

## Jennifer Bichanich: Rising from the Ashes by Jennifer Bichanich, Pat Benincasa

In this deeply moving episode, Fill to Capacity podcast host Pat Benincasa speaks with writer and life coach Jennifer Bichanich. Jennifer opens a window on her experiences with profound loss, including losing her beloved husband when the church they were remodeling went up in flames. Despite immense grief and despair, Jennifer found ways to rebuild her life and discover her own creative resilience. Working with a shamanic energy healer, delving into art therapy, and joining the Modern Widows Club, she found community, healing and the possibility of creating something beautiful from the ashes of her life. This podcast explores themes of grief, healing, and the power of creativity in navigating through difficult times. What follows is a transcript of the conversation. You can listen to the audio version [here](#).

Pat: Hi! I'm Pat Benincasa, and welcome to Fill to Capacity. Today's episode, Creative Resilience: Rising from the Ashes. My guest is Jennifer Bichanich. Jennifer is a published writer, speaker, teacher, dreamer, dog-lover, artist and healer. As a tour guide of the heart, she facilitates deep level healing through art, dreams and intuition. Her workshops and spiritual life coaching help women who have been through tragic loss such as the loss of a loved one, passion or purpose, and help them discover how to find their bliss so that instead of giving up they give life a second chance. Welcome Jennifer!

Jennifer: Thank you Pat for having me. It's such an honor to be on your show.

Pat: Thank you! I've been really looking forward to this conversation. Let's start. Everyone has turning point events in their life. Something happens and your life is never the same. Now you've had your share of life-changing events. But let's start with the fire. Can you tell us a bit about yourself before the fire, and what is the Bear's Grass Church?

Jennifer: Well back around 2008 or so when I was about to turn 40, I was working at a job for about 15 years and realized that it wasn't filling my heart with joy. So I just completely quit. No plan, I just packed up my bags and headed East back to the family farm and I started planting flowers, because it made my heart happy. I just planted flowers. One day I took my mom on a blueberry picking adventure, and on the way home we drove by this little country church that had sat vacant for a number of years and it had been recently sold to an architect. I saw somebody standing outside, so I said, "Mom, let's be neighborly and say hello." Turned my car around, got out and said, "Hi I'm Jennifer." And that is how I met the boy next door, Blake Michael Bichanich. Romance quickly

blossomed. Two years later we were married in that same little church. At 43 I was a first-time bride. This was better than any dream I could have dreamt. Blake was a wonderful, creative, and talented man. He had this great sense of humor too. We were living the dream. Part of my dream was to have more events at that church. My great grandfather had been a minister there long before I was born so it was in my DNA to care for that church and see it preserved. About two years after we were married, we planned to have my nephew's wedding there. The afternoon before the wedding I was out running an errand and I got a message from my sister and she was crying and she said, "You have to come home the church is on fire and Blake is trapped inside!"

I could not believe my ears. I rushed back and it was too late. I knew in my heart of hearts that he was gone. I stood there in shock. I wanted to vomit but I couldn't. I couldn't talk, I couldn't breathe. I stood in a hayfield watching the church burn down and it was like all my dreams were crashing to the ground. It looked and felt like this big brick wall was going up around me into my soul, and everything just went black.

Following the fire, day after day I went through there and dug through the rubble looking for my husband, my home, my memories. There were ashes under my fingernails, up my nose and in my hair. Each night I'd go back to my mother's home. I'd lay on my childhood bed and just stare at the ceiling, praying for the pain to end. It wasn't so much that I had a death wish, but I really had no life wish. I couldn't imagine anything else. Everything I had dreamed of was gone. This future I had planned with Blake was gone. Then one day, 79 days after the fire I was laying on my bed staring at the ceiling and something shifted deep within my soul and I had a vision. In this vision I saw this purple piece of paper unfold, and it read on there, "Jennifer you have to try." I got up off my bed, and I got a yellow sticky note and I wrote on there, "I am Loved." I stuck it on my mirror, and I kept on writing. "I Believe." "I Forgive." "God has Great Plans." I knew even if I couldn't feel or see it at the time, that it was true, and that is what I had hoped for. In the final note that I wrote (I forgot that I wrote this, I just found it recently,) I wrote, "I am following my bliss." 79 days after the fire I made that statement.

