



**THE
COMPASSIONATE
FRIENDS**

The Story of The Compassionate Friends

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The Compassionate Friends – Four Decades of Sharing and Caring

The story of The Compassionate Friends is one of loss, but also of the love, caring, and sharing that have emerged from those committed to the idea that We Need Not Walk Alone. Over its four decades of existence, TCF has supported hundreds of thousands of families in dealing with the natural grieving process following the death of a child. Today, with more than 600 chapters in the United States, and a presence in at least 30 countries, TCF has emerged as the world's largest self-help bereavement organization, never losing site of its mission of compassionate support. Here, then, is the story of TCF from the start of the organization in England through its development and continued growth decades later in the United States.

**BY WAYNE LODER
PUBLIC AWARENESS COORDINATOR**

Compassionate Friends started there,” wrote Joe. “Joan and Bill telephoned their thanks and we met for a cup of tea.

“Together, midst freely flowing tears, the four of us were able for the first time to speak openly of our children, without feelings of guilt that we were endlessly repeating the virtues of our children and of our vanished hopes for the future. Together, we were all able to accept, for the first time, the words used by many well-meaning friends but rejected almost universally by parents who have lost a beloved child: ‘I understand.’ We *did* understand, all four of us, and, in the immensity of our grief (and in reality is there any other tragedy of quite this enormity?), we all suffered together.”

For the rest of the year, Simon Stephens stayed in close contact with both couples and observed their ever-growing friendship and encouragement. “You are helping each other in a way which I, and virtually everyone else, am unable to do, because of your shared experience; do you think it could work with other parents?” he asked.

In January 1969, six persons, including Simon, attended the meeting that resulted from this question, talking of an organization that would help other bereaved parents.

“What about a name?” wrote Joe Lawley later. “The word ‘compassion’ had been featured frequently in our conversation, and eventually the “Society of The Compassionate Friends” emerged. It sounded right then, and now . . . in a slightly shorter form, it still sounds right—perhaps even inspired.”

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC . . .

On October 8, 1970, a car-train accident caused the death of 10-year-old Gabrielle Shamres. Her parents, Arnold and Paula Shamres, suffered through overwhelming grief, guilt, and anger, without guidance, and, though they “functioned,” it was without direction. Then one day in 1971, they read an article in *TIME* magazine about the British Society of The Compassionate Friends. They quickly reacted to the article.

“Theirs was the very first letter to arrive at my Coventry office seeking help and understanding as they walked together through the Valley of the Shadow,” wrote Simon Stephens. “The loss of one of their dearly beloved

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

Was it fate or a higher being that brought Simon Stephens in early 1968 to assume his duties as assistant chaplain at the Coventry & Warwickshire Hospital in Coventry, England? Newly ordained but full of confidence, Simon quickly discovered he was not prepared to deal with the death of a child. And he was needed to help not just one set of parents, but two.

Joe and Iris Lawley came face-to-face with death May 23, two days after their 11-year-old son, Kenneth, was rushed to the hospital with severe head injuries suffered when he was struck by a car while riding his bicycle to school.

“Our family stood around in stunned, agonizing disbelief,” Joe wrote later. “The nurses in the intensive care unit cried; they never quite got used to the death of the young.”

Simon Stephens delivered a prayer requested by the Lawleys as Kenneth’s death neared. Simon also prayed for young Billy Henderson, who lay dying nearby in the same hospital from terminal cancer. A few days after Kenneth died, Billy also died.

At Iris’s suggestion, the Lawleys sent flowers to the Hendersons. “We did not then know the significance of that act but, looking back, it might be said that The

children was indeed a bitter blow to them; but through their tears they could see the Valley's end, and the founding of TCF Britain gave them the belief that a new day would dawn in which broken hearts and lives would find their healing balm."

Simon came to Florida to meet with them and was inspired by the selflessness shown by the Shamres.

"In 1972, Arnold and Paula Shamres kindled the TCF flame, which now burns so brightly in every state of the union," recalls Simon. "It was hard work. There were tensions and misunderstandings as men and women, the early pioneers of TCF, did the hard work of grieving in a society which was reluctant to acknowledge the very special needs of the bereaved parent. But the vision became a reality."

While Simon was visiting the Shamres, publicity of his visit on *The Today Show* was significant in the earliest development of TCF in the United States.

From 1972 to 1977, approximately 40 "branches" of The Compassionate Friends developed, primarily in Florida and the Midwest, under the leadership of the Shamres, who established a national headquarters in Hialeah, Florida.

