as I know, in the research that I've done, Death Wings is its own thing. and, so I worked... I started writing a draft of the play. A year later, my dad was dying, and so I tried it, and I decided that I wanted to see what would happen if I actually made a set of wings out of these tangible artifacts of my dad's life.

and I'm not a visual artist by trade at all. I'm a, words person. I'm a performance person. [00:12:00] So there was a lot of trial and error to come up with a process through which I could actually construct, a set of these fabric and paper wings. And I started to make them as my dad was dying. and so it was, helping me with some of my anticipatory grief.

and then I didn't finish them until actually after he died. and I traveled. I'm... I live in Maine, and my sister, and my parents were living in the South. my mom and my dad were living in Memphis at the time. So we gathered in Memphis to sit shiva for my dad, and I decided to bring the wings with me, because it was this new thing that I was experimenting with, and I wanted my family to see what I was doing.

And while they were not interested necessarily in actively participating with me, my mom and my sister were very generous about, thinking about what items of my father's, [00:13:00] they felt comfortable with me, taking and tearing up and cutting up and, incorporating into these, sort of five-and-a-half, six-foot wingspan wings.

and the process, anchored me through those earliest days of that loss, during that sitting shiva period, up at night, not able to sleep, thinking I'd cried all of the tears that I could cry. it was incredibly helpful to me to have something to do with my hands.

and it meant that I actually was making space for myself in and around this, this loss that was, of course, mine, but also shared by all of these other people. And, and I found it both meditative, and an opportunity to really sit with, memories, with feelings, actually with, uh, many, moments of actual, [00:14:00] joy in the midst of, in the midst of s- tremendous sadness.

the kinesthetic experience of the cutting, and the cutting, and the weaving, and the gluing, all became this sort of ritualistic, experience for me that really did transform the way I was making my way through this really first very significant loss in my life.

and I remember at the time that my sister said to me, "I can really see this is doing something for you. I don't know exactly what it is, but something, is, happening here for you, and I wonder if you would ever wanna teach other people how to do this." And at the time I was, dismissive.

I was like, "I can't think about that. our dad just died. I'm, like, totally overwhelmed." but she planted that seed, and it really did stay with me. And so

as I continued to develop the play over the next several years, took a [00:15:00] long time, theater takes a long time, and then the interruption of COVID, made it take even longer.

but COVID gave me a pau- a really important pause, which allowed me to think not just about, like, how I wanted to take the play itself forward into production But really that I realized I wanted to build a whole project around the play, and that it wasn't just about gathering a group of artists to tell the story, but that it was also about, developing ways to directly connect with community, in, in creative spaces that allowed them to engage directly with these ideas, with these materials, with this, way of, basically in the same way doing what Laura's doing, inviting conversation.

invi- and inviting conversation around a table, that might be a little bit different than how you might expect you would sit in a room maybe with strangers and, find yourself, in a [00:16:00] creative project, in a very simple, a simple project that literally anybody, can participate in as long as they can, manage scissors.

And even if they can't, we've got co-facilitators that can help them manage the scissors. we, built this... I had collaborators. we designed this curriculum, to teach people how to make a set of what we now call mini wings, because of course the big wings take many weeks to assemble.

but we figured out a system where through, over the course of three hours, most people can complete a set of what we call mini wings, and really developed this curriculum, with a lot of intention, with a tremendous amount of care, in consultation with mental health professionals because I'm an artist, and a teacher, and a parent, and a family member, but I am not a, a mental health professional.

definitely got feedback and guidance around folks who are really in spaces, trauma-informed spaces and people who are really working with people, [00:17:00] um, at end of life, consulted with them as we created this, this workshop. And then we rolled out a bunch of workshops before the play went into production, so we were already building community, through this engagement.

And as we moved toward production, we were then able to feature the wings that community members had ma- had made as part of, an installation that became part of the show. and so- Laura came in and was able to see the play, and then also see these wings that other people in community had made.

And Laura being Laura, of course a million light bulbs went off. and,

Laura Cleminson: and she- I think I said something like, "What are your hopes and dreams? What are your hopes and

Bess Welden: dreams?" Yeah.

