

Bereaved Families Of Cape Breton

Help Me Tell Your Story

By Susan Evans

At the time of my daughter's death, I did not know anyone else who had lost a child. I knew there were people who had lost a child, but I didn't know any bereaved parents well enough to sit down and talk with them.

"You must meet Sandy and Mary," my friends urged. "They have lost children too and they could probably help."

I couldn't imagine it. What would I say? "My daughter was killed in an automobile accident. What happened to yours?" I declined; I wasn't ready.

Then one day Jeanine came into my life. She was a substitute in my tennis league, and she ended up not only in my court, but also as my partner. In the pre-game banter, I asked her where she usually played and then I mentioned that John, one of my daughter's best friends, played there as well. I asked if she knew him.

"You aren't Courtney Robinson's mom, are you?" she asked, turning pale.

It seemed that she and John had played tennis together regularly, and she had met my daughter a number of times. Jeanine had also lost her son to leukemia the previous summer. After the game, we began to talk, hesitantly at first, but then in a rush. "How are your other kids coping? Can you sleep at night? Are you getting counseling?"

I told her I kept losing my car in parking lots and finding myself in rooms without knowing why I was there. She said the only station she could listen to without crying was the rap channel. Our experiences were different, but we understood each other. As much as my mother and sister tried to be empathetic, I knew they were baffled and concerned when I talked about such behaviors.

We finally had to leave the tennis center, but we exchanged phone numbers and continued conversations as soon as we reached home. I asked her if she would go to the bereaved parents support group, The Compassionate Friends, with me. I had been putting it off, using the fact that it met on a Friday night as an excuse. "We usually had other plans," I said. The truth is that I was terrified. I was afraid of all that grief. I knew I couldn't handle it alone.

Since she agreed to go with me, we went. Once there, I wasn't sure I could open my mouth. When my turn came, I did manage to choke out the bare essentials of Courtney's accident. Mostly, though, I sat in awed silence listening to others describe the difficulties they were having. One man's wife wouldn't speak to him. Another woman had lost her friends when she brought home her AIDS-stricken son. This was what grief was really like! It was not the whitewashed version I'd been reading about where you progress through a tidy series of stages and emerge healed. This was a battle just to keep going—but these people were hanging on.

I was particularly drawn to the other mothers. I knew what they meant when they said they lost part of themselves. I could understand how sad it made one that her daughter would never wear her wedding dress, another that her son

would miss his graduation. I was relieved to hear that one woman wore her daughter's sweater on days she was feeling low. I did that, too.

Over the following months, I talked with as many as these mothers as I could. I asked them how they celebrated birthdays, what they said when people asked about their children. I learned that many lit candles when they wanted to feel close to their children and that almost all of us talked to our absent children. These women were heroes to me. They had suffered the loss parents fear most, and they were coping. They were sad and often confused but rarely self-pitying. As I drew on their strength, I got stronger myself.

I thought these women's stories should be told, so I set out to write their stories. They're an inspiration for all mothers—not just the ones who have lost children. They could help anyone dealing with difficulties.