

THROUGH THE EYES OF A WIDOW

"CRITICALLY IMPORTANT... I want to say to Lynda that what you are doing is so critically important." -DR. BERNICE A. KING, Daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King

## Grief Diaries

Through the Eyes  
of a Widow

True stories about  
overcoming the challenges  
of modern widowhood

AWARD-WINNING & INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL

WITH  
MARY LEE ROBINSON  
MARYANN MUELLER

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## EXCERPT

LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL  
with  
MARY LEE ROBINSON  
MARYANN MUELLER

FOREWORD BY  
MARYANN MUELLER



Grief Diaries

Through the Eyes of a Widow – 1<sup>st</sup> ed.

True stories about overcoming the challenges of modern widowhood

Lynda Cheldelin Fell/Mary Lee Robinson/Maryann Mueller

Grief Diaries [www.GriefDiaries.com](http://www.GriefDiaries.com)

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## Testimonials

“CRITICALLY IMPORTANT. . . I want to say to Lynda that what you are doing is so critically important.” –DR. BERNICE A. KING, Daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King

“INSPIRATIONAL. . . Grief Diaries is the result of heartfelt testimonials from a dedicated and loving group of people. By sharing their stories, the reader will find inspiration and a renewed sense of comfort as they move through their own journey.” –CANDACE LIGHTNER, Founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving

“DEEPLY INTIMATE. . . Grief Diaries is a deeply intimate, authentic collection of narratives. I so appreciate the vulnerability and truth embedded in these stories.” – DR. ERICA GOLDBLATT HYATT, Chair of Psychology, Bryn Athyn College

“HOPE. . . These stories reflect the authentic voices of individuals at the unexpected moment their lives were shattered and altered forever.” –SHERIFF SADIE DARNELL, Alachua County, Florida; Chair, Florida Cold Case Advisory Commission

“ACCURATE. . . These accounts portray an accurate picture.” JAY HOWELL, U.S. Senate Investigator, Former Florida State Prosecutor, Co-founder - National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

“VITAL. . . Often alone in their time of need, these stories will play a vital role in surrounding each reader with warmth and comfort as they seek understanding and healing in the aftermath of their own loss.” –JENNIFER CLARKE, obstetrical R.N., Perinatal Bereavement Committee at AMITA Health Adventist Medical Center

“BRAVE. . . The brave individuals who share their truth in this book do it for the benefit of all.” CAROLYN COSTIN - Founder, Monte Nido Treatment Centers

“HOPE AND HEALING. . . You are a pioneer in this field and you are breaking the trail for others to find hope and healing.” –KRISTI SMITH, Bestselling Author & International Speaker

“A FORCE. . . The writers of this project, the Grief Diaries anthology series, are a force to be reckoned with. I’m betting we will be agents of great change.”

-MARY LEE ROBINSON, Author and Founder of Set an Extra Plate initiative

“MOVING. . . In Grief Diaries, the stories are not only moving but often provide a rich background for any mourner to find a gem of insight that can be used in coping with loss.” -DR. LOUIS LAGRANDE, Author of Healing Grief, Finding Peace

“HEALING. . . Grief Diaries gives voice to a grief so private, most women bear it alone. These diaries can heal hearts and begin to build community and acceptance to speak the unspeakable. Share this book with your sisters, mothers, grandmothers and friends who have faced grief. Pour a cup of tea together and know that you are no longer alone.” -DIANNA VAGIANOS ARMENTROUT, Poetry Therapist & Author of Walking the Labyrinth of My Heart: A Journey of Pregnancy, Grief and Infant Death

“STUNNING. . . Grief Diaries treats the reader to a rare combination of candor and fragility through the eyes of the bereaved. Delving into the deepest recesses of the heartbroken, the reader easily identifies with the diverse collection of stories that create comfort and hope.” -DR. GLORIA HORSLEY, President, Open to Hope Foundation

“WONDERFUL. . . Grief Diaries is a wonderful computation of stories written by the best of experts, the bereaved themselves. Thank you for building awareness about a topic so near and dear to my heart.” -DR. HEIDI HORSLEY, Adjunct Professor, School of Social Work, Columbia University, Author, Co-Founder of Open to Hope Organization

## Dedication

### **In loving memory:**

Neville Claflin

Todd Fabian

Alan Julian

David Edward Kenyon

John Marchesa

Cecil Patrick McMinn

Mark Thomas Mueller

William Norris

Pat Robinson

Ken Staggs

Brian Weaver

Darrell Williams

Robin Worthington

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BY MARYANN MUELLER

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## Foreword

Becoming a widow is a somewhat indescribable event. When we join our lives to someone, losing them is not an active thought. The morning my husband died suddenly from a heart attack at age fifty-three, the thought of him not surviving did not even enter my mind. We see it so many times on television—the ambulance arriving, some miraculous procedure is performed, and in the next scene everything is fine. They survived and are **alive**.