Laura Cleminson: And, I see so

Bess Welden: much. And, Yeah And over time, and over actually a long period of time, Laura and I have really, built, both a personal and professional, relationship, a collaboration, really [00:18:00] focused on the workshops that now continue to be the backbone of Death Wings Project.

And then really u- under Laura's suggestion and real collaborative leadership, we have, created a toolkit so that folks can participate in wing- wing making, even if they can't attend an in-person workshop. the idea being that it's a process that seems to have been quite valuable to many people, some folks even call it transformative, and we wanted to figure out ways to share it with as many people as possible.

So it took some convincing. Laur- at first, Laura had this idea, and I was skeptical, because I was... I felt so, I felt so strongly about how much care and intention we had put into designing the curriculum, and I didn't want to put something out into the world, without having those same ideas behind it.

and, so it took a while, and we took our [00:19:00] time, and we iterated the process. We got a grant, so we were able to make a first version of it and send it out to testers and get feedback, and then we made another version of it. And we've been able to share this latest version of the toolkit, and we're getting, we're getting some terrific feedback from folks who are actually taking this idea and then finding even newer creative ways, of interacting with wing making, and how people are using it, to proliferate into their communities as well.

Karen Wyatt: Wow. Bess, I love how, you took this creative idea from your play, from a story, and brought it into your real life to utilize as a tool, and now look what's happened as it's expanding out in the world and helping people. And then both of you, Laura, likewise, your grief informed you a- and taught you- what the community needed to know about grief. I love that both [00:20:00] of you are, using your work together and separately to reach out to p- to everyday people in your community, because that's where grief work belongs. That's where we need to be doing it and sharing it together. And I wondered if you'd

talk a little bit more about that, L- Laura, about the power of coming together as a community to, work on our grief.

Laura Cleminson: I, there's so much stuff that is, we hide and, we gloss over and so much, "Oh, I'm fine," or, we don't have language, for articulating what grief is. So when I saw, Bess's, program project and that they were already in community, and I was like, "Oh, a kindred spirit." not on the stage, like they were in community at tables.

And as somebody... I'm, also an artist, that I'm like, I love [00:21:00] working with my hands. So much stuff just frees up, and, i- this workshop, that Bess and her, her cohort de- was so intentional about, I just saw, oh, this is a way for people not to have to speak about it, but they could use their hands.

and just watch how people navigated that piece of it. And I will say, also to answer your question is- Coming into community and having something to focus on, not just anything, but we've got- we have a little, we have a little project together, or we are gonna talk about one topic at a time so we can share perspectives and we can see.

That is such a grounding rod, and, it's not being [00:22:00] ping-ponged all over the place on five different topics. We're w- we're giving ourselves and everybody else around us a virtual little hug 'cause we see each other. And, the way that Bess, I've learned so much from, Bess in this project as well, is she has something called community agreements.

and you sit around the table with a bunch of strangers, and we agree how we're gonna show up with each other for the next couple hours. And it was, again, one of these, oh, this is so beautiful that we're... There's, rules of the road. that sounds more strict than it is. We are being respectful of each other, by, showing up in a certain way.

but I did see, like the whole... it did take some convincing, of [00:23:00] Bess about this toolkit 'cause I'm like, I can see so many people not feeling comfortable. They would love this project, but they would like to do this in the comfort of their own home. They would like to do this for an hour and come back to it.

they might look at it for six months, and then, now they're ready for it. It's again, k- hospice, meeting people where they are. The toolkit, meeting people where they are. and it has the ability, it has the ability to be a virtual,

collaboration with friends and family in different ZIP codes and different timeframes.

It's like, "Hey, mail me s- a little strip of paper with something to put it on that's a feather," or, "Send me a letter and I'm gonna cut it up, and I'll make a copy." it's, ex- so expansive. So yes, I got super excited about this from, that community [00:24:00] aspect.

Karen Wyatt: I was just gonna say, I feel excited.

