

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS, INC.

A self-help organization offering friendship and understanding to bereaved families

JULY 2008

Inside Valley Forge

Meetings are on the first Thursday of every month at 7:45PM (ending at 9:30PM). We meet at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Fellowship Hall at Valley Forge and Henderson RDs, King of Prussia, PA. Phone on meeting evenings only is 610-265-0733. All other times please call Ann or Rhonda at 484-919-0820.

Meeting Schedule Please Mark Your Calendar

- Jul 3** **General Sharing and Suicide**
- Jul 17** **TCF National Pre-Conf.**
Regional Coordinator & Professionals
Sibling Get Together
Registration, Sharing Sessions for all
- Jul 18-20** **TCF National Conference (see page 3)**
Nashville, Tennessee - see website:
www.compassionatefriends.org
- Aug 7** **General Sharing**

We encourage newsletter writings from our members. You may also submit articles written by others, please include the author of all articles submitted. **The cut-off date for newsletter entries is the 15th of the preceding month.**

ARTICLES SHOULD BE SENT TO THE NEWSLETTER EDITORS.

There are no dues or fees to belong to The Compassionate Friends, or to receive our newsletter. Your tax deductible donations given in memory of your loved one enables us to defray the cost of chapter expenses, particularly the newsletter, meetings, and our outreach to the newly bereaved. **Please include any special tribute you wish printed in the newsletter along with your gift.**

**PLEASE MAKE ALL CHECKS PAYABLE TO:
TCF VALLEY FORGE CHAPTER
SEND TO: RECORD KEEPER, FRANK GOMEZ**

**PLEASE SEND ALL OTHER CHAPTER MAIL
TO CHAPTER CO-LEADERS
ANN RAPOPORT or RHONDA GOMEZ**



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We send our regrets, love and prayers to **Rose Cote** and **Germaine Weaver** upon the loss of husband & father **Paul Cote**, who died of a cerebral hemorrhage on May 27th. The Cotes joined the Valley Forge Chapter of The Compassionate Friends May 1999, shortly after the death of their son/brother **Mark J. Cote** 6/3/63 - 3/2/99. They have been very supportive members for the past 9 years.

NEW FRIENDS

We welcome our newly bereaved friends. We are sorry for the cause that brings you. We have all been in the depths of despair, and know that it is difficult to share our pain and personal feelings. We hope you will attend three or four meetings before evaluating the benefit of our group to you. We offer confidentiality, unconditional love, compassion and understanding to all of you.

JUNE REFRESHMENTS

Nina Bernstein, for all the children of TCF parents.

Mary Lou Harrison, for my son *Lance "Scott" Harrison 8/4/56 - 6/12/97*
on the anniversary of his death

Anyone wishing to donate refreshments (cheese & crackers, fruit, cakes, cookies, etc.) in memory of loved ones, please call **Ann Rapoport or Rhonda Gomez (484)919-0820**, or you may sign **the refreshment chart** located on the refreshment table. Beverages are provided by the chapter.

LOVE GIFTS

TCF 31st NATIONAL CONFERENCE - Nashville, Tennessee**www.CompassionateFriends.org****toll-free phone 877-969-0010**

Listed below are some of the conference highlights. The conference registration forms are too lengthy to print in our newsletter. Please use the National website listed above to download your registration form, or call the Valley Forge Chapter, 484-919-0820, to receive a copy by mail. Registration forms will also be available at the regular July meeting.

THURSDAY ACTIVITIES (Pre-Conference)

Professional Registration 8 - 9 am
 Professional Outreach Program 9 am - 4 pm
 Regional Coordinators meeting. 10 am - 4 pm
 Conference Registration 3-10 pm
 Hospitality Room open 12 noon - 10 pm
 Sibling Orientation 7 - 8 pm
 Sibling Social & Sharing Session 8 - 9:30 pm
 Sharing Sessions for all 7 - 9:30 pm

