

Surviving a loss

Parents begin healing process after death of a child

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Logan Vierra. Aaron Brooks. Jackie Terry and Kelly Garecht. John Teeslink. All local youths whose short lives ended unexpectedly in the past year. Sons and daughters, every one, to parents still in mourning.

Parents who outlive their children suffer an immeasurable loss and a deep ocean of emotions. Feelings of guilt rise up, bringing questions of what they might have done differently to prevent their child's death.



Shellie Carlson lost her daughter, Paige, from a cardiac arrest just moments after Paige was born. Shellie and her husband, Dave, both have had the strength to overcome the difficulties of losing a child. ([Angelina Gervasi/News-Sentinel](#))

Their marriages are put under the ultimate strain, when husbands and wives refuse to see each other through a grieving process that may never end. Divorce rates for those who lose children climb as high as 75 percent as tensions build over year. Still, life persists.

The families of children who lost their lives recently will have a long road ahead of them. But other area families, who have already been forced to deal with the loss of a child, attest to the value of the journey.

Sabrina Grimaldi

Morada resident Karen Grimaldi still remembers the last words she ever heard her 17-year-old daughter Sabrina speak. It's been seven years, but still the words ring inside her head. "I love you, Mommy."

"That was such a gift to me," Karen says, "to know there was that love."

Sabrina's car was struck by a motorist as she made a left-hand turn off Ham Lane to Eight Mile Road. The girl, a cheerleader and theater student, would not survive the day.

In one moment, the Grimaldi family was changed forever. Karen and husband Emilio saw one another through the hard times. Karen kept journals and recorded her thoughts and emotions each day, yet she says the grieving will never go away.

"She meant so much it hurts," Karen says. "But it's a good thing I had someone in my life like that."



Karen and Emilio Grimaldi hold a photograph of their daughter, Sabrina, who was killed in a traffic accident at the intersection of Eight Mile Road and Ham Lane in January 1999. This file photograph was taken April 24, 2004. ([News-Sentinel](#) file photo)

Today, the reminders of a life lost so suddenly linger in the most ordinary places. A song on the radio. Watching friends of Sabrina's finish college. Seeing the joy on her friends' faces when their children get married.

Karen's heart is burgeoned, however, by what she calls signs that Sabrina's spirit is still with her in some way. Every time she sees a butterfly, she remembers her daughter.

"You need to find a way to not only survive it, but to still feel their presence," she says.

Shortly after their daughter's death, the Grimaldis set up the Sabrina Grimaldi Memorial Performing Arts Scholarship in Sabrina's name for aspiring theater students. Even now, something of Sabrina's spirit is living on, Karen says.

Emilio Grimaldi chose not to talk publicly about his experience, his wife said.

There is no uniform reaction to the loss of a child, says Dr. Gail Gazelle, founder of the medical advocacy group, MD Can Help, and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

Still, Gazelle says, most bereaved parents experience intense feelings of guilt, anger and disbelief that their children are gone, emotions that can last a lifetime.

"It is the most devastating thing that can happen in the life of a parent," Gazelle says. "Their lives will never be the same."

Learning to accept that the grieving process may never end is an important part of healing. Parents who can find an avenue of memorializing their children in some special way have a much better chance of surviving intact.

It's taken a long time for Karen to learn to live with feelings of grief, but she tries to ask herself what would make Sabrina smile.

"If you let (grief) ruin your life, you're not doing with your life what they'd want you to do."

Anthony Booth

When Stockton resident Dorothy Booth found out her 18-year-old son Tony had been killed on a Friday night in March of 2000 while driving home from baby-sitting his 1-year-old nephew Gabriel, all she wanted was to see his face.



Dorothy Booth looks at photos of her son, Tony, who was killed in a car accident. (Kendyce Manguchei/News-Sentinel)

It was an opportunity she would not have until four days later, on the day of her youngest son's funeral. According to state law, family members of someone who has died in certain cases cannot view the body without the presence of a coroner.

"It's your child," Dorothy says. "You should not be kept away from them, whatever shape they're in."

That ordeal would be the beginning of a years-long journey she and husband Robert would take together in grieving the loss of a child.