I'm imagining and remembering back when, after my mother died and going through all of her things, there were thousands of things that I found that were so special that reminded me of her, that I knew she cherished, and yet I could not keep them all. There was no way. It, wasn't possible. And the grief and pain I felt at having to disperse all of her belongings and get rid of things that were actually very special, but there was no room for them, and I'm thinking, "Wow, what an, what a unique way to save just parts of each one of these things, and to have them gathered together in this beautiful piece of art as wings," and h- how amazing that would be for someone who's in that very process of figuring out, "What do I keep?"

How do I remember my loved one, and, what do I have space for that I can actually [00:25:00] keep with me?" So I think it's really br- beautiful.

Bess Welden: Yeah, it's really interesting what, people decide to show up with. So when someone registers for a workshop, and now w- when someone purchases a toolkit, the toolkit comes with step-by-step instructions.

There's even a video online for folks to watch if they're more visual learners. but the initial instruction is to really think hard about, what do you want to include in these wings? and we try to approach it from a very expansive perspective in terms of death. most folks do make wings for or about a specific person.

but some people make wings for other large, big, important transitions in their lives that are kinds of deaths, that also come with loss, that are, losses and come with grief. So sometimes people make wings for, for a divorce, or some folks have made wings even for [00:26:00] their transition, into retirement and thinking about the life that they're leaving behind.

In any event, people-- we ask people to be intentional about what they wanna bring and what they wanna include, and we always remind folks that- Anything can be photocopied. So if it's something very special to you that you don't feel

comfortable destroying per se, you can keep the original, but then you can also, and still incorporate this important thing into the wings that you're making.

For some folks, being able to show up with the object, the piece of clothing, a letter, anything that people are coming with, the actual cutting up of the material can be incredibly freeing for some folks. It can feel pretty intense for some people, too. And I definitely have stood next to people and, held, those scissors with them or have taken the first cut for them, because they've really wanted to incorporate whatever it was.

I'm remembering [00:27:00] somebody was cutting up a, a beloved pair of socks, and just couldn't- ... quite get started. but by being there and holding that space, and literally holding that person's hand, we were able to make that initial cut, and then, and then they were able to, move forward. We cried a lot while we were doing it.

but then those tears also gave way, of course, to then all of these stories and memories, and this is what happens as people are together, in a workshop. On your own, if you're the kind of person where being with a group of people and feeling emotionally vulnerable that way is never gonna work for you, then you can have a toolkit, and then you can, as Laura says, you do it...

you let yourself... you meet it where you are. And for some folks, that's gonna be completely on their own, and then for others, I think it's a real invitation to do it in a small group, or even just with one other person. and especially if you're navigating the same loss, that you might do it with a family member or a close [00:28:00] friend or a small circle of people, where you might each make your own set of wings, or you might collectively make a set of wings together to honor a particular person that you have, in common.

but inevitably what happens is what a friend of mine described early on, ... in one of the pilot workshops. She talked about the, the project allows you to put your hands into your grief.

And that there's something about, that, that kinesthetic, opportunity to just be with the action of it, be with the movement of it, that then s- then inevitably seems to open something for folks.

and there's a sense of feeling less alone. There's a sense of, just an o- an opening or an allowing. and what often happens is that, we start with tears, and then it opens up into, connections and laughter [00:29:00] and joy and making space

for those really important memories, which of course our society does not really encourage us to make, space for.

So by actually getting yourself to sit down, and do, do this activity, which again, is quite simple, and even if you would never think of yourself as a crafter or an artist, inevitably what happens is people make something and then they're really surprised, by, by how it looks in the end, because it's inevitably visually interesting, and all of the wings are entirely unique, both to the people who are making them and to the people that they are honoring or memorializing.

so for some folks, some of the joy is just looking at what they've created and thinking, "Oh my gosh, I made something." which I think a lot of us as adults, move away from. we're give up on the idea that we can be, artistically [00:30:00] creative because we're not gonna be professionals or it's not gonna be perfect or whatever it is.

and the invitation here is to leave all of that behind and allow yourself just to really work with, these materials that have deep meaning for you. and then you end up creating something that feels, really connected to who you are and the memories that you are, experiencing, and that you've got now this visual, memorial, to a person, that you can then display in a space that makes sense for you, and it's an opportunity then to, share.