FRIDAY ACTIVITIES

Conference Registration 7 am - 5 pm
 Annual Meeting 8 - 9 am
 Orientation 1st time attendee 8 - 9 am
 Opening Ceremony 9:15 - 10:30 am
 Workshop 11 am - 12:15 pm
 Lunch with speaker 12:30 - 2:30 pm
 Workshop 2:45 - 4 pm
 Workshop 4:30 - 5:45 pm
 Southern Style Buffet 6 - 7:30 pm
 Nashville Bluegrass Band 7:30 - 8:30 pm
 Sharing Sessions 8:30 - 10:30 pm

SATURDAY ACTIVITIES

Conference Registration 8 am - 12 Noon
 Workshop 9 - 10:15 am
 Workshop 10:45 - 12 noon
 Lunch 12 noon - 1:30 pm
 Workshop 1:30 - 2:45 pm
 Workshop 3:15 - 4:30 pm
 Banquet/Candle Lighting/Speaker 6:30 - 9 pm
 Sharing Sessions 9:30 - 11 pm

SUNDAY ACTIVITIES

Walk Registration 7 - 8 am
 TCF Walk To Remember 8 - 9 am
 Closing Ceremony with speaker 10 - 11:30 am

THE CONFERENCE WILL PROVIDE:

103 workshops on Friday & Saturday
 Sharing Sessions Thu. Fri. & Sat.
 Complete Sibling Program - age 9 -17
 Remembrance Walk
 Hospitality Rooms - Parents & Siblings
 Photo Memory Board
 Reflection Room
 Butterfly Boutique
 Book Store

GUEST SPEAKERS

Dr. Frank Lewis speaking Friday Opening
 Dr. Lewis is a surviving sibling, speaker, author, and pastor who led the sibling support group of TCF Las Vegas for 10 yrs.

Bruce Murakami speaking Friday Lunch
 Bruce bonded and teamed up, in the name of safety and saving lives, with the drag racing teen who ended the life of his wife and daughter, a story that was made into the Hallmark Hall of Fame movie Crossroads. A Story of Forgiveness.

Darrell Scott speaking Saturday Banquet
 Darrell's daughter was the first to be killed at Columbine, started "Rachel's Challenge" in her memory, a program presented at more than a thousand high schools to Inspire students to pass along kindness and compassion.

Ann Hood speaking Sunday Closing
 Ann is a bereaved parent, the award winning author of 9 novels including Comfort: My Journey Through Grief, and has been published in Redbook, Parents, Ladies Home Journal, and a number of other magazines.

OUR CHILDREN & SIBLINGS LOVED, SADLY MISSED AND REMEMBERED

Each month some of us must face those special, but difficult days of birthdays and anniversaries. This Month we ask your thoughts and prayers for the parents/siblings/relatives of the following children:
Additions or corrections to this list should be given to the editors, Marie & Ken Hofmockel.

JULY

EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE OKAY

On my surface everything seems to be okay. Faking a smile, pretending to laugh, while inside I'm dying a bit everyday. This all seems too much, this mountain I can't climb. The world wants to see more of me, all the things I try to hide. I'm not ready to show my all, not ready to face my fears. I want to find happiness, erase a thousand silent tears. Something keeps pulling me back, when what I need is there right in front of me. I try to reach out, its too dark, I can't even see. Never asking for help, feeling all alone. Nothing ever seems to be enough, taking back the brightness I have shown. Why am I afraid to let myself out of this cage? Allow myself to get close to people, not always running from change. When all seems lost, and all hope is gone. Maybe I'll pretend to laugh, putting a fake smile on. Deep within me I'm dying a bit everyday. While on my surface, everything seems to be okay.

Alexis Noel in memory of my brother,
Steven Andrew Shark, Jr. 6/11/80 - 12/10/99

SHARED THOUGHTS ON VACATIONS

Many well meaning people like to tell us what we should, or should not do. We emphasize the importance of not letting others "should on us", but, perhaps we are the greatest offender, by "shoulding" on ourselves. We put such unnecessary demands on ourselves. The only thing we should do, is take care of ourselves, and our family. We need to do what is right for us, and that may mean changing traditions and lifestyles to fit the new person we have become through our devastating loss.

