



Photo courtesy of Valerie Sobel

VALERIE SOBEL

nine lives, one heart

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

The serene, beautiful face of Valerie Sobel quietly masks a lifetime of epic highs and shattering lows. The lows began almost immediately. In 1941, just three days after her birth, Valerie's father was taken to a labor camp in Hungary; she, and the rest of her family, managed to survive by hiding in non-Jewish "safe houses." It took three painful years before Valerie and her family were at last reunited.

The dramatic start to her life—hidden by people operating out of empathy and morality—would foreshadow her life after 1994. At that time,

Sobel had it all—a thriving interior design career, a successful and happy marriage to Erwin Sobel, an eminent trial attorney, and two successful college-bound teenagers. Then, in 1993, her son, André, about to enter the film school at New York University, was suddenly stricken by double vision.

Sobel soon heard the most heart-wrenching news a parent could endure: Her son had a brain tumor and his condition was incurable. In six months, this vibrant, cultured, and energetic boy was almost blind. After he died in early 1995, Sobel decided that she would find a way to use her personal resources and public influence to do charitable work in his name.

"It is not possible to seek or find God in the truth that others have found, nor without the urgency of catastrophe," Sobel told *Lifestyles* recently while taking a well-earned break from preparations for a forthcoming fundraising and research trip across America for her foundation, The André Sobel River of Life (ASRL). The organization provides for the needs of single parents (and struggling families) with children facing life-threatening illnesses.

"In a pleasant life of complacency, we may practice ritual or be obedient to tradition, but that is not the same as the faith found in praying for a child's life. When you have been on your knees for months, you can find yourself suddenly uttering words from a deep place, 'I will to will thy will,' then you know that you had a glimpse at what faith must be like."

Within a year of André's death, Sobel's faith was tested twice more. Her husband, unable to recover from the loss, committed suicide, saying in his farewell note that he did not wish to live past his son's unveiling. And, just before that, Sobel's mother died of a stroke.

Even with this series of devastating events, Sobel's will to help other families, combined with her resourcefulness, empowered her to begin working on behalf of thousands of families coping financially and emotionally with similar experiences.

"The difficult lessons of my life were learned through surviving a world war where I was separated from my



Valerie and André Sobel.

family (at age 2), the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the upheaval of living in four countries and seven different cities, the wearing of assorted career hats, and the skills necessary to be married for 25 years," notes Sobel. "These events, if not exactly preparing me for the holocaust of losing a child, a husband, and a mother in the same year, forced me to employ all that I have learned. The resiliency that was required to endure all this was more than I would have suspected I had. It was as if my whole previous life would have been lived to unintentionally prepare me for the spiritual, psychological, and physical battle

fought for André's life. I am in awe to witness the person that emerged."

Although Sobel's family was reunited after the war, the conditions in Communist Hungary prompted her family to flee to the United States in 1957. Despite new social freedoms, the family's financial situation forced Sobel to drop out of high school. However, with her striking looks and innate intelligence, she soon made a name for

herself as Valerie Varda, a 1960s Hollywood actress. She appeared on classic television shows, such as *Wagon Train* and *77 Sunset Strip*, and had a few brushes with the day's A-list stars, thanks to parts in *A New Kind of Love* with Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman and *Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation*, featuring a cast of Hollywood greats (such as Jimmy Stewart, Maureen O'Hara, Fabian, and John Saxon).

In 1971, she gave up the fast pace of Hollywood life to marry attorney Erwin Sobel. Not only did they share common interests, they shared a past: He also carried scars from the Holocaust. In the 25 years that followed, she raised children André and Simone and became a star in the world of interior design. Her sun-kissed life in Southern California seemed lifetimes

removed from the struggles of her childhood. However, those trying days were never far from her mind.

"You don't love a family member automatically for being a family member," she states, "you love them for who they are. There is an instinct learned early on about the preciousness of where you belong. In terms of getting involved in charity in the wake of a child's death, it either bubbles up as a quality of mercy, or is learned like algebra. In my case, it became the ingredient of my personal survival. Structuring the charity was a

natural extension of what I have experienced. It became a most natural thing for me in the long run. As an interior designer, I have done some truly beautiful residential projects, but the excitement of design pales by comparison with the work that I do now where we are making a difference collectively, one family at a time. Furthermore, The River of Life carries André's spirit and washes up problems on its shore that deal with the plights of the siblings, the intense challenges of the caregivers, the gigantic divorce rate, and how society deals with its weakest links."

Although the ASRL organization, along with affiliated hospitals, doctors, and

the next day. When a child has something growing in his head or in his spine creating 10 billion new aberrant cells every minute, his mother will not go to work because there is no time to waste. She will take her child to the best place she can get treatment as quickly as she knows how, the best her circumstances can afford. For this reason, we never ask the parent to fill out exhaustive forms. At that point they should not have to deal with the indignity of lengthy and oppressive paperwork. Where there is a treating physician, a critically ill child and a strained single provider, my concern is more for the best and most imaginative solution to the problem rather than worrying about if they are deserving."

Almost half of the foundation's dis-

life-threatening or critical illness of their child?" it is not possible not to go deeper. It is revealed layer by layer, and after six years and almost 6,000 documented cases, a picture becomes apparent. I have become quite stubborn, and all I need is funds to continue this work that started with my family's money. As ASRL's understanding grows, our means decrease. It is an under-investigated problem because the population experiencing it is invisible. People with dying children, balancing emotional pain, finances, and the lives of their healthy children, have no where-withal to demonstrate on the streets or pound the halls of government for assistance. Knowledge about this segment of the population in the field is anec-

"There is no family that has not been touched by tragedy, none that are insured against this worst nightmare of any parent: the grave illness of their child. I cannot think of a greater gift for a sick child than the presence of his parent, and that is what this foundation's work ensures."

donors, have helped thousands of families, Sobel feels that their work has just begun. She monitors the inner workings of the organization, wary of overextending her network and causing families to suffer unduly. The foundation's program now operates at 12 major pediatric medical facilities throughout the country.

By working through social workers' recommendations, the foundation eliminates the barrier of the lengthy application process required by most foundations, not to mention the overhead cost of supporting a large staff. Sobel says emphatically, "By caring for the single caregiver, we care for their child. Our goal is mental health for the caregivers, permitting them to deal with the crisis without worrying about going to work

bursements go to emergency housing, utilities, and groceries for families facing inadequate food supplies or eviction. This has led Sobel to focus her energies on fundraising. The foundation also funds transportation for families going to and from treatments, recreational activities, such as ballet lessons for a patient's siblings, and, sadly, burial costs.

"We try to support what the government or hospitals can never be expected to support: the nonmedical emergencies that accompany an actual medical crisis," explains Sobel, who continues to be shocked and awed by the desperate situations of so many families and their inability to meet basic living needs through other programs.

"Once you ask the question 'How can a single-parent family cope with the

dotal, yet the financial, psychological, and physical problems that result for the extended family and society are worthy of support and a good subject for a think tank."

Sobel encourages everyone she meets to visit the website, www.andriveroflife.org. Should they have money, expertise, connections, or intellectual property to contribute, she can be reached directly at vsobel@andriveroflife.org. "There is no family that has not been touched by tragedy," she surmises, "none that are insured against this worst nightmare of any parent: the grave illness of their child. I cannot think of a greater gift for a sick child than the presence of his parent, and that is what this foundation's work ensures." —LifestyleMagazine.com