

We need not walk alone

Compassionate Friends helps families who've lost a child

By Gary Strohm
Publisher

Last September Sarah Lemay experienced the greatest tragedy of her life - the loss of her son Justin Lake at age 18 in a car accident.

Her mother and sister were very supportive but admitted, "We don't know what you're going through." However, her sister, Lori Rhoads suggested the book about the loss of a child entitled *Roses in De-*

cember, which is available at HeavenBound Christian Bookstore in Marshall. The author is active in Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who've lost a child and there was a contact page in the back of the book for the organization.

Sarah contacted Compassionate Friends in October and was connected to the Terre Haute chapter. Since then she has attended month-

ly meetings. "She's been a great resource helping us," said chapter leader Cindy McClain, whose son Dylan died in 2006 at the age of 20. At the meetings, which have an average attendance of 10-15, the members are able to share the ways in which they grieve and cope with the death of their child, grandchild or sibling.

"You get as much as you get back," commented Sarah. "They become like your new best friends because they understand the shoes you walk in because they've been there." When we hear that someone has lost a child, added Cindy, "You feel sorry for people, but until you've been there...It never really resonates until it happens to you. These friends are forever friends.

"It's a positive outlet for your grief," continued Cindy. The group discusses a different subject at every monthly meeting, which is held on the fourth Thursday. At a recent meeting, the members shared favorite songs which helped them to grieve. Sarah's was a song which Reba McEntyre wrote after members of her band were killed in an accident. It includes the lyrics, "If I had only known I would never hear your voice again..."

Sarah and Cindy both acknowledge that a parent never really recovers from the loss of a child. "You don't heal. You deal," said Cindy. Sarah recalls that her aunt, who had lost a son to cancer, told her, "You'll never get over this." At Justin's funeral, she asked her friend Dena Patterson, who had lost her son Kenny, "How do you do this?" Dena responded, "Just keep being strong like you are." Sarah says, "Sometimes it's a daily struggle, an hourly struggle."

She tries to stay very busy with work and family. "He wouldn't want me to give up," said Sarah.

She receives comfort in remembering all the good times she had with her son and is reassured by the fact that he was saved just a week before the accident and is in heaven now. "I know that he's safe," said Sarah, who tells how Justin prayed with the ambulance personnel all the way



Cindy McClain (center) and Sarah Lemay discuss Compassionate Friends with Advocate publisher Gary Strohm. Photo by Stephen Murphy.

from the accident site to the hospital in Paris.

In addition, she spends a lot of time with her daughter Christy and her two-year-old grandson Haydon.

Compassionate Friends has given Sarah a network of friends who understand her pain. "Without this group, people don't know who to talk to and don't know how to open up to start to heal," said Sarah. In addition to the meetings, members can communicate by email and Facebook.

The group has a variety of pamphlets which cover various types of loss, such as the death of a grandchild and the death of a child by suicide.

Cindy learned of Compassionate Friends soon after Dylan's death but didn't become active in the group until May of last year. By last May she had heard of so many friends who'd lost children that she decided to get involved. She contacted the group lead-

er who'd kept in touch with her through the years and that woman told her that she was quitting the group. Undaunted, Cindy was ready and determined to get involved and did. In the years immediately after her son's death, she had worked for passage of legislation to curb the use of the pain killing drug methodone, which killed her son. Since May she has turned her energies to Compassionate Friends.

Compassionate Friends of the Wabash Valley holds its meetings at the Unitarian Universalist Church at 1875 Fruitridge Avenue in Terre Haute but has no religious affiliation. It is one of 600 chapters nationwide.

The group is a self-help, mutual assistance organization offering friendship, understanding and hope to bereaved parents and their families. Their mission is twofold: to assist families toward the positive resolution of grief

following the death of a child and to provide information to help others be supportive.

The chapter has no employees. Leadership roles are filled by member volunteers who work in honor of their children, siblings or grandchildren who have died. Though they are planning a candle fundraiser to raise funds for community projects, they have no dues or fees of any kind.

The local chapter recently participated in the Worldwide

Candle Lighting ceremony and is planning a Walk to Remember in August with family and friends to celebrate the lives of their loved ones who have died.

Contact Cindy McClain at tcfwv@googlegroups.com or on Facebook at Compassionate Friends of the Wabash Valley.

The Compassionate Friends Credo

- We need not walk alone. We are The Compassionate Friends. We reach out to each other with love, with understanding and with hope.
- Our children have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for our children unites us.
- Your pain becomes my pain, just as your hope becomes my hope.
- We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances.
- We are a unique family because we represent many races and creeds. We are young, and we are old. Some of us are far along in our grief, but others still feel a grief so fresh and so intensely painful that we feel helpless and see no hope.
- Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength; some of us are struggling to find answers. Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression; others radiate an inner peace.
- But whatever pain we bring to this gathering of The Compassionate Friends, it is pain we will share just as we share with each other our love for our children. We are all seeking and struggling to build a future for ourselves, but we are committed to building that future together as we reach out to each other in love and share the pain as well as the joy, share the anger as well as the peace, share the faith as well as the doubts and help each other to grieve as well as to grow. We need not walk alone. We are The Compassionate Friends.