And so as you are showing people your wings, of course, those stories and those memories then continue on.

Laura Cleminson: I think that's the thing, but also I'd, jump in to say, people can do it for pets. people can do it... one of the... We held a workshop in, Portsmouth, New Hampshire a bit ago, and there was a woman that [00:31:00] was in the school system, and she thought this would be a beautiful project for children to participate in if a child has, in their class has died.

if, of a, place for them to go with that in a safe environment through the school counselor, et cetera. and Bess, to your point about earlier about people using this creatively, there's a death doula, that took a set of wings, recently and asked everybody just to, write a couple sentiments on s- slips of paper, and she started weaving them into the wings, and she's just gonna continue that.

And so at the end, it's gonna be this community set of wings of people that have ebbed and flowed, but there's, continuity that we're all woven in this together. There's just an endless seemingly, way to [00:32:00] stay con- to be connected to this if somebody's drawn to it.

Karen Wyatt: It's a really beautiful ritual, and for

We live in the society where I think we've abandoned or lost most of our rituals and the meaning-making that they allow. And I don't know if you wanna share more about that, about, Laura, the importance of rituals around end of life.

Laura Cleminson: you've ki- you've said it. It's like we have a dearth of them, and Bess, that was one of the first things you said is, like, where, are our rituals?

How, where are our personal rituals and where are our community ones? And how can we do this... and when I first met Bess, her ... I was definitely end of life, human space, pet space. and, and Bess, you know, the ripple effect. She's "And our environment, and all the other things, that [00:33:00] people are grieving."

and, there, there's a piece in here, often the hands will sol- I'm, reading from it. often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain, by Carl Jung. And I'm just like, I think whenever we have the ability to get out of our head, in some type of a ritual, there's this magic that happens, and it doesn't have to happen in the moment.

I think maybe sometimes we overcomplicate, that when we say ritual, to me that feels very, uh, religious, so to speak. And there's so many people that, have moved away from whatever the religion was that they were raised. and then so religion does have [00:34:00] rituals. So I think it's, I think most people if they looked at it would say there's r- there are rituals that help us stay grounded, and we might do them unconsciously, during our day.

having a morning cup of tea, sitting outside in the same chair facing the same way. That's a ritual, right? And then how do we do it to support ourselves, navigating The loss, the death of somebody so important. And, I would even say it is so helpful for us to think about how to ... how could these set of wings help us understand how to support a friend who has lost a spouse or somebody important?

I have mentally made 100 sets of wings for people. It's like, what would I include? and because there's probably, [00:35:00] 60 feathers, I think about all the things, and that has, in and of itself, that emotional, mental exercise, has helped me, I think, show up more grounded and not, "How are you today?"

But, "I remember this about somebody," and I s- I remember seeing you guys doing this. And, yeah. I don't know. That just came to me right now. I have

made hundreds of sets of wings- in my mind. I ... Yeah. The ... It's ... That's the free version.

Karen Wyatt: I, love also the symbolism of wings themselves, and the idea that i- in some ways we may think of our loved one being departed, flying off on wings, but wings represent freedom in a way too, and the ability to move around.

And I, think that's really important for us too. And I like Bess that you [00:36:00] emphasized you don't have to be an artist to create the wings, and I think many people don't attempt art or involve themselves in art, hands-on art, which we all really need to do, but people feel judged or feel they're not good enough or they don't have talent, and they don't try to make things with their hands, and this is such a perfect opportunity to teach that.

Bess Welden: Yeah. I ... and it's been ... It's, it's, We've proven it over and over again. there are obviously people self-select to participate in this. For some folks, they're certainly attracted to it because they do tend toward, thinking of themselves as a crafter or an artist. And then we've had plenty of people do it because- it seemed like maybe something that would help them, even though they felt, nervous or uncomfortable with the idea that they would be making something.

and I just try to reassure people that I [00:37:00] came into it as someone with zero visual art-making skills, and so therefore the whole process is designed for somebody exactly like me. and of course then it's fascinating to see how different people end up, even within the space of just using a toolkit or being in a workshop, find their o- everybody finds their own version of it and their own innovations and, are adding things that I would never have thought of before, which is also one of the great things that's...