Frequently, non-bereaved friends like to tell us vacations can be a cure-all. They stress we should, "get away from it all". They fail to realize our pain goes with us, and it is too early to expect much peace. It is not wise to take a vacation because someone else feels that is what we should do. We can't expect the same enthusiasm as in past years. We have to realize if we stay home, we will not have a great summer, either. Our grief is far more than an interruption in life.

Perhaps, it can help to plan a trip on a smaller scale, and not let our expectations be so great. It is normal for memories to bring sadness, but these same memories will one day bring a smile, when our hearts become lighter (which may be beyond your expectations at this point, but it will happen, but not nearly so soon as you want it to).

Taking vacations has to be a very individual family decision. Some bereaved families have found vacations to be very helpful in their grief, as well as time to sort out our feelings and relationships with the remaining family members. Even though it may stir up memories of past summers and create a void, it can bring some healing, and help us get more from our vacation the following year. Each phase of grief we deal with, helps to strengthen us, and puts a bit of normality back in our lives.

Vacations were always a big part of our life. We felt they were a necessity, not a luxury. It was a time for our family to devote a couple of weeks to one another. Having seven children created a limited budget, so they were primarily camping trips. Our last trip, before Doug's death, was a 2-car caravan, with a camper, across country to California, which now brings fond memories of the closeness we shared. For the most part, we kept our family traditions intact. Vacation was the one exception. It was always such a fun time, and we were not ready for fun.

Sometimes we regret not continuing family vacations. Although, we resumed vacations some 8 years later, we feel we may have missed out on many years of sharing fun times with our family. Death has made us more aware of the importance of spending time together, and also the fact we can not go back to recapture what we have lost. We did the best we could at the time, so that has to be good enough, and maybe we handled it in a way that was best for us.

We hope you will plan your summer for what is best for you, and pray you will find some peace, and hope regardless of where you are.

God Bless, *Marie Hofmockel*, TCF Valley Forge

GRIEF IS LIKE A RIVER

My grief is like a river -
I have to let it flow,
But I myself determine
Just where the banks will go.
Some days the current takes me
In waves of guilt and pain,
But there are always quiet pools
Where I can rest again.

I crash on rocks of anger -
My faith seems faint indeed -
But there are other swimmers
Who know that what I need
Are loving hands to hold me
When the waters are too swift,
And someone kind to listen
When I just seem to drift.

Grief's river is like a process
Of relinquishing the past.
By swimming in Hope's channel,
I'll reach the shore at last.

Cynthia G. Kelley
TCF, Cincinnati, OH

**GRIEVING ALONE
A SINGLE PARENTS EXPERIENCE**

When a single parent experiences grief over the death of a child, there are several areas that make it an especially difficult time. This article will point them out and provide suggestions that may help. Some brief background: In April 1982, my only child, Aaron, was kicked by a horse and hospitalized. During a fifth surgery, he died at the age of 19. We had always been very close, having raised him by myself since he was three. His death was a devastating shock.

1. Strong sense of isolation: No marital partner to be there...friends drift away after a while...the pain and needs don't seem to lessen...it's draining and tiring to try to reach out...TCF was there to ease my isolation.

2. Inconsistency: I needed to be strong but also longed for someone to depend on for reassurance. Normally assertive, I found it difficult to ask for what I needed most, one person to give me time one day at a time, for my grief...it's hard to be sociable and entertaining when dealing with fresh grief.

3. Decision-making and Major Events: After Aaron's memorial service, I was left with all the major decisions...sorting through all his possessions, clothing, papers...I dealt with his dogs...decided to bury his ashes...grueling responsibilities...I needed to find someone to get me through the difficult first birthday and holidays.

4. Need for Touch: Bereaved people strongly need to be touched and hugged...the contact has healing qualities...being single, you need to find sources for this consoling when the pain erupts. Some of my friends were "huggers" and one was a therapeutic masseuse who gave me a free massage once a week for the first year...if you have surviving children, HUG them often.

5. Grieve at your own Pace: It's easy to do this as a single parent...you are free to cry whenever you feel the need to do so, even in the small hours of the morning.

6. Special Strengths: One asset of a single parent is the extra strength we've had in being the sole decision-maker...the coping skills, parenting alone...that knowledge gives you the courage to survive grieving alone...reaching out for other's support often takes the MOST courage of all.

