

Looking Back...the Awesome Power of Hope

By Nan Zastrow



There is a quote that states, “Don’t look back. You aren’t going that way.” That’s good advice for many circumstances in our lives. However, sometimes looking back is also a way to understand how far you’ve come; the accomplishments you’ve made, especially under duress; and the power of “Hope” in becoming someone different than planned.

In 2018, Wings celebrated its 25th anniversary as a non-profit organization. It was a year of looking back and remembering, not with sadness, but rather with surprise and profound gratefulness for the support of family, friends, community, and even strangers as we traveled this journey after the death of our son, Chad, in April 1993. Looking back reminds us of the feeling that we didn’t think we could do it (move forward). Looking back reminds us of the challenges, the emotional hard work, and the victories won!

Please bear with me while I regress and summarize a fraction of what we’ve learned.

Remembering the beginning:

Spring forced its way into Wisconsin in an unusual way in April 1993. It strangely marked the day with headline news. “Blizzard.” It was Eastertime, a time when the sun typically began warming the earth and tulips emerged. Outside my window, a cherry tree with long, thin branches swayed in the wind. The branches loaded with spring buds supported dozens of plastic Easter eggs in bright colors suspended from ribbons. The sudden freezing rain and blizzard coated the branches heavily with ice causing them to strain and bend unbearably against the frozen weight. This bizarre scene mocked the event that had just unfolded...the death of our 21-year-old son, Chad,

as the result of suicide. We tried to shake the icy chill that numbed our minds and bodies. How could this be happening to us? Ten weeks later, Chad's fiancée took her life too.

In an instant, our lives changes forever. Sometimes who we were meant to be is changed by a memory from our darkest moment. Memories triggered by traumatic events change the way we think, act, and respond to future events. They can create either negative or positive reactions going forward. In most cases, we make a choice. What we become tomorrow is molded by how we process the event, when the numbness subsides. Our son's death, our darkest moment, became a turning point that changed who we were and created a life much different than we ever imagined.

Challenges:

My husband, Gary, my daughter, and I were left to survive an unimaginable absence in our lives. When life seemed almost perfect, suddenly we were challenged beyond the limits of our human understanding. Here are a few of the challenges:

Faith. Our faith wavered with unanswered questions and triggered a new search for meaning.

We lived with a stigma-related death in a time when death by suicide was silent.

We challenged the statistics. So many people quoted the statistics about divorce among parents who lost a child. We wanted to show, by example, that the death of a child can also forge an unbreakable bond of communication, love, and marital commitment.

Lack of knowledge about grief, unavailable resources (the internet was newly born). Community resources were few. We struggled to learn what we needed to help us heal.

Learning how loss of a sibling would affect our daughter with an intellectual disability and provide for her future needs.

Returning to the workplace, managing productivity, dealing with inquisitive questions from coworkers, and finding motivation to excel when it doesn't seem important anymore.

Accepting that this death was something we could not control. We struggled with shoulda, woulda, coulda feelings of guilt until we realized that some things in life are not to be understood, but rather accepted.

Restructuring family traditions long term. Recognizing that this loss changed the way we practiced our traditions and filled the gap created by death.

Loss of dreams. Seeing family and friends living out their dreams through the lives of their children and grandchildren. Then, realizing we would never have the opportunity to experience the same.

Finding purpose. Purpose equals "future." Without a vision of the future, there is no such thing as purpose.

How we healed our pain:

Here are my short answers to some of the items above that paved our path to healing.

First, we let God in. After a brief period of anger and frustration with a loving God, we realized there is nothing stronger than faith to get you through.

Stopping the silence about suicide became a passion. So often suicide is misunderstood and over-judged. We speak publicly about this and other related taboo deaths.

Remembering who our son was, not how he died, is our focus. Guilt implies “intent”. We adopted a “no fault” judgment regarding Chad’s death. We instinctively knew, without a doubt, that Chad did not intend to hurt us. Putting guilt aside was a simple choice.

Continued education and learning about grief. This became a lifelong pursuit to help us deal with our own loss as well as help others.

Providing educational opportunities to help people deal with uncertainty and live with a society that sometimes minimizes the impact of grief on someone’s life.

Building a “different” life with different “dreams” and grasping joy wherever we could find it. Living in the present moment and not taking it for granted.

Creating “purpose” through our grief ministry allowed us to see a brighter future.

Our way to defeat the pain was to never forget.

We’ll never forget our darkest moment, but there are lessons to be learned from all life experiences. We still selfishly surrender to moments of sadness and tears. It is our legacy. However, choosing to be better rather than bitter was the right choice. The memory of our grief lives as our daily companion, but it is the healing that reigns. The dark moments become grayer and the sun shines brighter, fading the pain of loss so we can live meaningful lives.

We will forever be amazed at the surprises that unfold because we are exactly where we are meant to be. God directs our paths. Our pursuit for peace evolved through action. Choosing to heal grief can challenge your life temporarily, but it will likely change your life forever. One nanosecond in time changed our lives forever. Looking forward is the key to surviving loss, but looking back is a requirement for discovering and acknowledging the awesome power of HOPE!