It's so generative. It's such a generative experience and activity, that is sitting alongside, some of the feelings that are the hardest feelings to negotiate as a human being. and I remember early on in the project talking with, someone in Maine who's been... who was, working at the, at the, foreground of, death with dignity, legislation here in the state.

And, and she reached out [00:38:00] to me when she heard about the project and said, "In my opinion, after all of these years of working on this particular aspect of, a legislative, kind of freedom," that, she was like, "I'm just convinced that creativity is the key for us changing the conversation."

And, creativity is the opportunity to open people or people to allow themselves to open enough to have these kinds of more vulnerable, meaningful, connected sorts of conversations, either with themselves or with a family member or potentially in a group setting with other people. And then that sense of, I am part of a community.

I'm no longer holding this thing by myself. I am part of a group of people who, have participated in this particular activity, and now we're all holding those pieces, little pieces of each other's stories, little pieces of each other's grief, and that [00:39:00] we are able to heal ourselves through, coming together in these spaces.

and with a toolkit, it's an opportunity also for people to then think about, who is my community? And who would I want to invite to be part of this with me? Maybe I'm scared to do it by myself, but if I call my sister, maybe she'll do it with me. Or I'm really having trouble having a conversation with my, parent about, the death of their spouse and what's gonna happen to them and that if we came together, and looked at these objects together and talked about them and, and, discussed these shared memories that we are finding opportunities to, build more trust, more, more understanding, the ability of, for some people to just release and let go, in ways that can just feel incredibly difficult.

And of course, every single one of us, as we well know, is [00:40:00] gonna do this. we're all gonna die. Everybody we love, is gonna die. and there's no reason not to, invest time and creativity into, finding the meaning that we can, and the aliveness that goes along with, being truthful about this reality, this shared human reality, and then also giving ourselves a chance for our, perhaps untapped creative, source to come forward, and to build something that can actually be really quite beautiful in a short period of time.

Karen Wyatt: I, really like the quote, from the per- the person you quoted saying that creativity is necessary if we're really going to move the needle forward. And I love, Laura, that you in your work too, in starting the Pre-Dead Social Club, you've used so much creativity there, and I think that was maybe the point I was trying to [00:41:00] make.

Whatever you heard on the podcast was that each of us can bring our own unique creativity. We each have some ... We each have things to share. Yeah. we're all facing death. We're all grieving. We're all going through this life as humans, and we can each share in a creative way with one another, and that's what helps us all.

Every time we do share, we help one another to see this life from a new perspective or get new ideas and new hope maybe for how to navigate it.

Laura Cleminson: I think there's, this ... The thing that also struck me Bess when you shared the wings that you were making for your dad, that you started them before he was dead.

And I have this, I can totally see people who are, supporting somebody dying, and [00:42:00] having this little set of wings be contributed from people all over the place, and a new feather comes in. And if somebody is, confined to a small, a, a bed or a room, it's like, look at this. This person here remembered this.

And then when people come to visit, how- If people come and visit, if it's awkward, they're like, "What is this?" oh. And then there's stories. Th- there's just ... It just bubbles up from this whole aspect. and people will feel more seen. And when we think about maybe some of the reasons why people hang on a lot longer at end of life is because they're not sure how they mattered, or have

Did anybody ever see me? no matter ... I think that's probably, one of the bigger things. no matter how [00:43:00] often they might have heard that professionally or from their family, I think that sentiment creeps into our, our, body at that time.

Bess Welden: Yeah. And we've also had, experiences like there's a, member of my team who is in, therapeutic practice.

she's a LCSW, and she's actually made sets of wings with her, individual clients and patients. so as a one-on-one sort of, combined activity between the two of them, as an opportunity she does a lot of, she does a lot of, creative intervention kinds of things.

She does a lot of, , all of that realm of, employing creativity as a pathway. art therapy per se. but has found to, found it to be a process that has really, opened some people up to being able to talk about, their fear of death, their fears of loss.

an opportunity to, in a way, rehearse some of [00:44:00] these- some of these feelings and thinkings and ways of talking. which is, I think, partly what the project is about, and certainly, how a toolkit could potentially be used, between two people who are working together towards some sort of opening or conversation or healing, together.