It doesn't always happen that way. In whatever way we lose our spouse, having the mantle of "widow" placed on our shoulders forever changes how we live and who we are. It changes our lives in ways we do not know how to handle. It changes how we look at the world.

When it happened to me, I looked for some sort of list of rules—something that told me what to do and how to handle things. I read anything I could get my hands on just to see if I was doing things right. The more I read, the more confused and lost I felt. Everyone's grief was different; there were no steadfast rules to follow.

What I do remember is that reading personal stories helped validate what I felt. It helped me understand that what I was going through was normal. That was very important—to see my experiences reflected in the eyes of others. This felt like the closest thing to having a checklist, and I finally began working through my grief.

Only a widow can fully understand what being a widow is about. Losing someone we shared life with is comparative to an amputation. The person we took care of, the person who made us laugh and held us when we cried, the person who was everything to us is now gone. How do we reconcile ourselves to the fact that they're no longer part of our existence? What do we do with all these feelings? How do we make sense of a life that is now so different?

The purpose of this book is to help other widows. Our stories help those who are unsure how to make it through the first weeks, months, the first year, and beyond. No matter whether you've been married a short time or for decades, having someone say, "Yes, I felt like that," can bring a bit of comfort and encouragement to deal with fears and insecurities.

Within the pages of this book are stories to help you navigate one of the toughest experiences you'll ever face. May you find peace and hope in our written words.

MARYANN MUELLER

BY LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL

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## Preface

One night in 2007, I had a vivid dream. I was the front passenger in a car and my teen daughter Aly was sitting behind the driver. Suddenly, the car missed a curve in the road and sailed into a lake. The driver and I escaped the sinking car, but Aly did not. As I bobbed to the surface, I dove again and again in the murky water searching desperately for my daughter. But I failed to find her. She was gone. My beloved daughter was gone, leaving nothing but an open book floating on the water where she disappeared.

Two years later, on August 5, 2009, that horrible nightmare became reality when Aly died as a backseat passenger in a car accident. Returning home from a swim meet, the car carrying Aly was T-boned by a father coming home from work. My beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter took the brunt of the impact and died instantly. She was the only fatality.

Just when I thought life couldn't get any worse, it did. My dear sweet hubby buried his grief in the sand. He escaped into eighty-hour workweeks, more wine, more food, and less talking. His blood pressure shot up, his cholesterol went off the chart, and the perfect storm arrived on June 4, 2012. Suddenly, he began drooling and couldn't speak. My 46-year-old soulmate was having a major stroke.

My husband survived the stroke but couldn't speak, read, or write, and his right side was paralyzed. Still reeling from the loss of our daughter, I found myself again thrust into a fog of grief so thick I couldn't see through the storm. Adrenaline and autopilot resumed their familiar place at the helm.

As I fought to restore balance to my world, I found comfort in listening to stories by those who walked before me. They gave me hope. Grief Diaries was born and built on this belief. By leaning on and learning from one another, our stories become a lifeline for those who share our path. It's comforting to know others understand our loss language and, more important, have survived the journey.

Which brings us to this book. Helen Keller once said, "Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light." This is especially true in the aftermath of a life-changing experience. If you've recently become a widow, the following stories are written by women who share your path and know exactly how you feel. Although no two journeys are identical, we hope you'll find comfort in these stories and the understanding that you aren't truly alone, for they walk ahead, behind, and right beside you.

Wishing you healing and hope from the Grief Diaries village.

