

FamilytoFamily

LifeNet Health's "In Celebration & Remembrance" ceremonies were held in April. Approximately 1,200 people attended all five events this year in Roanoke, Richmond and Chesapeake (our Virginia locations) and in Pensacola and Jacksonville (our Florida Tissue Services locations). These are annual events which help us celebrate and honor the lives of organ and tissue donors, and their families.

A common theme at the events was the reference to the "LifeNet Health family." In Chesapeake, donor mother Sherry Ellis Freeman mentioned by first name all the wonderful people she has met from her association with LifeNet Health. I sensed that, for her, this organization served as an extended family during this difficult time in her life.



I have been asked what the title of this column, Family to Family, means. Well, Sherry helps me explain it. We are humbled that the work that we do may lead many donor families to call us "family." When we began this column nearly ten years ago the intent was just that - a friendly message from our LifeNet family to the family members of organ and tissue donors. I hope many of you feel this way.

I have also been asked, many times by our own Donor Family Services staff, why I personally still sign all the regular monthly correspondence we send to donor families.

Not long after I began work here, a donor father from the Eastern Shore of Virginia called me to say that he knew we were interested in him personally because of my original signature. We now distribute about 300 donor family mailings per month. It may be a small thing and I am certainly "old school," but when you write a family member it is not too much trouble to sign your name to the letter.

Over the years we have tried to address gaps we are told exist in bereavement services. For instance this fall, we are holding our third gathering of men to explore masculine grief. Donor family members have also told us that the community is weak in supporting teens and young adults as they mourn the death of a loved one. We are trying a number of initiatives which we hope will address this concern, and I encourage you to read Richard Meadows' article in this issue. Please call us if you have family members who are interested in these workshops.

Families always work better with effective communication. Please let us hear from you regarding this newsletter and our services in general.

Most Sincerely,
Robin

Robin L. Cowherd, Director, Donor Family Services

Donor Family Quarterly

A Newsletter for Organ and Tissue Donor Families

Summer 2008

The Struggling Man

Kevin Eckerman loved to create art. One of his family's most treasured is called The Struggling Man. He created the work while in college and it remains a special legacy for the Eckermans. Four years following Kevin's death, The Struggling Man image appears on the jewelry his mother, Peg, makes and the cuff links his father and brother, Don and Paul, wear.

Don Eckerman is a struggling man. The art piece could represent his own journey following Kevin's tragic death on the ski slope. Kevin was 21 years-old, and was enjoying the beginning of his last semester at James Madison University. His final run that day resulted in a fatal accident that changed his family's life forever. Kevin had designated himself as an organ and tissue donor when he obtained his driver's license. There was no question that Don and the family would honor Kevin's wish. Kevin's donation saved the lives of five organ transplant recipients and the tissue donation restored the lives of many more patients.

Authorizing the organ and tissue donation was just the first step on Don's struggle. As a father, Don faced the inevitable second thoughts about Kevin's accident and care. Did he teach Kevin enough about safety on the ski slopes? Did he make correct decisions regarding his medical care? Finally, where did he go wrong in his role of family protector?

Don returned to his office three weeks after Kevin's death. While he was present physically, by his own admission, it took about a year to feel like full job performance had returned. The subtle expectations of the work place underscored a lack of understanding of the bereaved parent's journey.

The first year following the loss of Kevin was spent figuring out the vocabulary of a bereaved father. He soon discovered there were many who came forward to tell him he was approaching grief the wrong way. People would approach him asking, "How's your wife doing?" implying that the man's role is to take care of all this. He laughs at the fact that Peg gets many more phone calls than he does. "Men just don't support one another that way," Don says.

Bereaved parents will inevitably be faced with answering the question, "How many children do you have?" Don answers that question as the situation demands. He will normally say he has two children, meaning Kevin and his brother Paul. If there is follow-up, Don is proud to talk about Paul, but continues to be sensitive as to how to introduce Kevin's death into a discussion.

