

Nan & Gary Zastrow

Founders of Wings—a Grief Education

Meet the Founders: Through the years...with Wings™



Our Darkest Moment

In 1993, our journey through grief began creating a legacy that is stronger today than it was in its earliest years. It was a legacy to heal grief, and ultimately it helped others heal theirs too. The journey began with tragedy. On April 16, 1993, our son, Chad Zastrow, died as the result of suicide. Ten weeks later Chad's fiancée took her life. There were no signs that could have prevented this from occurring; and this kind of "unknown" lives in the shadows of one's darkest moments.

Chad loved life. This senseless death to this day causes us to wonder "why?" We found that grief from significant loss is a life changing event—and sometimes people in our communities and even in our own families don't understand why we grieve the way we do. Nor do they understand why grief can last so long.

Within a few short months after our Chad's death, we mutually decided not to let this loss destroy our lives. This was our saving grace. All we knew, was that someone somewhere could help us heal this pain. In 1993, resources were not as prevalent as they are today. The Internet was new, bereavement was not a strong focus for hospices, funeral homes, or churches. Today that has changed. But our desire to learn more became the catalyst for our non-profit organization.

In 1993 we established ©Roots and Wings, Ltd., a non-profit organization. The name was derived from a needlepoint picture that hung on our wall with the verse: *Two things we give our children One is roots, and the other is wings.*



Our initial mission was to publish a newsletter to help those who experienced the death of a significant loved one and wanted support. The articles, poems, and information we published in a newsletter were educational and inspirational. The word got out and our newsletter began getting feedback from all over the United States. It was purchased by funeral homes for their families and was also available through individual subscription. The newsletter was named *Wings*[™], and the organization was familiarly referred to by the same name.

It's Interesting How Others Helped Us Find Our Journey

All I knew was I “needed” to write, but had no idea how that would develop or how I would promote my written thoughts. I printed my first magazine and took it to local funeral homes to see if they would “subscribe” by allowing me to send the magazine to their families. One particular funeral director began a deep conversation with Gary and me about what our goal was. He asked us if we knew what a thanatologist was. We told him we didn't. He told us to go find out and come back next week. We did that. Then he asked us if we knew who Dr. Alan Wolfelt was. And, of course, we didn't. He told us to go home and find out and then come back. Then he told us to go meet Dr. Wolfelt who would be speaking in Appleton in a few weeks. We signed up for his seminar which was for funeral directors.

We were the only non-professional people there. But we did meet Dr. Wolfelt. We asked if we could talk to him after the seminar and show him our thoughts about a printed magazine to help the bereaved. And thus our relationship with Dr. Wolfelt began!

We attended classes at the Center for Loss and Life Transition, directed by Dr. Wolfelt (who is an internationally known thanatologist). Each year we traveled to Fort Collins, Colorado to continue our education until we graduated and became Certified Grief Educators. We continued to go to classes there over a span of 12 years and remain close friends with Dr. Wolfelt today.

Then the Writing Became Personal

“I always wanted to write, but I didn't have anything to write about.” That's how I described my passion for expressing my thoughts. It was often easier to write it than to say it. In my writing, I was able to explore my deepest thoughts and feelings about life and death. I shared memories, shared “what ifs”, fears, and the uncertainty of life ahead with my loss of dreams.

My first written grief words were expressed and published in the Editor's Journal in the original *Wings* newsletter in 1993. Successive articles explained my pain and healing from our loss. From 1993 until 2003, we published the magazine under the name of *Wings*[™]. It was mailed through the United States and Canada, available by subscription. In 2003, I was invited to become a columnist for *Grief Digest*-a national magazine and product of the Centering Corporation. As a regular columnist for this magazine, my articles have been forwarded and shared, read and re-read, and circulated through cyberspace. This magazine was beautifully printed in full color. In 2021, it moved

to electronic format. In 2003, we also discontinued the printed version of Wings due to the costs of developing, printing, and postage. We moved to a free electronic e-Letter, and continue to publish this quarterly for our hundreds of subscribers.

Beginning Our Public Ministry

In 1997, our ministry took on a new face. We started our first in-person education/support grief group as volunteers for Comfort Care and Hospice Services. In the same year, we held our first public Seminar with an invited professional in the field of grief. We invited Dr. Alan Wolfelt, as our guest speaker. Our passion for learning more about grief fueled the work of Wings™. We began offering workshops, seminars, support groups, giving personal presentations, holiday tips programs and various other events to help the bereaved and caregivers. We also served on our county's Prevent Suicide Coalition in Wisconsin, as suicide prevention was important to us

Name Changed to Reflect Ongoing Ministry

In 2003, we officially changed the name of our organization to Wings-a Grief Education Ministry which described our evolving mission. Our slogan: "Honoring the past and rebuilding the future" defined our philosophy for healing grief. We are professional volunteers. Our work/ministry is not compensated by the organization. There are no paid staff or administrative positions. The organization is funded through donations and sponsors who believe in their cause. We are grateful for those who have helped us for many years.

Fast Forward Over 25 Years Later

In 2018, we celebrated 25 years of our non-profit organization. Today, we continue to be active in grief education. We are

hospice volunteers. It is important to us to continue our personal grief training on a regular basis. Some of our most noteworthy presentations include: 2005 International Conference on Bereavement in Vancouver, 2009 National Bereaved Parents Association, and the National TCF Conference in 2014 and 2015. These things we do as volunteers. Both, Gary and I held full-time jobs in the community until recently.

Though the trauma and numbness of those early years have passed, we still have fleeting thoughts of what life might have been if Chad were living today. We admit that we grieved differently, as most parents do. This allowed us to recognize the uniqueness of grief and open our lives and our experiences to others in grief support groups and education series. Recently we have moved to a Zoom series.

This is a life-long journey...you carry with you the memories and the pain of loss of dreams. But inside you become someone you never dreamed you could be. You become compassionate and desire to help other people who are first beginning the journey. We have no regrets for accepting the path we chose as our lives are different than planned. Never would we have dreamed of doing something like this; nor did we expect it to continue for so long. But what better way is there to honor Chad's life.