*Lynda Cheldelin Fell*

CREATOR, GRIEF DIARIES

[www.LyndaFell.com](http://www.LyndaFell.com)

[www.GriefDiaries.com](http://www.GriefDiaries.com)



CHAPTER ONE

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## The Beginning

When one person is missing the whole world seems empty. — PAT SCHWEIBERT

Every story starts at the beginning, and so do our journeys. What was life like before that pivotal moment when it became divided by before our husband died, and after?

\*

MARY LEE CLAFLIN

Mary Lee's 73-year-old husband Neville died from small cell lung cancer in 2013

This was a second marriage for both of us. We had known each of our families for over thirty years. My first husband and I divorced, and Neville's wife had recently died. I hadn't been notified of her death so I decided I wanted to go to the cemetery where she was buried. Neville met me in the small town of Kerriville. After spending the day talking about our families and catching up on our lives, I left the next

day to come home. As I was driving away and seeing Neville standing by his truck in my rearview mirror, I remember saying “Could there be something here?” We began emailing each other, talking on the phone then meeting at various bed and breakfasts in the Hill Country. We lived six hours apart. We were married a year later. I found a love with Neville that I never knew existed. We just had a different kind of love. One of those rare ones who not many people have. Others noticed it in us and said they were envious.

It was our seventh wedding anniversary and we decided to go back to the bed and breakfast where we had our honeymoon. Each year we said we were going back and just never did so now was the time. We did all the same things we did the first time. We rode bicycles, walked trails, ate great food and drove the back roads—a favorite of ours. We even booked the same suite that we stayed in the first time. It was a wonderful weekend.

When we packed up the next morning Neville sounded hoarse. I asked if his throat hurt and he said no. He tried to clear his throat but it still sounded hoarse. This was the beginning of the cancer but we didn’t know it. After we got home, his body started itching all over but there was no rash. Went to see the dermatologist and he gave him some cream and antihistamine but could find no reason for the itching. This was the second sign but no one recognized it.

While visiting one of our daughters who was having a baby, Neville’s breathing was worse. I called his doctor and they suggested he may be having an allergic reaction to the antihistamine and to go

to the emergency room. My husband refused to go but did go to his family doctor he had used several years prior. The doctor did a breathing test which he failed and suggested since we were leaving the next day to have a chest x-ray performed when we got home. He said you could not rule out lung cancer since he smoked for over forty years. Once home we went to the doctor and he ordered a chest x-ray. They called us that night and said it showed a mass and scheduled a CT scan on Tuesday.

When Neville woke me up at 4:30 a.m. Saturday morning he said I think we need to go to the hospital. I got him to the emergency room and told them what the x-ray showed and he was scheduled for a CT scan on Tuesday. The doctor put him on oxygen and ran a CT scan. When he returned he said we needed to go to their hospital in Temple where they had the facilities to better handle his care. We asked the doctor what the mass looked like. He was sure it was cancer.

I rode in the ambulance with Neville. They checked him into the oncology floor. On Tuesday they ran tests and did a biopsy. We waited all day to hear the results. When both the doctor and nurse came in the room and sat down on the bed, we knew it was not good news. They said Neville had lung cancer, and not the good kind—if there is such a thing. He had small cell lung cancer. He smoked for over forty years and only recently quit. His only question was, “Is it terminal?” She said yes, with a year to a year and a half. He laid there calmly.

For the next fourteen days we stayed in the hospital with me by his side. He did not want me to leave and I did not want to. People

kept saying that I needed to rest, and Neville will need me. What they didn't realize is we are all different, and I was not leaving. I felt there would be time for me to rest later.

The doctor said they usually start with radiation as his cancer was not only in his lungs but had spread to his liver and brain. Since he was having such a difficult time breathing they started chemotherapy. After three rounds, the scan showed shrinkage of the tumor which made breathing easier. The doctor said the tumors in the brain showed some shrinkage even though they had never seen the chemotherapy break the blood barrier to the brain. This gave us hope.

We came home on the fifteenth day. I was exhausted and so was Neville. In came the people to provide oxygen, then the man who set up the nebulizer. They taught me how to use both of the machines and when they left, I panicked. This was the beginning of what would be many panic attacks for me. Most came after he died. I sat down on the sofa besides Neville and started crying. "I can't do this."

He hugged me and said "Yes, you can."

Chemotherapy gives you hope but really only prolongs your life. We would get excited when the scan showed shrinkage, but the next month it showed growth somewhere else. Neville started radiation after three months of chemotherapy. He went every day for five days, off two, and then on another five. While on chemotherapy, the itching stopped. Once they stopped the chemo to allow his body to take a break, he began to itch. I knew the cancer was getting worse.