Don and Paul attended a Men and Grief workshop hosted by LifeNet Health in the fall of 2004. "I learned that it was okay to be different and to have a more physical, action-oriented response to my grief," he said. Don designed and built a new pulpit for his church with the help of other men in the family. Kevin's name is engraved on an attached plaque. Both the work itself and the pulpit were Don's way of mourning and memorializing his son.

He reached out shortly after Kevin's death to a man whose daughter was killed a few years earlier. These two men meet regularly and have learned together about grief and loss. Other bereaved families reached out to help the Eckermans. They are helpful as they remember each others' loved ones.

While the nightmare of this experience remains, in Don's struggle he has learned more about life. When an acquaintance complains about having to baby sit a child, Don tells him he is lucky. Before, the thought of crying in public concerned him, but no longer. What is important and what is not important have become clear, and as a result, Don believes he probably values life more now than ever. Don is a father who still struggles but in its midst has grown. And Kevin's Struggling Man means more to the Eckerman family than most can possibly imagine.

The Eckerman Family

from left
Kevin, Peg, Paul
and Don



Donor Family Quarterly



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Healing the Spirit

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Healing Tears
By Dr. Lani Leary

Dr. Leary is a psychologist and certified grief therapist who consults with LifeNet Health. Her responses reflect her professional opinion to general questions. Individuals struggling with complicated grief are encouraged to seek the care of a professional. Please submit your questions to Robin Cowherd, LifeNet Health, 1864 Concert Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23453, or visit Healing Tears at our website www.healingthespirit.org.



*Dear Dr. Leary:
My baby girl died at birth. I know other women who have lost children just months old. Family members try to console tell us that we will get over our grief because we didn't have too much time to become attached and had not "invested" too much. We feel as though they are telling us that our children were not "real enough" to us. This makes us feel outraged as well as devastated. Can you help me understand this?*

Your grief is every bit as deep and profound as if you had nurtured your children into adulthood. Your outrage comes from having your grief unacknowledged, diminished, and not validated. Others who have not lost a child, whether in utero, at birth, or as infant, do not understand the magnitude or the meaning of your loss.

What you are experiencing is called "disenfranchised grief." It is grief that goes unrecognized and is not legitimized in our society. It is not deemed "as real" as other losses and so is not given the same respect, significance, or rituals as other deaths.

The nature of your loss is sudden, and that factor compounds the difficulty of your grief. The suddenness, lack of anticipation, and ability to prepare for the death leave you with feelings of being out of control and without support systems. Unlike the opportunities in an anticipated death such as terminal illness, you were not given the opportunity to say good-bye, to contribute to the care of your loved one, to understand the cause of death, to struggle with questions and begin to find meaning, or to connect with social agencies for support.

The meaning of your loss is great. Your child has died. In addition, your legacy, your hopes and your dreams for the next generation in that child have been buried. At this time, whether you have more children or not, your name and your identity as a parent has died with that child. You are grieving the loss of your child and all the hopes for the future attached to your child.

Next to our physical survival, the greatest need we have is our need to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, and to have experience appreciated. Our most difficult times in grief are when our pain is not understood or permitted; when it is shunned or avoided, or our loss is deemed "less than" others.

You need to hear from others that your grief is real, valid, and that it "okay to not be okay." The physical presence of a friend and an on-going relationship of support is what heals. Perhaps you can take this article to someone whom asks you what they can do to help. If you can find one person who will genuinely listen to your pain as often as you need, rather than give you advice, you will be on your way toward healing. It is a lifelong journey, and only you can do it, but you do not have to be alone.

The Masculine Style of Grieving and Mourning:

A Men's Gathering: A conversation, not a workshop.

Men tend to grieve and cope with loss in a "masculine" style. We will explore and discuss what that means to us. We will have the opportunity to tell and honor our stories. We will provide a unique support for one another.

The session is designed to bring together collective wisdom and experiences which can become solutions for the work of grief and mourning.