One of the very first branches was in Hinsdale, Illinois, and was organized by the Reverend Don Balster and his wife, Marian. They had contacted the Shamres following the death of their son, Mark, and after reading a book by Simon Stephens called *Death Comes Home*, about TCF and its goals.

According to Marian (who eventually became the first administrative director of The Compassionate Friends following its incorporation), in April 1977, Simon Stephens visited several TCF chapters around the United States, including the Hinsdale chapter. "He asked if we would hold an organizing gathering of the established group and, in his words, create a 'national committee.'" A subsequent fall meeting in Hinsdale of a half dozen core U.S. chapters resulted in plans for an organizing conference.

It was evident to Simon that the independent U.S. chapters could benefit if they were united in a single organization.

The growth of TCF was fueled when, on July 7, 1977, Harriet Sarnoff Schiff, groundbreaking author of *The Bereaved Parent*, appeared on what was supposed to be one episode of *The Phil Donahue Show*, recorded in Chicago.

Marian Balster recalls the day clearly. At Ms. Schiff's request, Marian had worked with the Hinsdale TCF chapter, SIDS, and Project Hope to locate 200 persons, all bereaved parents, who could attend the taping.

"That show was so powerful and so many people were calling in that Mr. Donahue asked us to take a 15-minute break, and he then recorded the second hour," says Marian.

The Shamres' address and phone number appeared on the screen several times, as did the phone number of the



Simon Stephens addresses early conference

Hinsdale chapter. Following the program, the Shamres received more than 1,000 phone calls and letters from people around the country seeking information on TCF. The Hinsdale chapter also received hundreds of local calls and letters.

In early 1978, Ann Landers published a letter from a TCF member who described the organization and how it had helped her. Again, an outpouring of letters from parents interested in joining a chapter or starting a new

one arrived at the national office.

THE INCORPORATION OF TCF . . .

Following the earlier suggestion of Simon Stephens, in April 1978, the Hinsdale chapter hosted an organizing conference attended by 240 representatives from the 40 fledgling TCF branches. Simon told of his visions for The Compassionate Friends USA, and those present were also addressed by grief expert Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

But there was real work that had to be accomplished at the conference. National bylaws were adopted, a board of directors formed, and national officers elected. The organization was also incorporated in the state of Illinois as a nonprofit corporation known officially as The Compassionate Friends, Inc.

Suffering from a malignant brain tumor, Arnold Shamres was unable to assume duties as board president and instead was named vice president. Don Balster, became the first president of the board. Within a week of the conference, a small office, staffed by volunteers, opened in Oak Brook, Illinois.

"We thought we would have the summer to get ourselves together and well organized, but then summer came and Phil Donahue reran the shows," recalls Marian. "We were already inundated with a lot of requests for information and we, in essence, divided up the work amongst us volunteers. I took care of all the requests on how to form a chapter. Another volunteer coordinated the volunteers answering all bereaved parent mail. We had another who responded to inquiries from professionals."

Money was another problem. "We had no funding whatsoever other than the contributions that were given to us at the organizing conference by the bereaved parents themselves," says Marian. "We started out on a wing and a prayer."

A national newsletter was created and published every other month, partially to provide support to those persons unable to be serviced by a chapter.

In February 1979, less than a year after the national organizing conference, Arnold Shamres died, followed four years later by the death of his wife, Paula, from cancer. Of the Shamres, Simon Stephens recalls that "their lives were

TCF's 3 Decades . . .

too short. They still had much love to give.”

An in-house newsletter, *Friends Caring and Sharing*, was born in the fall of 1979, and the Patron Plan was developed as a vehicle for bereaved parents to support the organization.

Art and Ronnie Peterson were named national coordinators in the spring of 1980, traveling the country on a volunteer basis to promote TCF and visit chapters. Later, again on a volunteer basis, Art became executive director. According to Marian, Art basically developed, with Ronnie's skilled writing, the Seven Principles of The Compassionate Friends and the chapter leaders training manual. Ronnie also became the liaison dealing with professionals.

Don Balster stepped down as president of the board in May 1981, followed by Marian as administrative director of the office in 1985. Art Peterson, addressing the TCF national conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1987, said of the Balsters, “If Simon and the Shamres can be credited with the conception and birth of TCF, Don and Marian are responsible for its survival. They took the dream and made it a reality. Without their guidance during those early critical years, TCF would have slowly fallen apart and disappeared.”