This was the beginning of a long year. He was in and out of the hospital many times. Once, he got a rare bacterial form of pneumonia. Neville wanted me by his side at all times, and I wanted to be there.

Finally, that dreaded day came when they told me chemotherapy was not working. They suggested we call in hospice. Neville and I both knew what this meant. I had been a hospice volunteer for many years. He wanted milkshakes with coffee ice cream, which he loved. I read to him each day for about an hour—sometimes twice a day. He loved this. When I thought he was asleep, I quit reading and he would open one eye and just look at me. That was my signal to continue reading.

We talked about his wishes for when he died, and he asked for only two things: don't let him be in pain, and don't let him die alone. The only time he had pain was when the chemotherapy cracked a bone in his back and they had to cement it together.

Hospice was set up and we used them only for a week. Neville was getting weaker. On the night of October 3, 2012, I had to give him more morphine. If one can be lucky with chemotherapy and radiation, he may have been one of those. He was never sick nor in pain.

I knew from being a hospice volunteer that sometimes a loved one wants permission to die. That night I bent over Neville in the hospital bed and told him I loved him, and he had opted for the chemo and radiation so we could be together longer. I told him it was okay for him to go home to God.

He took one breath and that was the end.

\*

NANCY FABIAN

Nancy's 52-year-old husband Todd  
died from a heart attack in 2014

My husband Todd was an amazing man. He served in the Navy as a submarine man. He worked as a road grater for our local county Road and Bridge department. He loved helping people. He would go out of his way to do whatever he could to help.

In 2011, I sustained a traumatic brain injury. Todd became my caregiver while still working forty hours a week. We lived on a little farm about forty-two miles from town. Todd needed to be close to me so he asked to be transferred closer to home. We have two children, a son and daughter, and five grandchildren.

Todd had asthma most of his life but it had never been a problem. If he felt his lungs getting tight, he used his inhaler and the problem was solved. I had felt he was having trouble with it, but he kept insisting he was fine. He was so busy working and caring for me that he didn't want to take care of himself.

After about a week, I made him a doctor appointment. He was stubborn and didn't want to wait in town for his appointment. He wanted to get back home where we would both be comfortable. I was very upset with this decision but couldn't do anything about it. We went home.

The next day, Todd was feeling a little better. He came home from work and cooked dinner, we watched television and then went to bed.

The next day, he got up and went to work. We talked throughout the day, like usual. He seemed congested but kept saying he felt fine.

Todd called later that afternoon and said he was going into town to get groceries. He came home through the kitchen door with his arms full of food, went to the stove and yelled, "I can't breathe!"

I thought he was joking but went running into the kitchen and found him bent over the stove. I said I was calling 911. Todd said, "No. Get me my nebulizer machine." I ran to get it set up but it seemed like it took forever. Todd started it but it wasn't helping. I grabbed my oxygen and turned the tank all the way up. I could see Todd starting to turn color. I dialed 911 and told them my husband couldn't breathe. While sending the ambulance, the dispatcher asked if Todd was still conscious. I said that he was. She said, "Okay, that's good."

I could tell the oxygen wasn't helping, Todd was starting to look blue. I frantically told the dispatcher. She asked if I could do CPR. I said I knew how but didn't know if I could do it on my husband. She said, "You **will** do it."

Todd started to walk around and stretch as if trying to get more air. He walked into our bathroom, came back out, looked at me and said, "I'm dying." I said "No, you can't die on me." He collapsed in my arms.

I told the dispatcher what was happening. At the same time, I was using a second phone to call our children but no one was answering. I kept dialing and redialing. I finally got ahold of my son who lived fifty

miles away. He was on his way. I still couldn't reach our daughter. Her husband finally noticed missed calls on her phone while they were at the gym. I told them to meet us at the hospital.

The dispatcher told me to start CPR and coached me through it. I kept yelling at Todd to open his eyes and breathe. I kept doing CPR. The dispatcher said the ambulance was now outside, but at that point it had been nearly half an hour. I stopped CPR to run outside with the phone in my hand, but there wasn't an ambulance in sight. I started screaming, "It's not here! It's not here!" They had gone to the wrong house! I kept doing CPR on Todd. Finally, I heard my front door open. The ambulance had finally arrived. I was so glad to see them.