So I think there's great potential for that too, no matter where a person might be along their life or, if their life is coming to a close.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Have you had feedback from some of the people who've been in the workshops and who've talked about it, about how it's helped them or what difference it made?

Bess Welden: Yeah, we've had tremendous feedback. we've now facilitated, close to 30 workshops, mostly on the East Coast, but also expanded out to the West Coast in the San Diego area as well. we've gotten unbelievable, feedback from folks. as I mentioned earlier, [00:45:00] for, many people, they've called the experience transformative, that it was really, it was really something that broke them open in a way where they felt stuck, in a place of grief, and the activity just allowed them, a real sort of cracking open and allowing themselves to move through some feelings and thoughts that they, hadn't been able to before.

other people don't have necessarily quite that level of, experience, and I try to make it clear to people that I don't think the expectation should be that it's going to transform your, whole life. but to a person, everyone who's participated has talked about, the, the meaning-making involved, and m- probably most importantly, that they gave themselves the gift of the time, that they just let themselves carve out a space [00:46:00] to be able to be with whatever was gonna come up for them.

And that the sort of homework part of it, of having to think about what they wanted to include or what they didn't wanna include, that alone actually sparked a lot of healing for a bunch of people. looking at those objects, spending time with them, touching them, smelling them, thinking about them, as a precursor to then the actual making of the wings.

I think that's mostly what people have talked about, the, that it feels like, our society doesn't really support us, to take time, and there's sort of this sort of, perception, misperception that all of our grief has to unfold in a certain way- in a certain cycle, that it only should last for a certain amount of time.

and honestly, many people have come to make wings for losses that occurred decades ago.

Laura Cleminson: Yeah.

Bess Welden: That they just didn't feel like they had the opportunity to really, I [00:47:00] hate to say this word, but they didn't process it. They just didn't give themselves the time, and it's been, they've been holding it for, s- some people, 25, 30, even more years.

and then come and work on a set of wings, and there is this sense of release, this sense of lightness, this sense of "Oh, I am now part of a group of people who have done this thing, and I now belong to that, that community." Whether it's just the people in the room or a virtual community of knowing that there are other people who have utilized this tool, to help them, to help them move through.

Laura Cleminson: I will say when we launched, the official toolkit, there were people that, communicated with me when they ordered that, they had a friend, on the other side of the country that somebody close to them died. They're sending this as a [00:48:00] gift. there was a f- there was somebody who had, another friend whose child committed suicide, sending that with a care package and a gift that, even if it doesn't get used now, who knows?

it is, a gesture. It is a, it is another permission to say, "I see. I'm grieving with you. I can't be there. and maybe this is, maybe this resonates, maybe not. You know where my heart is," yeah, the distance and time after somebody died, I, think that is one of the things is either, way before or way after.

I don't know my personal experience, and Bess, you have a lot more of the workshops you've hosted, because we [00:49:00] also tell people, "Take care of yourself. If it's too close, this might not be the absolute right thing for you right now." And in the toolkit, we actually have a bit of a, a personal meditation and community thing.

If you're doing this with yourself, get grounded in what you're doing. It isn't just, "Here, go get your scissors." it is, "Please take care." and so that carried through. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: I love that idea of offering it as a gift at a time when we really don't know what to do for people or what to send them, but I was thinking it even plants the idea in their minds that there are certain special things about their loved one that they could be gathering, or they see something and think, "Oh, I'll set that aside.

That would make a good feather if I ever do those wings someday." but it just, it helps them do the meaning-making once again and think about [00:50:00] that.

Laura Cleminson: It would be g- Like if it, just talking about this out loud, is I'd love to give people the suggestion if they hadn't already is include a couple feathers-

to start people off. and maybe somebody already did, and I just don't know about it. but sometimes it just takes a little bit of inertia,

Bess Welden: Yeah, and I think also for, tracking a little bit who is, partaking in the, the toolkits now, and really looking at, how many folks who have already had the experience of wing making, and really wanting to share it with other people.

and so knowing "Oh, my friend in Colorado, I just know that this would be the perfect creative ritual for them," or, "I know I wanna do another set myself," because like Laura, I have also created hundreds of sets of wings in my mind. I've [00:51:00] made several dozen sets in real life. and I make some, I ma- I make the large format ones, and have been doing that as a way of processing all sorts of, losses, large and small in my life over time.