Other topics could be: sleep and dreams, acknowledging the presence of the beloved, the effects on marriage, family life and work. You are also encouraged to come with topics of specific interest to you.

When: Saturday Sept. 20 from 10:00 am - 3:00 pm

Where: LifeNet Health's Richmond office

For more information and to register, contact:

- **Richard Meadows** (Richmond) 1-800-847-7831 ext. 1916 or 757-521-1916 or email richard_meadows@lifenethealth.org, or
- **Michael Reilly** (Virginia Beach) 1-800-847-7831 ext. 4412 or 757-609-4412 or email michael_reilly@lifenethealth.org

Announcement Donor Family Mailing List

LifeNet Health maintains nearly 4,000 donor family members' names in our mailing list database. As each year passes, it is our practice to delete the names of those whose loved one was a donor more than five years ago. This year, we will be deleting the donor family names from year 2003.

If you would like to remain active on our mailing list, and your loved one was an organ or tissue donor in 2003,

Please call, e-mail or write us
1-800-847-7831, extension 4351
kristine_laraway@lifenethealth.org or
Kris Laraway
LifeNet Health
1864 Concert Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23453

We will be pleased to keep your name on our mailing list. You will then continue to receive the *Donor Family Quarterly* and periodic LifeNet Health Donor Family Services announcements, including invitations to the annual donor remembrance programs. Revisions to our mailing list will begin with the Fall *Donor Family Quarterly* in October.

Western Virginia Tribute Album Workshop

Through the generous support of the LifeNet Health Foundation, our Donor Family Services Department is planning the first donor family weekend retreat in the Western Region of Virginia. Mark the dates - Friday, July 25, thru Sunday, July 27, 2008.

Throughout the year, LifeNet Health offers various workshops across Virginia to donor families who are interested in creating tributes to their loved one's lives. This July weekend will be devoted to this effort.

This workshop will be held at the beautiful W.E. Skelton 4H Educational Conference Center at Smith Mountain Lake. Please let us know if you would be interested in attending. There are limited openings available so please respond quickly to reserve your spot.

You may contact **Tina Pierce, Donor Family Advocate** at 1-800-847-7831, extension 4903 or by email at christina_pierce@lifenethealth.org.



Shelley Christenson and Leanna Sasse share Memory Album Ideas

In Celebration and Remembrance



Rebecca Meisel, flutist, shares her beautiful gift of music in Roanoke

A lovely tribute for organ donor Paul Harris, from the Chesapeake tribute table



Donor mother Gwen Braswell-Nash gave inspiring remarks during the Richmond program

Just like adults grieve differently, so do young people. LifeNet Health is excited to announce the **UTOPIA** (Utilizing Times of Pain in Art) Project. This project is designed to help teens and young adults ages twelve through college, reconcile their grief and loss through expressive arts and creativity.

With the help of Richmond based Z Mullins Dance Company, participants age twelve through college will come together to share stories, explore various types of movement and create a movement collage that reflects those stories. Each week, they will lead the group in various dance improvisations and teach dance movements that serve as a foundation for the groups' own creative ideas.

Journaling is a proven platform for helping people to express and understand life's journeys. LifeNet Health has purchased a journal designed to inspire youth who are in challenging circumstances. The Journal 180 which are designed to help young people think more broadly about their lives, including the painful experience they have just encountered.

We are in the final stages of developing a box that allow celebration and remembrance of a life lived and loved by family, community and friends. The designs will match the personality of young people today with room in the box specially designed to encourage young people attending a memorial service, viewing or in-home activities following a death to express their love and caring through letters, photos, memorabilia and similar contributions.

Youth throughout our culture see on-line social communities such as My Space to be an accepted forum for self-expression. LifeNet Health is in the process of the development of a My Space Internet webpage devoted to grief and loss, and organ and tissue donation. In collaboration with a young adult LifeNet Health donor sister, we will provide support and resources.

As with all of our Donor Family Services programs, we hope these new efforts support donor families in ways not otherwise available in the community.

Grief and Loss Support For Young People