The growth of TCF was astonishing, demonstrating the need for such an organization. Reports show 126 chapters when the first national conference was held in 1979; 180 by the second; 236 by the third; and 314 by the fourth in 1982. Marian Balster recalls there being 460 chapters by her retirement in 1985.

The growth of the organization was so great that when Art Peterson made the decision to resign as executive director, he suggested the board conduct a search for a full-time, paid executive director. On that basis, Therese Goodrich was hired in January 1984 to fill the full-time ED position. She remained until her retirement in July 1992, at which time Susan Salisbury-Richards was hired and remained until her resignation in 1995. Diana Cunningham served in an interim capacity until July 1996, when she was appointed by the board as executive director. A small, part-time paid staff was hired under Therese Goodrich. Today, the staff remains small but is full-time.

Joe Rousseau, elected to the TCF board in 1982, worked with his wife, Elizabeth, to write the TCF Credo, which

is widely used throughout the TCF family today.

By the close of 1982, the national office had moved to its current location on Jorie Boulevard in Oak Brook, Illinois. This allowed more centralized operations. Previously, volunteers had to store some materials at their homes, where mailings were routinely handled.

The first sibling representative was appointed to the national board in 1989, while the Sibling Credo was created by a committee of TCF siblings and adopted in April 1989. The newsletter *STAGES* (Siblings Together Adjusting to Grief thru Encouragement & Sharing) was started in the summer of 1990.

TCF's first Strategic Plan was approved in September 1994, with goals to guide the organization. These have been updated on an ongoing basis.

Karen Snapp was elected board president in July 1996, the first sibling to hold that office. In December, TCF was awarded a grant of \$100,000 (it's largest ever) from the Project on Death in America to develop a chapter leadership training program. CLTPs are now held three times annually, funded by the national organization.

The first International Gathering was hosted in the founding country of England in 1994, with the second hosted by TCF USA in 1997 as part of the national conference. They have subsequently been held every 3-4 years in varying locations.

The first TCF national website was launched by Glen Heavilin in 1995 and in 1997 it was revamped and moved to www.compassionatefriends.org where it remains today.

TCF USA, in 1997, created the first Worldwide Candle Lighting, which is held the second Sunday in December of each year. TCF's Worldwide Candle Lighting annually illuminates the world in a virtual 24-hour wave of light at 7 p.m., lasting one hour in each time zone. Tens of thousands of families worldwide light remembrance candles during the vigil, now believed to be the world's largest mass candle lighting. Memorial messages in the thousands are posted from countries around the world on TCF's national website during the global event.

In observance of the Worldwide Candle Lighting, TCF successfully lobbied the United States Senate in 1998, to declare the second Sunday in December of that year “National Children's Memorial Day.” President Bill Clinton

signed a formal proclamation recognizing National Children's Memorial Day and encouraged Americans everywhere to participate in activities like the Worldwide Candle Lighting “in remembrance of the infants, children, teenagers, and young adults who have died and to bring comfort to their families.”

In 1998, the two TCF national newsletters were combined into the award-winning national magazine *We Need Not Walk Alone*®, supporting all members of grieving families and the people who care about them.

A figurine was designed by Precious Moments creator Sam Butcher in mid-2000 to benefit The Compassionate Friends and was distributed nationally, complete with information about the organization.

Established June 11, 2000, TCF Foundation was created to provide a stable funding base to guarantee TCF would always be there for those in need of support. First distribution (from interest earned) was made to TCF, Inc. in 2004, with distributions following each year.

The first two-mile Walk to Remember with 600 participating was held July 2, 2000 and in 2007 approximately 1200 shared the experience of the walk, carrying the names of an estimated 10,000 children honored and remembered. Concurrent walks are held by chapters and in 2006, the first *Friends Asking Friends*® fundraising program in conjunction with the Walk to Remember was initiated by TCF to help raise much needed funds to support TCF programs across the country.

Following the resignation of Diana Cunningham as executive director in September 2000, Patricia Loder, TCF's former development director, was named to that position.

In 2007 TCF's Credo was revised to include siblings and grandparents.

The Compassionate Friends is celebrating four decades of growth worldwide. It has been a lifeline to hundreds of thousands of bereaved families through national organizations, local chapters, and newsletters.

Its growth continues because of the gentle love and light so many have been willing to share with those seeking support as they walk through the darkness of the valley.

Years later, those who have been helped often sum up the support they received with the simple words, “*TCF saved my life!*”