They started working on Todd but made me stay in the living room because I kept getting in their way. They put an automatic defibrillator machine on Todd and started a bunch of IVs. Even though it felt like they were taking forever, I thought Todd would just wake up and be fine. That didn't happen.

They loaded him onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. Just then, our son and his family arrived. I climbed into their car and we followed the ambulance, but it didn't seem to be going that fast. I was getting so mad and became hysterical. Finally, the ambulance started driving faster. My son started driving faster and was way over the speed limit when a policeman pulled us over. Oh my gosh, we're trying to follow the ambulance carrying my husband!

The policeman asked why my son was driving so fast. I rolled down my window and explained what was happening and begged the

policeman not to give my son a ticket. The officer said it was against the law to speed, especially after an ambulance. I kept repeating that my husband was in there! The officer said he wouldn't give my son a ticket but told him not to speed to keep up with the ambulance.

When we finally arrived at the hospital, I went in through the emergency room door. A nurse met me at the door and when I told her who I was, she said, "I'm sorry."

I yelled, "No! No!"

A doctor came out and said they got Todd's heart restarted. Our daughter finally arrived and we waited a few minutes for the doctor to return. He then explained that they had to restart Todd's heart in the ambulance and then again when he arrived at the hospital. Todd was connected to a lot of machines but alive. I was allowed to see him just for a few minutes while they prepared to fly him to a bigger hospital.

I went back to see Todd. He looked like himself except for all the machines and tubes. Our children each went in also. We decided how we were all going to go to the hospital two hours away. My son drove me, and my daughter and son-in-law drove their car. This drive felt like we were never going to get there.

Todd's brother lived down the street from the larger hospital, and was already there when we arrived. He took me to Todd's room and I sat in the corner chair. I told the nurses what had happened prior to Todd's arrival. He was hooked to so many machines and tubes. The alarms kept going off and they kept adding more IVs.

They asked if Todd had hit his head. I said yes, because I couldn't get him safely to the floor. He went sent for a CAT scan which detected no brain activity. I knew what that meant. I wanted my husband.

Todd's hands were swelling so the nurse took off his wedding ring. For the next two days, they tried everything. They even lowered his body temperature for twenty-four hours and then rewarmed it with hopes that it would restart his system. I kept hoping for the best but knew Todd wouldn't want to live life hooked to a machine. On Valentine's Day 2014, my love passed away.

\*

ANN JULIAN

Ann's 32-year-old husband Alan  
died from atherosclerosis in 2015

Alan and I had been friends before we got together. We married when we were seventeen, on his birthday. I was pregnant at the time with our first son. Now we have seven children together. At the time of his death we had been married sixteen years. Alan was going to school at the time. He already had an associate degree but wanted his bachelor's in computer science and in math.

His death came suddenly. Though he did have other health issues, none were with his heart. The morning before his death I had woken up and stepped outside. I was speaking to my mother on the phone. I went back in to wake Alan up and he did not respond. I had to give him CPR. I brought him back and ran to my mother-in-law to get her

to call 911. She came down and just stared at him and yelled at me. I called 911 and while I was on the phone he died again. I gave him CPR again and brought him back. When the ambulance arrived, they quickly rushed him out.

When I got to the hospital, I already knew. The staff was waiting for me and told me to wait in a room. Once they did that, I knew it was official. It seemed like forever until someone came in. When a man came in, he simply said, "He isn't going to make it."

I started crying and screaming, "Why? What do you mean he isn't going to make it? He's only thirty-two! He can't go. He's my best friend, my everything, my heart."

The guy had tears in his eyes. He said they were taking Alan to the cardiology wing and I could wait over there. As he said that, I saw them taking Alan and he coded again.

They took him into surgery and then to ICU. While I was waiting to go back to his room, I fell asleep. I wasn't even tired but fell asleep for two minutes. I know, because I looked at the clock right before and after. While asleep, I saw Alan in a dream. He was perfect. No missing tooth, nothing. He looked amazing and was surrounded by white light.