Pat: When we talked on the phone and you were talking about this, you were talking about how you went back to the fire, digging, and you somehow wanted to find your husband, your home, you kept looking. And then you said something, "But you can never really recreate it the way it was. But you still can create something really beautiful out of the ashes." Jennifer from everything you're saying, the dark of the darkest moments of your life, somehow you were able to connect with some sort of cosmic lifeline, the universe, or God. Something got through to you and sent you a message. So when you said, "You can still create something really beautiful out of the ashes," what did you build, what did you do?

Jennifer: I was just thinking this morning how chaos is really the beginning of creation. I just kept looking for light. Looking for any little scrap. Any little sign. One of the first things I saw following the fire was a piece of paper lying outside the church, and it said, "God is love, and he who dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God and God in him." So that was really the starting point. Love. It started really small. At first it was just cleaning up. Making sense. Finding my flowers in the garden that were buried under the ashes. That first week that was all that was in mind. Find the flowers. Dig out the flower garden. My sister in law stood beside me and helped me dig. She was a lifeline. I had one thing I could

focus on. I wasn't thinking about what I was going to do next. It started there and then it went out.

When I finished cleaning up the ashes I went to our home in Minnesota, which had had water damage before Blake died. I still had scaffolding up when he died so I worked on that process. When somebody dies there's so much paperwork to do. So that took me awhile, paperwork, insurance claims. About a year after the fire, when I was ready, there were three things I started that really helped me. One is I started working with an energy healer a shamanic practitioner in Golden Valley - that was amazing. Two, I started art therapy which opened up this whole new world for me. And three, I found community with Modern Widow's Club an organization that supports and mentors widows.

Pat: This is really interesting to me. When something traumatic happens, we go through the motions of daily life as if we were on autopilot because frankly I don't think we can handle anything else, and then eventually, slowly, and I want to be careful to say there is no timeline on this, but eventually on our own timetable we start to feel little things again and maybe at that point we create space for what we need. Coming back full circle to what you just said, it's interesting to me that you created space for art therapy, for working with a shamanic practitioner, and then finding community in the modern widow's club. I wonder if someone might ask you, "Jennifer! How were you not rageful? Why weren't you pissed at God or the universe? How on earth were you able to look for flowers?"

Jennifer: Oh, I was rageful! There was one night I woke up and I broke dishes in my shower. I put safety glasses on first. I'm a cautious rageful person.

Pat: That's wonderful! Okay, so let's start with working with the energy healer, the shamanic practitioner. How did you find this person? How did you even know to go to this person?

Jennifer: Well, I've known from early on that our body carries memories and trauma in it. My mom went back to school following my father's death, and in the 80s she studied neurolinguistic programming, and she was a marriage and family therapist. With her training in NLP and neurolinguistics, she could help clients get to the root of some of the things they were feeling. You could tap in and release that and reframe that. So I knew that there was deeper help for what I was feeling. So, I was like, okay, I'm going to go to this person. One of the things this practitioner taught me about, and his name is Ed, was the Chinese medicine clock and how at different times our energy is cycling through our body. So that waking up at 3 a.m., that's grief. You carry your grief in your lungs, which made sense to me, because after the fire, I walked around saying, "I never knew my heart could hurt so much." And it was my chest. It physically hurt. It felt like-- did you ever see Raiders of the Lost Ark? There's a scene where the bad guy rips the heart out of the other guy and he holds it up. That's what I felt-- like my heart was ripped out of my chest and it was beating and you know eventually with time that healed, but we do carry that, our body remembers.

Pat: So yes, an interesting side note to that, as an artist I work in a lot of materials- steel,

wood, glass. Well materials have memory. So wood if you soak it and try to form it, it has a memory. Steel has memory. So why is it such a leap to think, our body, our muscle tissue has memory? We carry that. So you started to work with the practitioner and how did that lead to art therapy? How did you find that?