Kelly Osmont, Portland Oregon

They are everywhere, people who are hurting so deeply...so desperately...so broken in spirit and soul that they feel almost certain they will never smile again. Hearts so tender and crushed, that pain is all consuming and it strips them of all hope that there could ever be a day they wouldn't hurt. If only they could see a day when their agony would end. But what can I do? All I can do is love them - so desperately that their pain is no longer theirs alone, but mine as well, and I bearing the same pain makes it more endurable. To this end I seek, and to this goal I commit my life. I can do something - I can love.

Debby Grogan
TCF - Atlanta, GA
Debby is a nurse. The patients who come upon her are fortunate.

MY BIG BABY BROTHER

When I think about why you had to go away that bright August day,
I wonder is it because God giveth and God taketh away?
Or is it all just part of His divine and perfect plan ~
A course we must follow though don't always understand?
I must stop trying to question all the reasons why
And just accept that you're in your new home in the sky.
I've heard it said that trials and tribulations make us stronger,
But all I know for sure is that each day without you seems longer.
There's a place in my heart where emptiness knows no light,
It's the void that was left when your body left my sight.
I miss your smile, your laugh and your big crushing hugs,
I miss your eyes and your nose and that adorable mug.
But most of all I miss your contagious excitement and spirit,
The kind that could make me smile if I were just near it.
Do you know what an impact you made on the lives of us all?
My precious brother, it's oh so much more than any other I can recall.
We've learned and been told that you're in a much better place
And I ponder with amazement that you can see His holy face.
Oh, darling, there have been times I wish I was there, too;
More than you know, I have wanted to be with you.
I hold on to the truth that God's Word has provided ~
That on one sweet day, we all once again will be reunited.
Oh, Peter, I miss and love you and know there will never be another
Man in my life like my sweet, big baby brother.

Till that day, Pete ~ you are forever in my heart!

Stacey Mastrocola Sullens, Valley Forge, PA

for brother, **Peter A. Mastrocola, III**

June 7, 1975 - August 10, 1995

Written for the 2nd anniversary of his Homegoing

FEELING FINE TODAY

I am feeling fine today,
full of hope and warm and bright.
All my grief seems gone away,
and my memories are light.

Yes, I know this might not last
But while laughter holds my hand,
I will let it lift the past,
I will let the gladness stand.

While this sunny moment brings
beauty for my heart to touch,
I will keep a thousand things,
Right and good and blessed things,
That I did forget...too much.

Sascha Wagner

LIFE CAN BE GOOD AGAIN

For nearly sixteen years, his voice has been silent. It is a span now nearly equal to the time it was heard. Never did I anticipate life without the sounds that marked his presence. Learning to survive that silence once seemed an impossible task, one so overwhelming I could find no hope or expectation of ever finding life once more.

He was our son, our only child. The tempo of his growing measured the cadence, the beat, for our own living. His passing left an existence without any value that I could immediately perceive. Ultimately, I came to recognize that I was wrong.

Life still had meaning, but it had fallen to me to find it, just as it had been in the years before his coming. Indeed, even as it had been throughout the time of his living, life still demanded my active participation, my own commitment to give it purpose and resolve.

Hindsight affords an ease in stating this realization that did not exist while struggling in the depths of bereavement. The steps taken to finally seize life again seem logical and ordered while intellectualizing the process but I know that this is much easier to write than it was to experience.

I confess, with both sorrow and gladness, that I can no longer summon the full measure of those savage feelings and the unremitting pain that engulfed me in those early years. Working through them was the most demanding challenge of my life, enacting tolls in physical health perhaps even greater than the long-term effects on mind and emotion.

Today, however, I can reflect with gratitude upon a decade of mastery over the sadness. Control of my thoughts returned to me and I know freedom from the utter devastation of those early years.

Looking back reveals essential turning points on the road to healing. Some would seem to generalize easily for anyone. Others seem to respond to personal strengths and weaknesses more particular to an individual. These points included:

Self forgiveness for the many deficiencies found within on the endless soul journey that is our lot in the wake of our child's death.

Forgiveness of others, relatives, friends and associates, who are less affected than are we, who seem unable to help us in our time of deep trouble and need.