When I woke up, I knew. I tried to deny it, but I knew. The doctor came in the room and told me I would eventually have to decide whether to keep Alan alive by machine. I couldn't make that decision at that moment. I did however tell them not to resuscitate Alan again, because he told me he couldn't handle it again. I did it twice, the medics

had to shock him three times on the way to the hospital, and while in the hospital he coded five times.

Alan spent his last days in the hospital. My in-laws came but all we did was argue about Alan, mainly whether I was going to keep him alive. I already felt guilty because Alan was already on the machines that kept him alive, and he never wanted to be on them under any circumstances. His sister said she didn't care, that she would take care of him. The doctor said Alan would be a vegetable if we did, and he would have to eat through tubes. I told my sister-in-law she was being so selfish to let Alan live like that.

The nurse came in to check Alan's vitals. I had seen it when she came in before and checked his eyes. I told her, "Look at his eyes. He isn't there. His soul already left. This is just a shell. It's not him."

The nurse explained that because his brain had swelled so much, it caused his brain stem to snap. His brain had actually swelled so much, it was leaking from his eye sockets.

So he spent the weekend in ICU. I went outside to smoke and when I came back in, his sister was walking through the hall and said he just died. I flipped out because I wasn't there when he passed but when I got to his room, his heart was still beating. I laid my head on his chest. I was laying on top of him and listened as his heart took his last beats. He saved his last beats for me.

My life has change dramatically since Alan's death. We were inseparable. It has been so hard without him, and I'm still having a

hard time adjusting. He is always on my mind. I cry every day for him. It's my heart and soul that weep desperately for him.

I have no help. Alan's family kicked me out of our home and tried to take custody of our children. I had to start over from nothing. Alan was all I had. Now I have no one. All our friends were his apparently, because once he left no one talked to me. His family tells my kids I killed him. It's been a mess. He was the only thing that made life worth living. I hated life before him, and I hate it now.

\*

GAIL MARCHESA

Gail's 55-year-old husband John  
died from colon cancer in 2009

John Marchesa was a nice guy, sometimes to a fault. He worked for Home Depot and led a normal life. He was very good at math and was a joker. John first started losing weight. He then started coming home from work and going to bed. He was still too stubborn to go to the doctor until one day he went to work and was back home in less than an hour. By the time he saw the doctor and had a colon test, he was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. His attitude was amazing over the year he had left.

\*

DIANE MCMINN

Diane's 31-year-old husband  
Pat was murdered in 1995

Pat was born in Moncks Corner, South Carolina, and was the youngest of five children. He had two older brothers and two older

sisters who were constantly competing for time with him. They were the ages when you would think they would either be jealous of him or not want to be bothered by him. Instead, it was quite the contrary. His sisters, who were four and five when he was born, treated him like their own real live baby doll, and his brothers, who were seven and nine, took him outside on all of their little boy antics. He didn't even need a crib when he was a baby. He slept with one of his sisters.

His parents had all the help they needed. Pat was truly the spoiled baby. One of the neighbors even gave him a pony of his own to ride until he just became too tall to ride it. He was a country boy at heart, most likely stemming from having been raised primarily in the small town of McCool, Mississippi, from the age of seven. He loved his cowboy hats and boots and he enjoyed listening to country music.

Being that I was raised a city girl, we were a true case of opposites attract. It didn't take long, though, before our two worlds collided. Pat and I had both enlisted in the Navy, and that is where our journey began. I can honestly tell you that for me, it was love at first sight. When I first laid eyes on him, I just knew he was the one. He barely even said a word. It must have been the hat and the boots. I quickly learned to love country music, too. It wasn't beyond me to wear cowboy boots with my jeans every now and then either, something I had never done before I met Pat.

He was able to acclimate to city life while still maintaining his country roots. In high school, he was in the Future Farmers of America club and loved working with horses, cows, and pigs, as well

as working out on the land. At age seventeen, Pat joined the Navy in 1982, as an avionics technician. He was very dedicated and a hard worker, and soon rose in the ranks from an ATSR (E1) to an AT2 (E5). During his service career, he served on several ships deployed overseas. He also did a couple tours of shore duty. He served in the Naval Reserves, and also cross-served in the Army Reserves. In 1992, he went to work for the U.S. Postal Service.

From a young age, Pat loved spending time with children. His nieces and nephews absolutely adored him! That love for children was very apparent at home with his own children. The mutual love and adoration for each other was such a beautiful sight to behold.