Jennifer: Well, I had gone in for my yearly physical and my doctor the first thing she says, "Do you want a prescription?" I said, "No, I don't want to do that right now." You know, there's time and place for that for some people, but that wasn't for me. And then she said, "Well, would you like a recommendation for a therapist?" I said, "Great." They called, the clinic called me and said, "What do you think of art therapy?" I was like, "Oh, I didn't know there was such a thing. That sounds great!" And it was just so amazing. I would go in and my therapist would say, "Well, what do you want to do today?" I'm like, "Oh, I don't know, watercolors. I'm doing good today." I'd start painting and five minutes later, the tears were rolling. It was like it - it bypassed that part of my brain that wanted it to be all logical and explain it all. I'm sure you can explain that much better, but it was just so powerful. She, the art therapist, taught me how to do art journaling. With the images, it really helped me connect in with my intuition and with my writing. I work a lot with images, with dreams. So it all just flowed together.

Pat: Did you find that you got some kind of relief in that practice by doing these things?

Jennifer: Oh, I did. I did. Actually, before I even started art therapy, I was introduced at a grief workshop to SoulCollage. That is a process where you get a 5x8 card. It was developed by Seena Frost out in California. You get a card, and then you get a bunch of magazines. You just pick out a few images that you're drawn to and you make a collage and then you journal about it, and let the images talk to you. In this workshop, I got so excited, I was grabbing all these magazines. I had so much that had to sit on the floor and spread it out. I heard my seven-year-old self, sitting in the living room alone in the dark after my father died, and I was saying, "Finally I have a way to express myself." Throughout this whole healing journey losing my husband, and the church I came to realize that I had still been carrying 40 years grief from losing my father. So that was a healing process along with healing everything. That's something I learned. You really need to honor grief. Find a way to express it, whether it's art, baking, running, you have to get it out of your body.

Pat: It sounds like you were willing to be reintroduced to yourself. It sounds like in this process, grief rips you wide open and there are these multiple selves. Before fire. Post fire. It's almost like-- who am I? How do I know myself? How do I be in the world now? And it sounds like the art therapy is so wonderful for things we can't put into words. An image. Color! You know that the power of different colors we gravitate towards really tell a story in and of themselves. And from the shamanic practitioner, your journey takes you to art therapy where you really acknowledge the loss of your dad. How old were you when he passed.

Jennifer: I had just turned 7.

Pat: So there you are this child. And children react in so many ways. Okay I gotta say this, I have a theory we are all four-year-olds on the playground of life. I don't care how old you are at heart we're still those children, and it's really a marvel to me that somehow in this art therapy process, you allow that child to come safely, come forward, to feel her grief.

Jennifer: Yeah. I didn't realize how much of my life she had been saying she wanted out. She wanted to express herself. You know, and like I said with the fire, it was like this brick wall went up and there was no place else to turn. I realized too how that loss so early on had played throughout my life, fear of doing things. I was deathly afraid of getting married and I didn't realize it, but I was afraid of being widowed like my mom was. And here I am standing in front of the fire, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I'm widowed. Here it is." But the good news is I made it through. I found my way and I've come back to life.

Pat: So that brings me to how you sought out community. The Modern Widows Club, can you talk about that?

Jennifer: I really, I prayed for friendship. Because in moving back up to Minnesota full time I really didn't know many people. My husband and I hadn't been married very long. A woman came to inspect my work on the house, because I said I was rebuilding it. She invited me to her church. I made a commitment that if somebody asked me to do something, I would do it. I went and the pastor said, "There's a woman in our congregation named Lynn. She runs a community called Modern Widows Club. Are you interested in connecting?" I said, "Yes." The moment I walked into her door at her house, I knew I was in the right place. There's just something about being around people who have gone through a similar experience. You don't really have to even talk about it. You just know, you just understand. And it's okay to cry. It's okay to laugh. I think the first night I spent more time in the bathroom crying because I didn't want anybody to see me. But it's just such a wonderful, supportive community. We all need that community, that connection. It really opened up a lot of doors for me.