The accepting, at lost of the finality of our loss, and that we must gradually unleash ourselves from our former lives and structure anew.

Learn to communicate value to spouses, friends, and surviving siblings, our love for whom seems shrouded behind the totality of our grief.

Find ways to give expression to our need to somehow memorialize our child, be it through writing a book, planting trees, sustaining scholarships, or any number of ways. Our need to preserve and safeguard our child's memory is real and deserving of our attention.

A time comes for many to find new homes, jobs, and purpose. These are often part and parcel of any significant change in our lives.

Surrender to time, giving ourselves space within it to do our work. Use time to foster healing within, to enable us tomorrow with hope.

No recovery will return us to life as we knew it while our child lived. That life is forever gone and, to a certain extent, we may well have to accept that, as we perceive life today. The finest days of our lives may well be a part of our past. Somehow, we must recognize that this is not unique to surviving our child's death, but is often a portion of the human condition.

Olin is dead. As much as I would wish it otherwise, it will never be. He is not forgotten. His voice, his laughter, his joy, and his shortcomings live on in me. No day passes without thinking about him. I am grateful for his touch upon my life.

Yet, joy is again mine. Pleasure is no longer a forbidden or guilt-producing element in daily living. I live, gladly and with purpose, with Olin both behind me in time, but with me internally.

Is this not our goal, to heal, to find the strength to love both yesterday and today? Our children have been the richest part of our lives and today should reflect the grace of that love in all that we are today.

OLIN’S ROOM

There is a room in our home whose door is closed
 I open it from time to time and pause awhile.
 The red carpet is somewhat stained, an oil spill,
 perhaps.
 Hair oils darken the wall beside where the bed
 once stood.
 A candy wrapper, a popcorn kernel or two, lie
 beside the roller skates.
 All of this hid in the dark beneath the bed.
 Now the bed is gone, as are most of the clothes.
 Dressers stand alone around the desk, drawers
 full, cluttered with mementos.
 The closet holds a few tools, a batter’s cap, a
 down vest, a fish pole.
 It is Olin’s room.
 Here he lives in memory only.
 I stand quietly and remember waking him up in
 the morning starting a day.
 Within these walls we talked a lot, sharing
 experiences, hopes & dreams.
 In here I cared for him when he was sick.
 Sometimes we’d wrestle, laugh, look at papers,
 see a drawing.
 In this place I held him in my arms,
 Dried his tears, kissed him good night.

There were hard moments, too, within these
 walls.
 They have heard arguments, lectures, seen him
 placed across my knee.
 For these I feel the enduring sorrow over
 wrongs that cannot be changed.
 But mostly they witnessed hugs and closeness,
 caring and love.
 In here I catch the whispers of our yesterdays
 and know I love him still.

Someday this room will have another use.
 A few articles have been discarded and others
 have been stored away.
 Still, there is much to accomplish before I feel
 wholly at peace herein.
 It’s like my soul:
 A little cluttered, a bit dirty, just partially picked
 up.
 In its slow transformation back to life I say my
 goodbyes.
 Mostly though, I watch my now,
 Blessed and built in countless memories,
 Unfold to the future.

Donald Hackett
 from “SAYING OLIN TO SAY GOODBYE”

CIRCLES

How do you bear it all?
 The cry came from a mother
 Whose son had died only weeks before.
 We were in a circle, looking at her.
 Looking around, looking away.
 Tears in our hearts, in our eyes.
 How do we bear it?
 I don’t know,
 But the circle helps.

Eva Lager
 TCF, Western Australia

IS IT EASING?

I heard your name today and my heart did not skip a beat,
 nor was my mind flooded with the emotion of losing
 you.
 I heard your name today and it did not bring back the
 terrible hurt feelings of when you first left me.
 I heard your name today with a calmness that surprised
 me. Many another child carries your name, and it had
 been torture hearing it and seeing the smiling faces on
 those little girls.
 But today I knew – I found out – what others in my
 footsteps found out and tried to tell me. The hurt will
 ease; but the memories, the love, the good times will
 never go away.

Phoebe Redman – TCF, Bradenton, FL