

Reflections on Grief: One Man's Story

After 25 years of marriage, life was good for George and Susan (not their real names.) Still very much in love, the couple would often spend their vacation time each year snorkeling in the Caribbean, enjoying the beauty of nature—and the company of each other.

Until one day a little over a year ago, when tragedy struck. As George described it, they had struck out together in search of sea turtles. At one point, Susan grew tired, deciding to wait for George as he swam around a reef alone. As he returned to his wife, he remembered seeing a shark; fortunately, one that was non-threatening.

As George approached Susan, she looked frightened. If it was the shark, he thought, he would reassure her they were in no danger. But instead, she shared with him that she had seen a lightning strike in the distance.

"We decided to get out of the water," he recalled. "Susan seemed panicky as I swam toward her. She was having trouble breathing."

The couple was about a thousand feet from land, but there were no boats nearby. Susan called to a handful of people snorkeling in the distance, but they couldn't hear her. George then asked Susan to lie on her back in the water so he could help push her to shore while she also used her fins.

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Ursuline Academy Graduates Visit USS to Celebrate Legacy

Ursuline Support Services staff and board members welcomed a contingent of alumnae from Ursuline Academy, a Catholic girls' school that opened in 1894 on Winebiddle Street in the Friendship section of Pittsburgh. Following the school's closure in 1981, that same year the Ursuline Sisters formed Ursuline Center, Inc. Today the agency remains a fitting tribute to the work of the Sisters and the legacy of compassion and caring they instilled in their students.

The graduates, many returning to Pittsburgh from around the country, were in town to celebrate their biennial all-class reunion October 15. To help enhance their celebratory weekend to reconnect and reminisce, Ursuline Support Services hosted over a dozen alumnae of Ursuline Academy, along with Sister Rita Joseph, who taught at the Academy and served as its last principal. Also attending on the eve of the reunion were two Ursuline Academy graduates with particular ties to the agency: Mary Ellen McMeekin, who served as an original board member, and Karen (Miller) Tobin, who currently is Ursuline's director of independence support services. Then for the reunion itself, the Ursuline Board of Directors donated many Pittsburgh-themed giveaways that were enjoyed as door prizes by the alumnae attending the event.

Those attending the social at Ursuline's Squirrel Hill office expressed delight in knowing that the roots of their Academy have helped to create an agency now delivering critical services to so many individuals in need. Many expressed pride in their legacy and expressed an interest in becoming more involved in supporting the agency in its efforts to provide "help navigating life's transitions." 



Ursuline Academy "legacies" Karen Miller Tobin (l), Sr. Rita Joseph Jarrell (c) and Mary Ellen McMeekin (r) reconnect at reunion reception at Ursuline Support Services on the eve of the school's biennial all-class reunion.



Board Member Jonathan Livingston gets to know a bit more about our agency's history from Ursuline Academy's final principal, Sr. Rita Joseph Jarrell. Sr. Rita was the driving force behind transitioning the closed academy into the multi-service human service agency opened in 1981 that still exists as Ursuline Support Services today. Sr. Rita "recruited" Ursuline Academy graduate and Sister, Elaine Eckert, as the founding executive director for the new agency.

“She wasn’t gasping or choking,” he said. “She asked me if I had her mask. I thought it was a panic attack.”

As they got closer to land, Susan turned over, her mouth open in the water. The men on the shore applied CPR, but it didn’t help. George said he believes his beloved Susan may have completely lost consciousness and possibly accompanied by sudden cardiac arrest before CPR was started on the beach.

When an ambulance finally arrived, they were able to restart her heart but by then Susan was completely brain dead. She was taken by helicopter to a trauma center, with George forced to find his own transportation there. He found a charter flight and eventually arrived at the hospital (where he had to sneak past a guard to get in) before finding the attending physician.

Susan, a 65-year-old woman with no previous health issues, was diagnosed with complete brain death after undergoing several neurological tests. About two days after arriving at the trauma center, she was taken off life support. Because water was found in her lungs the official cause of death was drowning. An autopsy was unable to find any other cause of her death.

