

## Finding hope here in Darien after the death of a child

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When we are born onto this earth with our individual genes and DNA, talents and quirks, colors, shapes and sizes, there is one thing we all have in common: We are all going to die. It is **the** one incontrovertible thing we know about another person and ourselves. Yet, often it is **the** one thing that we try not to think about, find impossible to imagine when we do think about it and find very difficult to accept and handle when it happens.

**The** closer **the** relationship and **the** more "out of order" **the** death is, **the** more difficult it can be for **the** ones left behind to work their way through **the** burden of grief.

Many of us in our 40s through 60s have had parents die in their 70s or 80s. While it is always very hard to lose a parent or grandparent, at those ages it is **the** natural order of things. To lose a parent when you are young is out of order. **The** primary person who was to guide you through all phases of life and love you unconditionally is no longer there.

To lose a child is extremely out of order. No matter **the** age or circumstances, **the** natural order of things is that you die before your children do.

When Barbara Rittner brought her daughter, Chelsea, into **the** world two decades ago, she had every expectation her child would thrive. Like any parent, she knew it was her job to protect **the** tiny girl and her twin brother until forever. So when Chelsea was diagnosed with a rare form of Sarcoma at age 15, Rittner's world began to crumble.

For two and a half years, Chelsea battled **the** virulent cancer in her central nervous system, while Barbara watched her lose one bodily function after another. "It was a horrible illness.

Literally one function at a time shut down, and yet she still kept her spirit," Rittner said. A top student and star athlete at Norwalk High School, Chelsea maintained her spirit, her sense of humor and her studies, despite being constantly in and out of hospitals. She graduated with honors, attended her graduation in a wheelchair and spoke to her fellow graduates in June 2006. Two months later she died.

Her mother was a self described wreck, unable to focus on anything, even incapable of driving because she was so distraught. She had given up her job, devoted every moment of **the** past two years to caring for her daughter and now was finding it impossible to deal with her loss and **the** irrational feeling that she should have been able to save her.

"I think for any parent, from **the** time a baby is born, you are **the** protector," she said. "You can't imagine anything happening to them. You want to absorb all their pain. And when a child dies, you feel you've failed, even though it's totally irrational.

There was still a part of me that felt I could have saved her.

Finally, after several weeks of agony, Barbara followed up on a suggestion by a hospice worker that she contact **the** Center for Hope. There she met with a psychologist who she said was "**the** first person I felt I had spoken to who could relate to a parent who lost a child.

She joined a weekly group of other parents who had lost children and formed a bond with many of them that has lasted for more than two years. While their formal sessions are now monthly rather than weekly, they still meet informally on a regular basis.

"I have lots of friends and I do things with them socially, but no one can relate to aspects of dealing with this loss like someone from my group," she said. "You don't get over **the** grief. You learn how to live with it and incorporate it into your life.

Grief counseling is a specialized area, and staff members at **the** Center for Hope have an excellent reputation for professionalism and **the** quality of care they provide. **The** agency was established nearly 30 years ago to help those with terminal illnesses and their families cope, and, in time, it became **the** primary agency in Fairfield County offering help with loss and bereavement.

Three years ago, **the** Center merged with Family Centers, an umbrella organization offering a wide variety of services, including **the** Den for Grieving Kids.

**The** Den offers support groups for children and their families in its Greenwich office as well as in schools throughout **the** area. **The** Center for Hope offers group counseling for loss of a child, loss of a spouse, general bereavement groups, senior bereavement groups and a meditation group.

Individual and family counseling are also offered, as is trauma counseling and crisis intervention.

Death is **the** natural outcome of life, but it breaks our physical connection with someone we love, and we have to grieve for that loss. Sometimes **the** sadness and hurt is manageable and sometimes it overwhelms us.

Everyone develops their own tools for coping. We say prayers, build monuments and plant flowers. We talk to close friends and relatives and seek spiritual guidance. We try to get back into our daily routines and find distractions.

We have friends and neighbors who bring food and comfort and messages of love and support. But sometimes we need more. Around **the** corner, down **the** street, just a few minutes away, there are professional and compassionate guides experienced in helping anyone who has lost a loved one and, as a result, may themselves be lost in a maze of sadness.

**The** Center for Hope is at 590 Post Road in Darien. For information, call 655-4693 or visit [FamilyCenters.org](http://FamilyCenters.org).

This column was written under **the** aegis of **the Community Fund** of Darien Human Services Planning Council. More information: 655-8775. E-mail to Kathy Lake at [katla17@optonline.net](mailto:katla17@optonline.net).

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