So it's really become an artistic practice for me. Mm-hmm. and that there, and so there are people who, they find it, useful as a repeatable ritual. oh, I realized, like I, I have a friend just this week who reached out to me to say "I took your workshop and I made the wings for this person in particular, and now I've experienced something else, and I need to make another set of wings.

So I need to, I need, to order a kit because I now realize how much I got out of doing it the first time. I know if I bring that to this next experience, that, something will change for me through the process, and I know that it is a doorway for some kind of grounding or healing for me."

So I think there, that's really exciting and [00:52:00] gratifying to see how people are, y- organically wanting to share the experience that they've had, with other people because, you know, sometimes you just know your people, and you know who this is gonna be for, and this isn't gonna be for everybody.

but I think it's been actually very surprising to see what an enormous cross-section of people are actually attracted to this process and to this ritual. Literally people from all walks of life, totally intergenerational, people from all different kinds of spiritual, religious, areligious backgrounds, that there's just this human craving, I believe- for ritual as something that is practiced, that becomes, that becomes a, A physicalization of something that really, matters to us. And I think for a lot of folks, like for me, I'm Jewish, and [00:53:00] there are a lot of

Jewish death and dying rituals that I think are very powerful and helpful, and I did a lot of those.

they didn't feel personal enough to me. I wanted to some- make something- that was very specific to the person that I was grieving. And so this was the perfect complement. It was in no way, contradictory. It was, it, flowed right in with what, m- I was doing and what my family was doing.

And I think for folks who, as, as Laura alluded to, m- many, people in the United States are completely unaffiliated religiously, and I think, for lots of, reasons. But there is this sort of crisis of spiritual dislocation for folks. And that there's something about this, the simplicity of this project, and the ability to bring yourself and your person into it that then really makes it work for people, that I think fulfills that natural human desire, , to be part of something, generative and repeatable, and that you're doing, [00:54:00] in many ways, in community even if your community is only a teeny, tiny community.

Karen Wyatt: And Laura, w- where can people get the death wings- toolkit if they're interested in having one?

Laura Cleminson: we, to keep it simple, uh, you can find it at the predeadsocialclub, .com in our store. pretty sim- yeah, it's right there. and we are gonna be adding, as we keep paying attention to how people are using this, there'll be different versions of the...

The toolkit will stay the same, but you might be able to buy five sets of wings with one toolkit because you're gonna be working in community. And, so we're, we're working out those details to accommodate, how different people are envisioning and actually putting this to, to work personally and maybe even professionally.

yep.

Karen Wyatt: That was a question I had. If [00:55:00] someone wanted, to host a workshop in a different part of the country, could they... So they could maybe buy the toolkits in advance in bulk or could they... Are, are they able to consult with you, or is there a place for them to get resources or ask questions?

Bess Welden: They can come to me

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Yeah.

Bess Welden: Yes, and I would als- what I was also gonna say is, if it's easier, to remember Death Wings, you can also go to deathwings.org, and there's a link right on our website that takes you directly to the store that's hosted on Laura's website. So either way, either through deathwingsproject.org or predeadsocialclub.com, there's a link right there where you can click and order a toolkit.

And if people are interested in having a more group experience, I would really encourage them to get in touch with me, and I would be very happy, to do some consulting with folks to give them some [00:56:00] tips and tricks about how to work with a larger, slightly larger group of people. I think the toolkit really lays out what the process is, and it could be very, it could be very organic.