George sought comfort from his sorrow by attending a bereavement support group for six months, but said he felt he was getting little comfort from it.

“They could explain grief,” he said. “Except they couldn’t tell me what to do to get over the pain. I came to realize there is nothing more comforting in life than the illusion that the one you love is going to live well into old age.”

George said his counselor suggested he contact the Good Grief Center.


“The two facilitators were excellent,” George said. “They had a plan of what to do, but they didn’t lecture us. They gently brought up topics and let us talk. A big benefit was being in a smaller group—we had five in ours. That was very positive. Helping each other was a good aspect of the meetings.”

George added that this allowed the participants to talk about what was bothering each of them. The facilitators also suggested that each member of the group maintain a daily diary, to identify any actions or occurrences that either helped or didn’t help in dealing with grief.

“People in our society often tend to have a sense of denial about death,” he said. “Generally, we just don’t like to talk about it and that often leaves persons who are grieving on their own.”

George said the facilitators also recommended that the group members undertake a self-care program.

“They reminded us that we needed to eat healthy, exercise and socialize,” George said.

Today George continues to adjust to a life without Susan. As he spoke of the need to downsize his home, he shared two thoughts. The first is to adopt an attitude of complete acceptance that no one knows how long he or she has on the earth. The second: to always think about how best to use what time you do have. 

Bereavement Support Evolving to Meet Community Needs

Fifteen years ago, Lulu Orr had an epiphany of sorts. As a hospice nurse, she daily saw the acute need that families had for the support provided to help deal with the experience of losing a loved one.

“So I thought, any family not involved with hospice, which is a lot of the community, how do they cope?” she recalled. “They should have a place to call or visit.”

The idea stayed with Lulu, and she shared it with others. She soon found that most agreed there was a need. So she spoke to a couple of funeral homes who agreed to help. Soon serendipity stepped in when a Pittsburgh native who had worked in hospice in Florida came home to manage the Carnegie Library of Homestead. Once she heard of Lulu’s idea, she offered space to house it.

Lulu then went to others she knew for support. Before long, the Pittsburgh Pastoral Institute came onboard, explaining that most of the problems they were seeing in others had a grief component. With PPI’s support as a fiduciary organization,

raising money became simpler. A community meeting was held, with the invite list including social workers, funeral directors, oncologists and therapists.

“We invited about 120 people,” Lulu said. “Ninety showed up. It was an amazing response.”

After collecting input on what to offer, Lulu said they next needed funds to renovate the space offered. “It was all just people to people,” she said. “We raised about \$75,000 from caring individuals.”

From the beginning, the officially christened Good Grief Center was meant to be a place to put people in touch with resources.

“It wasn’t about doing everything for everybody,” Lulu said. “We knew there was good work and good resources available, but many people didn’t know how to access them. The key was

DIRECTIONS

from the Executive Director

The Burden of Loneliness

“One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do.”

—*Three Dog Night, 1968*



A recent article in *The New York Times* showed how researchers in England are uncovering mounting evidence linking loneliness to physical illness and cognitive decline. Additionally, as a predictor of early death, loneliness even eclipses obesity, according to the article.

At Ursuline Support Services, we have recognized the devastating effects of loneliness since we first opened our doors in 1981, a reality further confirmed for us when we joined with the Good Grief Center for Bereavement Support five years ago. The evidence is written on the faces of the individuals we serve, regardless of which program we meet them through: guardianship, protective services, independence support services or bereavement supports.

Each of these programs has a specific purpose. But they are united through our mission to provide “help navigating life’s transitions.” Most often, individuals face such transitions alone and find themselves suffering from abuse, neglect, financial and emotional distress or the lost and frightened feeling associated with the death of a loved one. Through a myriad of programs and services, Ursuline is there for them, whether providing legal guardianship, safety assurance for vulnerable adults and seniors, caregiver and bereavement supports for individuals and organizations, bill paying and representative payee services, service coordination, grocery shopping or daily wellness calls—all delivered by compassionate and dedicated Ursuline staff and volunteers.

