

Letting go of grief

by Clare Howard

A few weeks ago Jeanne Davis crouched on the gym floor, kneeling over a kindergartner's weekend bruises at 8:20 a.m. as Holy Family School filled with students excited about the upcoming holidays. For Davis, the school was filling with hope.

She has little memory of the holidays last year, when she was paralyzed with grief following the sudden death of her husband, Tom, 53. An active, strong woman, Davis found herself unable to answer the phone, unable to find her shoes, unable to cook. She lost 30 pounds. She lost her grounding. She lost hope. Though she returned to her job as principal at Holy Family two weeks after becoming a widow, her memories are of days filled with tears.

LETTING GO - Surrounded by children at Holy Family School in Peoria, Ill., where she is the principal, Jeanne Davis begins her day in the school's gymnasium. In grieving her husband's death, Davis has found reaching out to help others is a source of healing. CNS Photo by David Zalaznik. This year, she is planning new holiday traditions. "My children and I are finding creative ways to celebrate our lives together rather than defining everything by Tom's death," she said, sitting in her tiny school office in Peoria, Ill., bathed in late afternoon sun. "Before Tom died, I did not understand the importance of hope."

A PERSONAL PATH

Holidays are particularly difficult for people grieving a loss, said Pamela Shuck-Hoehne, a therapist at nearby Proctor Counseling Center. There is no uniform pattern to grief. The process can take months or years. Grief may never be accepted, Shuck-Hoehne said, but it can be acknowledged and integrated into a process of living. There are general guidelines for working through grief, but ultimately every person does it differently and uniquely.

"In our society we gloss over death and grief and shroud feelings in euphemisms. Other cultures are more direct. Our culture expects people to grieve and get over it, but the process is not so direct," Shuck-Hoehne said. "Holidays compound grief because the comforting and familiar rituals become painful and difficult."

For Davis, there were surprises in grief. "I'm not a crying person. I couldn't believe the well of tears that came. It was a deep, immobilizing anguish," she said. "I had not expected to be so disabled by grief. Accepting help is humbling, but this was something I recognized I couldn't get through alone."

Two friends brought soup and bread every week for months. "If they had not brought food, I would not have eaten," Davis said. "Some people are so gifted. They know how to be present but not intrusive."

In the months following Tom Davis' death on Oct. 22, 2005, even the children at Holy Family started worrying as they watched their principal drop from a size 10 to a size 2.

More than 1,000 people attended Tom Davis' funeral. He had been a partner at Miller Hall & Triggs law firm. He was a technical cave diver and was active in civic affairs. He was healthy, a strapping 6 foot 5 inches with 44-inch shoulders and a 32-inch waist when he died suddenly of a massive heart attack while blowing leaves off the roof of his home.

Jeanne Davis, who would have been celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary this year, has planned symbolic milestones to move forward for herself and her children, Jessica, 25, and Jason, 20. On the one-year anniversary of the death, Jeanne Davis hung the clothes her husband died in, draping them on her bedpost. Then she dressed herself in those clothes and went up to the roof to blow off leaves.

"At some point, I realized Tom would not want me to be so unhappy. It was OK to have moments of happiness and joyfulness. I could not let this event define us forever. I had to bring joy back to our family," Davis said. "Letting go of grief does not mean forgetting. It means moving forward. My children had lost their father. I couldn't let them lose their mother, too."

Reflecting on her past 13 months, she recognized grief is a time of intense introspection, but moving the process along means reaching out and offering help to other people. "If you are not yet at a stage to reach out, just get out and walk. Seeing your feet move forward is healing," she said. "Don't make any important decisions. Get an advocate to help with financial and legal matters. You need someone to be your eyes and ears when you are not thinking clearly."

MOVING FORWARD

During her process, Davis discovered grief could become the comfortable status quo and moving forward was scary, unknown territory.

"At some point, you have to figure out how to start letting go of grief and not feel disrespectful to the person you love. You are not betraying the love you shared. Letting go of grief is important. Some people think if they can't have the person back, they can hang onto the pain. Grief is the known, and we clock ourselves in the known," she said.

This holiday season, Davis started a tradition of laying a blanket on her husband's grave. She planted a tree. She is on the board of an organization her husband helped found, Peoria Opportunities Foundation, a not-for-profit group that works to find affordable housing for the homeless. She has a Web site her niece and nephew created, www.thomasrdavis.com. People can view photos and leave a message. "It's never too late for a kind note or a card. Something that says, 'I remember,' " she said. "Death is not the end of a relationship. It is not being maudlin to recognize he is still in our lives. Every day I do something to keep the relationship alive, but also to move forward.

"I still have meltdowns. This still takes enormous amounts of energy."

In addition to a wealth of family and friends, Davis found meaningful help from her husband's law firm associates. Dennis Triggs, Tom Davis' friend and law partner, said, "Grief is real and profound and nothing will take it away. Jeanne is one of the better communicators in the world. I listen carefully and look for

openings to offer help. No matter how inadequate you feel, that is never an excuse to do nothing ... because you don't know what to say. Better to have some awkward moments than not make the effort."

Tom and Jeanne Davis' daughter, Jessica, works in Chicago and hopes to start law school next fall. She said her mother is patient and open to talking about fear, anger, sadness and guilt. "It was hard to take the first step in moving forward. I felt guilty. I questioned if I was not grieving enough," she said. "Nothing good can come from getting stuck. It's good to feel like you can still be productive and make a contribution."

She wears her father's wedding ring on a chain around her neck. "The symbolic things are important," Jeanne Davis said. "My children expect me to act like a mom. They lost their dad, and there were days when I couldn't be there for them. I will do what I can for my children. When I got stronger, they got stronger."

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