It could be a democratically led group of people. sometimes it takes that one person to, to, be the catalyst to bring people together. and Laura and I have also been talking about the possibility of perhaps hosting some online introductions to the kit where we would be able to, answer questions about it and be able to give people some advice about how they might wanna work in small groups that would keep them aligned with the real spirit of, the intention and care behind doing this work i- in community.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that sounds really wonderful. I'm really excited about it, but also excited about what both of you are doing also out- outside of the Death Wings. And Laura, I wanted to go all the way back to the beginning and say [00:57:00] I love the concept you have of creating a gym for death because if anything, it's all of us need to realize we've never learned enough about death and dying and grief in our life.

there hasn't been a class or anyone there to teach us, and it's up to each one of us to start to work on the skills and the tools that we need to help us navigate those times. Death Wings is a fabulous tool to have, but also all the other things that both of you are offering on your websites, and I'll leave links for all of this on the show notes for the episode.

Laura Cleminson: I'm glad that gym resonated with you, Karen, 'cause also I just, I joke around you might have a gym membership. How often do you go?" That's true. ... because if the whole idea of the Pre-Dead Social Club is we're in community doing multiple things every month, that it's like, "You know we're here.

Come see us when it works out for you," as opposed to, "Where do I go?" [00:58:00] yeah, but- Thanks for inviting us, Karen.

Karen Wyatt: Oh, you're so welcome. It's really been fun, and I can't wait to get my- Yeah ... my toolkit. Because I realized, and I was saying, I was thinking, "Darn, I wish I could've done that for my mother," but actually I still can.

Yeah. And you reminded me of that. It doesn't matter how many years it's been, I can still create those for my parents, and I love that idea, so thank you so much for that.

Laura Cleminson: Yeah.

Bess Welden: Oh, you're so welcome. What a pleasure to talk about it all together.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah. Oh, it's been really enjoyable. And, I still have goosebumps.

I'm real- I'm excited- Oh ... about what you're doing, so thanks so much for giving me your time.

Laura Cleminson: And I want to- Thank you for having us ... I want to publicly thank Bess. she is one of the most collaborative and open m- open, generous creatives. to have somebody out of left field that she didn't know- ... entertain these thoughts and ideas.

uh, [00:59:00] but I think that goes to so much the power that we're better together. and who knows where any of this would've went, but we had some great conversations, and we, we brought it somewhere. I'm just gonna hold this up. This is the toolkit. Nice.

Karen Wyatt: Oh,

Laura Cleminson: beautiful ...

Karen Wyatt: you get

Laura Cleminson: the, it's a

And it includes ... Sorry, it's a little fuzzy. Oh, look at that, sorry. it includes all the stuff, and that's all on the website, but it's not huge. It's not bulky. You can take it on a, you can take it to the beach if you want.

Karen Wyatt: It's manageable and doable.

Laura Cleminson: Manageable, exactly.

Karen Wyatt: I hope we get, get feedback from lots of listeners who are out there who get their Death Wings kits, and we find out we're all creating them at the same time.

Laura Cleminson: That

Bess Welden: would be fantastic. That would be so great.

Laura Cleminson: I know. Yeah. Yeah.

Bess Welden: Yeah, we- And we c- certainly encourage people to take photos and, s- send them to us. And, if people go to the Death Wings website, they can see [01:00:00] lots of photos of examples of people, of ones that people have made and they are like

you start with this small thing, and everybody starts with exactly the same thing, and how they turn out is just, it's just wild, where people go with this very simple prompt. and I think sometimes, that's why we've got video on there too, so that people can visualize where they're headed and what the process might, might look for them, how the process might, go for them.

So we're, we, I think there could be, there's real inspiration, to see what other fo- what other folks have done.

Karen Wyatt: Yeah, that's wonderful. I- everyone should make sure they do check out your website is besswelden.com. And Laura, yours is Pre-Dead Social Club? Is it .com?

Laura Cleminson: Yeah. PreDeadsocialclub.com, but also deathwings- .

Bess Welden: Deathwingsproject.org. Yeah. Deathwingsproject. That's really where they wanna go. they're welcome to go to my personal website too if they want to, but I think what they're gonna be most [01:01:00] interested in is going to- ... deathwingsproject.org. Yeah.

Karen Wyatt: All right. Well- Deathwings ... how wonderful.

Thanks again to both of you, and take

Bess Welden: care. Thanks.