They are international now, and they do quite a bit to advocate for widows, not only here in the US, but around the world. And June 23rd is actually International Widows Day. So they'll be honoring that day next week.

Pat: So you're active in the Modern Widows Club now?

Jennifer: Yes, I served as a leader for five years with them. I recently stepped back with some of my duties so that I could focus on some other projects that I have been working on for quite some time.

Pat: So, I'd like to segue in a little bit of a different direction. I'd like to talk about your brother Howard. And it was really moving when we had talked on the phone. You said that you called your brother Howard, "One of my greatest teachers after the

fire." Who was Howard? Tell us about him. Why was he your greatest teacher?

Jennifer: My big brother Howard was about a year and a half older than me and he was born with Down's syndrome. I always had a playmate growing up. He just had a special way of looking at the world. Some people say people with Down's syndrome have special needs. Our family felt he had special gifts. I called him my interdimensional DJ. He loved music! He'd play his radio while he's watching TV. I remember this one time, I was in my mom's kitchen. I was in my early 20s. And I was bemoaning the fact that, "I don't have any money." Cue the interdimensional DJ, and he starts playing, "Take this job and shove it. I ain't working here no more." I'm like, yeah, exactly. I should shove my job. So he just had this wisdom about him and this cleverness. The night of the fire, I retreated to my mom's house, and I was laying on the sofa and kind of going in and out of these crazy dreams. At one point, he turned from his TV show, and he looked at me and said, "Are you going to rebuild? I said, "Do you think I should rebuild?" He said, "Yeah, you do that." And he went back to watching TV. So I feel it's more than just rebuilding the church, it's about rebuilding my life. I would come back to visit Mom. I remember this other time I came back and he was at work and he got home and I was out in the garden. He saw me and he said, "You're home!" And then he said, "My dear sister." There was so much love in those words and on his face. Today would have been his 55th birthday. He came to be a teacher for my family, I believe.

Pat: And what happened to Howard?

Jennifer: He passed away in November of 2020. He had gotten COVID, and that was really, really tough because they would not let any of our family members be in the room with him. As a disabled person with cognitive disabilities, he couldn't communicate like you and I can. So we just kept praying and doing what we could to see him. Finally, as someone suggested, we asked about hospice care. Then they released him right away. We got him back home for the last 12 hours or so. It was like he rallied when he was home. Our brother Stan walked in and right away he stuck out his hand to shake his hand. He saw my mom and she was sitting by his bed, and he patted her head like he always did after dinner. It was so sweet. One of the things Howard was so good at was speaking blessings. He loved to go to church and he would sing his heart out with whatever lyrics came to mind. He didn't really read much and one day I was just like, I got to pay attention to what he's singing. He was singing, "God bless pop and cookies, God bless work on Monday, God bless Mom!" What would happen if we all went throughout our day blessing everything around us and everyone? What a difference that would make.

Pat: Oh yes! It seems that Howard was a teacher for all of you in so many ways. Oh! You know you're no stranger to grief, the loss of your dad, your husband, your brother, and yet you said, "There are many gifts that can be found in grief if you're open to receiving them." Whoa Jennifer! Can you say more about that?

Jennifer: Well I think one of the biggest gifts that I got was finding myself. Like you said earlier it's like you're looking for yourself when you go through an experience like this, and I did become this observer and-- I got in the habit of taking selfies when I cry. It was just like, who is this woman? Who is she? I kept crying all the time. I had to really learn to love myself. You know, it says in scripture, people call it the golden rule,

love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. We don't really talk much about that loving yourself part. That really has to come first before you love your neighbor. Because when you love yourself, you have so much more love to give your neighbor and you can see the beauty in your neighbor more easily when you love yourself. I remember this one day, it was about 10 months after the fire and my friend, Maureen came to visit, and she got up before me and she did all my dishes. The windows were open. It smelled like lemons in the kitchen, and she was singing, and I walked out and I started crying because I was so touched by her actions. Then I started saying, "I'm such a loser. I can't get my dishes done, I can't get my paperwork done." And she said, "Hey don't talk about my friend like that." That stopped me in my tracks because I wouldn't call her a loser, why was I calling myself a loser? So we really have to be a friend to ourselves and love ourselves.