Dorothy says word of Tony's accident brought support from others who had lost a child. Eventually, the parents formed a casual support group in which they could talk about what they were going through.

It is important for parents to feel their emotions are normal if they are to cope with the death of a child, Gazelle says. The best support group is one made up of people with shared experiences. In that environment, parents come to understand and accept they may never stop mourning their loss.

"Wherever people can find someone who's been through the same experience — that's what they need," Gazelle said.

Now, Dorothy is working to change the laws that prohibit parents from being with children who have died on a weekend or holiday. It is a slow battle, though some state legislators have responded with letters of support. She hopes to someday make a difference for others in her situation.

Paige Marie Carlson

Clements residents Shellie and Dave Carlson had to say goodbye to their daughter Paige before they had even said hello.



Shellie Carlson examines the footprints on her daughter's birth certificate. Paige Carlson died of cardiac arrest moments after being born. ([Angelina Gervasi/News-Sentinel](#))

A baby, weighing just 5 pounds, 2 ounces, Paige was alive for some minutes before she suffered cardiac arrest and was pronounced dead.

Shellie, a nurse at Lodi Hospital's Intensive Care Unit, had a normal pregnancy with no problems until she went into labor.

As the baby's heartbeat was slowing down, Shellie would have to undergo emergency surgery to try and save her daughter's life. Right after the birth, she saw Paige for just a moment through a bleary haze of anesthesia. She would not see her again until days later, when Paige was laid out for her funeral.

After the death, Dave made arrangements for a service, but Shellie was in a state of shock. She could not deal with the constant questions from people in town who knew her — but not what had happened — and had to do her grocery shopping in another city.

It would take her months to slowly rebuild her life. It was important for her to show her other children, especially young daughters Tohya and Tawney, that life does go on.

Paige was buried in a cemetery in Clements. Her tiny coffin lays under a rock bearing a bronze plate bearing her name, the names of her parents and a simple inscription:

"May your spirit live on forever."

Resources for grieving parents

- [Bereaved Parents of the USA](#) is a national nonprofit self-help group that offers support to bereaved parents, grandparents and siblings struggling to rebuild their lives after the death of their children, grandchildren or siblings. Its [Web site](#) includes links to other resources, articles and more.
- [BabySteps](#) is an organization that provides information and online support forums to parents grieving the loss of a child, especially an infant or new born.
- [Hospice of San Joaquin](#) is a nonprofit organization that provides medical, emotional and educational support to individuals and families coping with grief. In Lodi, adult bereavement support groups are held Thursday evenings at Emanuel Lutheran church. For more information, call (209) 922-0237 or visit [the Web site](#).

The stone is nestled in a lush and tenderly cared-for garden of lavender, creeping thyme and a fuzzy plant called lamb's ear, a nod the family's 40 head of sheep.

Shellie, Dave and the youngest of their six remaining children visit the site often, to maintain the garden, take clippings or just sit on a cement bench they installed. It was in the tranquility of "Paige's Place," seven years ago that Shellie, expecting another daughter, asked for Paige's blessing.

"I asked her, 'Is this OK?'" Shellie says. "Then I just really felt this peace, like this was all right."

Soon after, Shellie was walking with Toyha and Tawny in the family's fields when the girls discovered a bird's nest. When Shellie peered inside and saw tufts of sheep wool, she was hit with the idea that would change her life.

Today, Shellie makes and sells Woolies, soft balls of cleaned sheep's wool that can be hung from a tree to help birds who are nesting. Her business, Nature's Blessing Sheep Company, came from that idea.

Tears still come at the thought of the life that never took root, of all the years Paige may have had ahead of her, Shellie admits. It's a pain most people can't understand.

"This is normal," she says. "When you're in the midst of that, don't let people tell you you're not normal. You have to grieve."

Losing a baby brings with it a unique kind of pain, says Gazelle, because husbands and friends may not understand the bond a mother has with an unborn child.

Gazelle commended the Carlsons ability to communicate with one another through the grieving process, and for finding a way to make their love for Paige the inspiration for their business.

"Things that memorialize the life of your child can be very beautiful," the doctor said. "It's says, 'My child's life was not in vain.'"

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