To be sure, many of the programs and supports we offer could be provided through social media and other technologies. We could email information, electronically sign checks, order and ship groceries online, even Skype with those unable to leave their homes. We could “friend” our clients on Facebook and even connect through Twitter. Using such methods, we might even be able to “reach” (and I use that term loosely) dozens, perhaps even hundreds, more individuals than we do currently.

After all, isn’t that the general direction society seems to be headed?

Technology...will never adequately replace the warmth of a smile, the reassurance of one hand grasping another or the comfort of real, live human contact.

Indeed, we are communicating more—but, are we really *connecting*? Technology is neither inherently good nor bad and it certainly offers many benefits. Yet it will never adequately replace the warmth of a smile, the reassurance of one hand grasping another or the comfort of real, live human contact. We are fooling ourselves if we believe otherwise.

Ursuline staff and volunteers believe in the value of the many programs and services we offer. We also believe that these programs and services reach maximum benefit when they are delivered in person, with genuine care and concern for the people we serve. Time after time, Ursuline representatives report that their clients respond positively when they arrive. In fact, referring to it simply as a “service provider-client” relationship seems woefully inadequate. In truth, genuine bonds are formed and relationships are kindled. For that moment at least, the pall of loneliness is banished and the critical connection between two human beings is formed and strengthened. It’s no exaggeration to say that these connections are really lifelines not just for our clients, but for our staff and volunteers as well.

Of course, all of this is made possible through the generous support we receive from individuals and organizations who know and appreciate this “value-added” service we provide to those in our care. Whether you contribute to this effort through your time, your treasure or your prayers, I thank you. Together we are letting our neighbors in need know that help is available and that they are not alone. The value of that assurance is immeasurable and, in some cases, literally life-saving.

Tony Turo


Former Ursuline Board Member Earns Prestigious Professional Honor

Nicholas G. Castle, former Ursuline Support Services board member, was named the recipient of the 2016 Elaine M. Brody Thought Leader Award by the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), the nation's largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to the field of aging.



According to GSA, the award is presented annually by the organization's Social Research, Policy, and Practice Section (SRPP) to one of its members to acknowledge outstanding career contributions in those areas. It was established in 2009 and honors the late Elaine M. Brody, MSW, DSc (hon), a former SRPP section chair and GSA president whose pioneering research in social gerontology focused on family caregiving and enhancing the well-being of older people.

Dr. Castle is a professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the University of Pittsburgh. He has more than 150 first-authored publications in peer-reviewed journals and is currently working on several grant-funded initiatives. A GSA fellow, Dr. Castle serves on several editorial boards and is the editor for international research for GSA's *The Gerontologist*. His current research focuses on examining staff turnover in nursing homes, staffing issues in long term care and nursing home top management.

The award will be presented later this fall at GSA's 2016 Annual Scientific Meeting in New Orleans. 

Ursuline's Guardians: Compassion Personified

"When I serve as a guardian, I become that person."

It's a gray, rainy October Monday as Karol Kerr arrives at the Cambria Care Center in Ebensburg. She's no stranger to the facility—evident by the number of staff members who greet her warmly.

Karol is an Ursuline Support Services "Guardian of Person"—a professional or organization (such as Ursuline) appointed by the local County Orphan's Court to make medical, placement and end-of-life decisions for another person, officially referred to as a "ward." As such, Karol is responsible for ensuring that the day-to-day needs of the 43 individuals assigned to her are met, including safety and appropriate medical care. She is one of 10 individuals Ursuline employs to manage 326 guardianship cases.

After a quick stop in the business office, then a brief meeting with the admissions director to check on the status of someone she is trying to help get admitted, Karol begins her rounds, stopping at one floor after another to visit the individuals entrusted to her care. At this site alone, she will visit two or three times each week to ensure, first hand, that her wards are getting the attention they need.

As with all Ursuline guardians, Karol knows the importance of being visible not just to her wards but also to the staff of the facility. It's clear she is not viewed as a stranger or intruder, but rather as a friend and ally, genuinely committed to her job. This obvious dedication is noticed and appreciated by the staff of the Cambria Care Center.

