

A MOTHER'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE "GHOST SHIP FIRE" COLLEEN DOLAN'S STORY OF LOSS AND HEALING.

Colleen Dolan is a writer, Certified Grief Educator, and retired Educational Therapist. But beyond her professional titles, she is a mother who carries an unimaginable loss. Her daughter, Chelsea Faith Dolan, was a gifted electronic musician and producer, widely known in the music world as Cherushii. Chelsea's vibrant spirit and talent made her a respected figure in the electronic music scene, but her promising future was tragically cut short in the Ghost Ship fire.

On the night of December 2, 2016, Colleen witnessed the fire that claimed Chelsea's life, along with 35 other young and talented people who had gathered for a party in an Oakland warehouse. That night changed everything. In the years that followed, Colleen sought answers, justice, and, above all, a way to navigate the grief that had become a permanent part of her existence. Two years later, she attended every single day of the trial, immersing herself in the painful details, not just for her own understanding, but for the memory of her daughter and the other victims.

Writing became her way of processing the loss, and over time, she documented her journey through grief, resilience, and acceptance. The Ghost Ship Fire is more than just a book, it is her deeply personal chronicle of the events from that fateful night to her eventual realization that grief does not have an endpoint, rather, it becomes a lifelong companion. Through raw honesty and heartfelt reflections, she hopes to offer solace to other bereaved parents who, like her, are searching for answers to the unanswerable. She wants them to know they are not alone in their pain.

The accounts shared in her book are grounded in truth, drawn from her best recollections, confirmations from other victims' families, and her extensive documentation—11 journals filled with notes from the trial and full transcripts she obtained from Alameda County court reporters Gerald Nachman and Kathleen Lyons.

Colleen continues to write and advocate for those navigating the complexities of grief, using her experiences to help others find their way through the darkness. While nothing can replace the loss of Chelsea, Colleen keeps her daughter's memory alive by sharing their story, one of love, loss, and the enduring strength of a mother's heart.



COLLEEN DOLAN



On December 2, 2016, a devastating fire engulfed an old warehouse in Oakland, California, claiming the lives of 36 young souls. Colleen Dolan stood outside, terrified and desperate, as her 33-year-old daughter, renowned electronic musician Cherushii, along with many of her musician friends, went missing. Were they trapped inside?

This heart-wrenching story emerges through Colleen's harrowing experience that night and her tragic

loss, revealing the gripping reality behind the headlines. It follows the high-profile criminal trial that began two years later, captivating the nation with chilling accounts of tragedy at an off-the-grid artists' collective.

As media frenzy ensued, families seeking answers were thrust into a circus-like courtroom drama. Throughout the trial, Colleen meticulously documented the proceedings, countering the chaos by learning to speak to the press and writing articles for several San Francisco Bay Area newspapers.

Colleen's story reflects society's fascination with tragedy and its impact on personal grief. Her exploration of profound questions surrounding her daughter's death offers solace to bereaved parents, reminding them they are not alone in their quest for understanding and healing.

The *Ghost Ship Fire* is a brave, deeply moving, and enraging book about the sudden loss of Colleen Dolan's daughter, Chelsea—a talented electronic musician—who perished in the 2016 Oakland warehouse fire alongside 35 others. At its heart is Dolan's luminous portrait of Chelsea, but the story is driven by a mother's fury and relentless pursuit of answers.

Dolan recounts the agonizing night of the fire, the numb aftermath, and the exhausting trial of those responsible—ending in outrageously lenient verdicts and a glaring lack of government accountability. Determined that these "36 stars" not have died in vain, she lays out urgent policy changes while navigating "the ongoing-ness of grief," likening it to "navigating a maze blindfolded."

Her gripping journey through loss and resilience "Each morning, I begin again"—underscores a powerful truth: "It wasn't their deaths that taught us a lesson, but their brief, full, beautiful lives." This powerful story of love and determination speaks to grieving families, policymakers, and all who seek justice.

Exclusive Interview with Author Colleen Dolan

What inspired you to write *The Ghost Ship Fire*, and how did the process help you navigate grief?

I wrote *The Ghost Ship Fire* for 2 reasons: First, I hoped the exposure would prevent a tragedy like this from ever happening again. Second, I hoped to share my experience of isolation and confusion with others who are grieving. It is a natural phenomenon.

How did witnessing the fire and attending the trial shape your understanding of loss and justice?

The image of the fire never leaves me. A whole community was decimated, but my pain felt singular. I know it sounds morbid, but I needed to witness my daughter's death. I had to know what happened, and I felt the trial would provide the answers I needed.

What was the most challenging part of documenting your experience, and how did you overcome it?

Writing about the trial presented the biggest challenge for me because there was no sequential storyline to the trial. Witnesses and evidence were presented in a sloppy, haphazard fashion. How could there be meaningful change without accountability? I felt it was up to me to report what I had learned.

How did writing your book change your perspective on grief and healing?

Writing this book allowed me to watch myself grieve. Although I had to relive the fire and trial as I wrote, I knew what was coming, and some of the painful tension in my body dissipated as I viewed myself with compassion.

What do you hope bereaved parents take away from your story?

I hope bereaved parents will know that the isolation and craziness that comes from grief is a natural process. They are not alone.

How did your background as an Educational Therapist influence the way you approached grief?

As an Educational Therapist, I assessed the way children learned and drew up a plan to overcome their learning obstacles. In the same way, my grief needed to be experienced fully before I could observe and write about it as my first step toward a new life plan.

What role did journaling play in processing your emotions and building your narrative?

Journaling is my therapy, but it is private, and I believe sharing one's pain is essential for healing. I wanted to tell the story of Chelsea's joie de vivre and the devastation of her loss. My narrative follows her story to the end. That's where I begin again.

In what ways has Chelsea's music and legacy continued to inspire you?

There are days when I turn on Chelsea's music and listen to her thoughts. Her resilience inspires me to go on. As a young girl, Chelsea was mocked and bullied because of her flamboyance. She learned to play out her feelings in music. I play out my feelings in words, learning from her beautiful example.

What has been the most meaningful response from readers who have experienced loss?

I am grateful to the bereaved parents who have written to me, sharing their own experiences with this awful pain. We belong to each other, and I find comfort in that.

What advice would you give to those struggling to find words for their own grief?

I suggest you find a "feelings wheel" online (*I have been contacted by readers who have reached out to me thanking me for sharing my story and telling me about how it has helped them articulate and understand their own feelings about their own life experiences. I learn from my readers as much as they learn from me.*) to dig a bit deeper into exactly what you're feeling. It helps to name it accurately. Then find your own way to express your grief: photography, painting, singing, poetry, collage, dance, playing an instrument, or whatever opens your heart.

What's next for you? Do you plan to continue writing about grief or explore other themes?

Writing gives me time to organize my thoughts and understand my reality. I'm beginning anew with grief by my side. Perhaps that will be my next theme. I'd also like to write a children's book about choosing artful expression... the way Chelsea turned to her piano to express her feelings.

How did you feel when you found out that Voraka Magazine would feature your book, and what does this recognition mean to you?

I am pleased and grateful that Voraka Magazine will help me tell Chelsea's story, and share my search for answers about grief, justice, death, and life's purpose. I know I am not alone in that search.

**“Healing is not about forgetting
but about remembering with more
love than pain.”**

— Colleen Dolan