



WHEN A CHILD DIES: HOW HOSPICARE CAN HELP

By Leslie Strebel

In February, 2006 I received the call that all parents dread. My son Lee, at the age of 15, had collapsed and died at school. There was no warning or symptoms. We learned weeks later that Lee had viral myocarditis, a viral infection that settles in the heart muscle.

Lee was an amazing kid: sweet, funny, smart and kind. Losing him after such a short time here left an unspeakable void in our hearts. I was angry, and felt that my husband, daughter and I were being punished. I resented that our extended family and all of our friends (particularly Lee's) were robbed. I could not believe such a good person could be cut down so early in life.

Our friends and family did nearly everything for us those first weeks. But they went back to their own lives and we needed to find ways to cope that did not depend on their presence. And for all of their help, for which we are eternally grateful, they did not truly understand what we were going through. We sought help anywhere we thought we might find it. Someone led us to Donna George at Hospicare, who told us of other local families who had lost children. Several of them had been talking about forming a support group for the parents and grandparents of deceased children. Lee's death was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, and the group started meeting monthly to provide mutual support in a judgment-free environment.

Although we had been meeting with counselors, had attended general grief support groups and had a very supportive network of friends and family members, this group soon took on a very special and unique status. Here we were surrounded by people who knew precisely what we were experiencing. The more veteran members were able to help us rookies through that awful first year, when every holiday and anniversary presented a new wave of grief and a new strategy for honoring and getting through.

There were a couple of surprises for me. One discovery was that every time new people attended and I told my story, a little bit of acceptance took place. The other discovery was that being there was a help to other families who were in a similar situation. Even though I had no tangible help or guidance for them at the start (that I could see, anyway), my presence gave them the chance to share their stories and be of help to me. This, in turn, provided healing for them.

Four and a half years after Lee's passing, I still often can't believe what has happened. We have resumed what others may see as normalcy. We are happy most of the time, and have long ago resumed our daily activities. It is now important to me to carve out time to revisit my grief and try to be of help to others who are undergoing their journeys. I hope you don't qualify (or know anyone who does) for membership in our group. But if you do, I hope you will join us and see if this is a group that can help you incorporate this loss into your life. Lee would have wanted us to be happy and live life fully. I also believe he would be glad to see that with all the negatives associated with his death that some good would also have come of this. Turning my grief into service to others is one way I have done this.

Leslie Strebel is a Financial Planner, Coach and Managing Partner of the Strebel Planning Group. She co-facilitates the Bereaved Parent Group at Hospicare, 172 East King Road. Beginning in September, the group will meet on the first and third Mondays from 5:30-7:00 pm. The first meeting each month will be peer led, and the second meeting of the month will be moderated by a Hospicare bereavement counselor. Leslie is happy to speak with anyone who would like more information, or to have a talk before coming to a group. She can be reached at 607-257-4066, or les@lightlink.com.