Karol moves from room to room. Whatever the degree of responsiveness from each person she visits, Karol greets them with a smile, a cheery hello and words of encouragement. Some recognize this regular visitor and engage in conversation. Some clearly struggle to recall why they know this person speaking to them even though she has "introduced" herself many times before. Many cannot speak or choose not to. But each is afforded the same attention, the same level of dignity. For one, she gently fixes her hair. For another, she offers a back rub.

One resident pleasantly but firmly tells Karol she wants to go home. When Karol explains that the old neighborhood isn't as safe as it once was, the ward responds, "Aw, this isn't Chicago. It's Johnstown."

In another room, Karol notices that the woman seems to be struggling a bit to breathe. She is on both a feeding tube and a ventilator. Karol calmly assures the woman she will have someone check on her. A quick pivot out the door and within seconds, Karol has gently but firmly asked a staff member to have someone help the woman; he assures Karol it will happen right away.

To the uninitiated, many of the elderly in Cambria Care Center—as well as the others Karol visits in other facilities or in their homes—seem the same: individuals in their later years dealing with the physical or mental challenges that most often afflict the elderly but can also, on occasion, impact those in middle age or even younger.

But to Karol and the other Ursuline Guardians, these individuals are just that: individuals.

Karol, who has been employed by Ursuline for more than seven years, knows the history of each ward for whom she is responsible. Many of those stories are not



Guardian of Person Karol Kerr confers with Shannon Hess, RN, for an update on her wards residing in the facility.

“When I serve as a guardian, I become that person. It really is not just a job. We develop genuine empathy and attachment.”

– Karol Kerr

happy ones; rather, they are tales of neglect and abuse and, often, abandonment. And too often, the stories end with Karol having to say goodbye to someone she has learned to care for as if he or she was a member of her own family.

Currently weighing heavily on Karol’s heart is an elderly man she represented for years whose medical complications have led his doctor to conclude there is nothing much to be done. The gentleman has been referred to hospice care to prepare for the inevitable.

“He’s a dear man,” Karol says. “We’re not supposed to have favorites, but I’ve been with him so long ...


“This will be a tough one to say goodbye to.”

Karol estimates that she and her supervisor, Debbie Mitchell, have attended more than 100 funerals for their wards over the years.

“We can’t help getting attached,” she says. “And we definitely feel the loss when it happens.”

Karol leaves the facility and heads home to handle the necessary and often overwhelming pile of paperwork demanded by her job. There also is what often seems like a “never-ending stream” of phone calls from physicians, referral sources and her wards’ family members. She attends hearings and tries to be present for doctor appointments or other events where she believes she might add value and speak up for the person in her care.

As she heads out the door of the Cambria Care Center, Karol says that, if she could, she would work fulltime speaking to groups about the needs of those she helps as well as the thousands more who have no one at their side fighting every day to ensure their wellbeing and dignity.

“When I serve as a guardian, I become that person,” Karol says. “It really is not just a job. We develop genuine empathy and attachment.” 


Bereavement cont. from page 2

that we never wanted people who were grieving to feel there was something wrong with them. Most didn’t need therapy, they just needed support.”

From the beginning, the Good Grief Center was to be a volunteer-driven organization, with people who have dealt with a grief experience helping others in a similar situation.

“The people who gave their time were people who understood grief intimately,” Lulu said. “Grief isn’t a moment. It’s something you learn to live with. Everyone’s experience is unique, but it helps to know there are similarities. By helping others, our volunteers help themselves, too.”

Looking back over 15 years, Lulu said a number of lessons have been learned through the Good Grief Center, including the ability of the community to rally around a good idea if the need is there.

“It all comes back to community generosity,” Lulu said. “There is always great hope because people are willing to help others and to learn something for themselves in the process. I can’t count the number of people who said they didn’t realize how insensitive they had been to another until they experienced grief themselves and then wanted to act upon what they learned by providing support to others.” 



Ursuline Support Services

Help navigating life's transitions

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