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Finding compassionate friends amid grief

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RACINE COUNTY — After her daughter was killed 25 years ago this summer, it was a struggle to get out of bed each morning.

Diane Beck said when she was in public, the reactions she encountered from others spanned from the bizarre to hurtful.

“People would see us in the grocery store and go to another aisle. They didn’t know what to say,” said Beck, of Racine, whose daughter, Berit, was found slain after disappearing while traveling to a seminar just weeks after graduating from high school. “All we want is a hug and a smile.”

Like so many families who have had a child die because of an illness, an accident, an act of violence, drug overdose, suicide or those who have been killed in the line of duty in the military, Diane Beck and her husband have heard a litany of comments that add salt to their wounds.

“Get over it.” “Everything happens for a reason.”

“ ‘They’re in a better place’ (is another). No, they’re not with me. They’re not in a better place,” she said.

When she sought a support group for parents whose children had died, she didn’t have options best suited for her. She found herself in a group with couples whose infants had died, while her daughter was 18.

Then she found Parents Caring and Sharing, now called Parents Caring and Sharing/The Compassionate Friends. The support group is designed for those older than 16 who have lost a

When They Meet

Parents Caring and Sharing/The Compassionate Friends bereavement support group meets at 7 p.m. on the last Tuesday of each month in the lower level of Wheaton Franciscan-All Saints hospital, 3801 Spring St., Racine.

Their meetings are hosted near the cafeteria. The support group is designed for those older than 16 who have lost a child, a sibling or a grandchild. The nonprofit also accepts donations.

To make a donation, checks may be made out to TCF of Racine or The Compassionate Friends of Racine and mailed to 3524 Washington Ave., Racine, 53405.

child, a sibling or a grandchild.

“We need to teach people what they need to say and do for us,” said Diane Beck, the Racine chapter leader.

Mount Pleasant resident Lyle Tryba began attending the support group about six or seven years ago, after one of his two daughters, Allie Tryba, 23, died.

“Now I don’t know what I would do without going there the last Tuesday of every month,” said Tryba, who also has a daughter named Ashley, 35, and two grandchildren, 4½-year-old Hugo Eilla, and 3-year-old Elsa Allison. Eilla is “Allie” spelled backward.

His daughter had Cornelia de Lange syndrome, which may result in slow growth and skeletal abnormalities, and affect intellectual abilities, according to the National Institutes of Health. Tryba said while his daughter had special needs, she didn’t die nine years ago from the genetic disorder. He and his wife don’t know the exact cause of her death because they didn’t want an autopsy performed.

“We didn’t want her touched, we didn’t want her cut,” he explained.

Sharing a bond, becoming family

Often, parents are unable to say their child’s name with family, friends or at work. That’s sometimes because others feel uncomfortable by their grief, Tryba said.

So he looks forward to the monthly meetings because it is the one place where he knows he can say Allie’s name two to three times. He cherishes those moments.

Equally important for Tryba is to listen to other parents talk about their children.

“I want to hear their story because society doesn’t want them to tell (it),” he said. “(Grieving is) a journey that never ends.” There may be hills and valleys, but “that road eventually gets straighter.”

The bereavement support group is a safe place, Tryba and Diane Beck say.

It’s OK to cry, they say. And no matter what led to the child’s death, parents need not feel ashamed, they added, because no one will pass judgment or cast any blame.

Members share a bond they never wanted, but cannot share with those who haven’t suffered such loss. They understand one another. And have become a family, Tryba said.

“I remember feeling the guilt that it should have been me, not my child,” Diane Beck said. “She had her whole life ahead of her.”

Berit Beck, of Sturtevant, went missing on July 17, 1990, while driving to a computer seminar in Appleton. It was 25 years ago this month that the Case High School grad was found dead in Waupun.

Fond du Lac County prosecutors in March charged Dennis J. Brantner, 62, of Kenosha, with first-degree murder. He pleaded not guilty during his arraignment in June, however, court records show no new court date has been set.

‘Something you go through’

“I don’t know if you ever really get over things. It’s learning to live a new way,” Diane Beck said.

Fair warning: at times group members will cry. And laugh. And host balloon launches. And bring in treats to mark the day their child died. And that’s OK, she and Tryba said.

“Grieving is something you don’t get over. It’s something you go through,” Tryba said. “You have this wound in your body and it gets ripped open — down to the bone. It starts to heal ... and all of a sudden it gets ripped wide open again.”

Parents' thoughts of suicide aren't uncommon after a child's death.

"They're walking the line. They're not sure if they want to be part of this world any longer," Diane Beck explained. She and group members talk with them, sometimes for hours, "saying 'is this what your child would want?'" They would want us to be going on and living as if they were still here, which is really hard to do."

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