Pat: And you said something that mirrors that sentiment. I mean it really hit me in our conversation. You said, "Really sit with and honor that grief." And that was a big thing for me because I was like I shouldn't be crying every day. I should have everything done and it's like, "No no no no. Take your time sit on the sofa. Eat all the potato chips you want. You have to honor the grief and work through it." And in working through it probably the most essential thing is the loving voice we use to talk to ourselves. And your friend. Bless her heart I mean to say that to you, "Don't talk to my friend like that!" It makes me wonder how many times we talk like that to ourselves in that critical voice and if we heard somebody talking to somebody like how we talk to ourselves in that voice we probably would butt in like your friend did and say, "Wait a minute don't talk to my friend like that!"

So maybe that is honoring your grief-- honoring and loving that tender soul inside of you.

Jennifer: Yeah, and just being gentle with yourself and it's okay to grieve. It's okay to let it out. It's okay to stop and sit. When you sit and you're still, that's when you start to notice the little pieces of beauty around you. I spent numerous hours down by the water, throwing the ball for my dogs, over and over and over. They took such joy in just swimming and catching the ball. I started to see just how beautiful it was to see the clouds reflected on the water, and the sunlight the way it would sparkle, especially in April when there's no leaves on the trees. You could see the lake and it was so gorgeous and then you start to hear the birds. But you have to be still. If you're constantly filling up your time, trying to fill that void, you miss it. So it's so important to just be still.

Pat: It sounds like you're saying you can't outrun grief. I know if I'm working on something that's really uncomfortable or painful sometimes I want to throw myself into more work and get into a frenetic pace if I'm doing all these things I don't allow myself to stop and feel what is going on and what you're saying, especially someone who's newly grieving, "It's okay to grieve as long as you need to." But that stillness I mean you're holding it up like a beautiful jewel--that stillness is something so beautiful. It's okay to hold it and to enter. It's okay.

Jennifer: You'd be surprised what you learn about yourself when you do hold it up and look at it. When you can say--sometimes you have to say, "What does this remind

me of?" And then you start going backwards. It's like -- remember when you used to go to the circus and the clowns would start pulling the scarf out of their sleeves? It's like that. You start pulling it back and you go-- Oh, oh, this is tied to it, and this is tied to it, this is tied to it, and then finally you realize it's tied to your heart. There may be something way, way back that that grief reminds you of. You can now take this as an opportunity to heal and to get at that deep, deep grief. I know with my father it was March 7th, 40 years after his death and I sat at my desk and I watched the lake melt that day. I saw the lake and I realized that the lake the ice melted on the edges and first and then it went to the middle of the lake and I realized that was like my grief. I had to take care of all the grief from the fire, from Blake, from the church, from the loss of my future and then I got to what was really deep down with losing my father

Pat: Yeah, as you've put one foot in front of the other in your life, what are the things that bring you joy?

Jennifer: I love people. I love being around people and helping other people. That brings me joy. I love being in the flower garden, getting my hands in the soil. Nature really inspires me. My pets bring me joy. My dogs and my cats, they teach me how to play. Music, art, just being creative really brings me joy. And being with my family.

Pat: Yeah, sounds like it. As we wind down, I was thinking of Rumi. He had many things about grief. He said:

"Your grief for what you've lost holds a mirror up

To where you are bravely working.

Expecting the worst you look, and instead

Here is the joyful face you've been wanting to see."

Jennifer: That's beautiful

Pat: Jennifer that's you! You are the joyful face. That's why I wanted you to come on today to share your insights and your journey. One expression I love using but man does it fit you to a tee! Iron will, tender heart.

Jennifer: Thank you. This was an honor.

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