



E. ANTHONY VALAINIS

"We can't change the world overnight," says Andrea Gambill, "but we can make beginnings."

## Hope and Healing

*How a bereaved mother turned her loss into others' gain.*

**B**ustling out of the house on her way to work, Judy, 17, stopped briefly at her mother's bedroom door. "I love you, Mom. I'll see you at 2 o'clock," she said. Neither knew that those would be her last words — that at 2 p.m. Aug. 25, 1975, Andrea Gambill's daughter would be undergoing brain surgery in a frantic attempt to save her life.

Judy drove off in the family's green station wagon. Her car made the turn at the end of the street, proceeded to the middle of the next intersection, and then stalled. A lumber truck approached from the north, but Judy's frantic attempts to restart her car were useless. Unable to stop, the truck was upon the immobilized vehicle in an instant. The resulting impact hurled both vehicles hundreds of feet and the twisted wreckage was consumed in flames.

A commotion in Gambill's backyard caught her attention. Neighbors were attracted from their homes by the sirens, billowing smoke and flames at

the intersection at the top of the hill. Mind racing, Gambill thought of Judy: Was she caught in the traffic? Did she make it through the intersection? Running barefoot across the field, she had a single purpose — getting to the top of the hill and making sure her child was safe.

But Judy was not safe. Only moments before her car exploded, her broken and burned body had been rescued from the blazing rubble by onlookers. The right side of her skull was crushed. Third degree burns covered the lower half of her body. She was unconscious, but still alive.

Reaching the top of the hill, Gambill was met by a friend who had arrived at the accident scene ahead of her. As their eyes met, Gambill read in her face confirmation of her most dreaded fears. Without words her friend's eyes said, "I wish I could spare you what you are going to see."

Judy was not expected to live out the day, yet she survived in a semi-coma-

tose state for 21 more weeks. On a roller coaster of faith and hope, grief and despair, Gambill finally came to terms with the inevitability of death. On that last evening she sat quietly speaking to her daughter. "You are going to be perfect now. You're not going to have any more injuries. It's okay, honey, you're going to be okay." On Jan. 12, 1976, at 6:30 a.m. Judy died. Her mother's first thought was, "At last she's free."

Andrea Gambill had spent the majority of her life as a "people helper." Now she was the one who needed help. Gambill realized immediately how vitally important her support system was to her survival. Within weeks of Judy's death, one of her friends suggested that she begin a support group for bereaved parents. She reasoned, "If you have an alcohol problem you go to Alcoholics Anonymous, if you have a weight problem you go to Weight Watchers, if you have twins you go to Mothers of Twins. But there is nothing for mothers of dead children."