Come July 1995, Pat was completely out of the military. By that time, Jason was seven, Kristen was four, and Pat didn't want to spend more time away from them. The children were thrilled to have him at home, and he was equally as happy! I was overjoyed to have our whole family back together again.

Pat and I took up bowling when we were stationed in Orlando. It was just a fun, inexpensive way to spend time together, as well as have a friendly competition. We continued bowling even after he got out of the military, and we played on several leagues together. While he was very good at it, I lacked skill. Although I never really was able to quite grasp it, I enjoyed every moment because we were together doing something we both loved.

Pat also enjoyed working. To supplement his income, he took a newspaper route during the early morning hours so as not to take time

away from me or the children. Also, never being one to shy away from hard work, he even did lawn work for others whenever the need would arise. He worked the midnight shift at the post office and got a few hours of sleep during the day.

On Friday, October 13, 1995, our perfect world came crashing down. The love of my life and father of our children was murdered just five minutes from our home.

That evening, I was babysitting the neighbor's children. Just before midnight, Pat carried our two children over to me. He was running late for work, so our goodbyes were quick. He and I had been calling each other back and forth earlier in the evening just joking around and laughing with one another. After our phone shenanigans, he laid down to get a couple hours of sleep before work, and woke a little late. Though he was only leaving slightly later than usual, I distinctly remember thinking he was being a little bit rough on his truck as it squealed loudly out of the driveway. I laughed to myself, though, and thought nothing else of it. After all, it was his truck.

Our neighbors returned home at around 2 a.m. I returned home only to realize Pat had locked all our doors, and I had forgotten our key. I repeatedly paged him but he never called back, which was very uncharacteristic of him. He knew I would never call him, especially at that hour, if it wasn't an emergency. I felt uneasy but never thought it could be anything as horrible as it turned out to be.

Finally, at 7 a.m., I took the children and drove to the post office. There I learned Pat had never made it to work. Unbeknownst to me,

earlier that morning the police received a call that someone was passed out in a vehicle parked at a flea market a mile from our home. It was 1 p.m. before I officially found out it was Pat. He was found dead with multiple gunshot wounds, the fatal bullet being in his chest.

My husband and our children's daddy was taken from us in the prime of his life by a senseless act of violence that has yet to be solved. I refuse to give in to the notion that I will never know what happened. His murder changed me. I am no longer the outgoing person I used to be. I am very guarded, live with social anxiety and severe trust issues. I was diagnosed with major depression, borderline personality, and various other mental health adversities years before Pat's death, it has only gotten worse. I have taken the necessary steps to deal with and get it under control, but I will never be the person I used to be.

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MARYANN MUELLER

Maryann's 53-year-old husband Mark  
died from a heart attack in 2014

My husband was the love of my life. He was so intelligent, warm, friendly, and ready to help anyone at a moment's notice. He was third in a family of ten children. He was a skilled mechanic most of his life. He also loved woodworking, a skill he inherited from his father. He created furniture, picture frames, and lathed wood into writing pens.

Mark had some health issues, but he was only fifty-three and I never thought I would lose him so young. We found each other in 2006, and married on Valentine's Day 2009.

On the morning of December 4, 2014, I found Mark standing at the bathroom sink. I asked him what was wrong, and he said he was feeling a different kind of pain. I told him to go sit in the recliner and relax, and maybe it would ease up. He had been having gastrointestinal problems and had just been in the hospital due to dehydration. If he sat and relaxed, I thought he would feel better but when I checked on him, he looked even more distressed. I asked him if I needed to call an ambulance. He said, "Yes."

Mark became unresponsive and the 911 dispatcher told me how to do chest compressions to keep Mark's pulse going until the medics arrived. I kept calling Mark's name while trying to do as the dispatcher instructed. When he was finally loaded into the ambulance, I followed behind with a friend driving so I could call family members to let them know what was going on.

The ambulance stopped once in the street and I found out later that they stop when the patient goes into cardiac arrest. I truly believe Mark was dead when they arrived at the hospital, because it wasn't long before the doctor came out to tell me Mark hadn't made it. I had no chance to say goodbye.

Mark and I married later in life than most. It was the first marriage for us both, so we never had any children. He would have made a great dad. We rescued and adopted three dogs: Pongo, Hannah and Max. Mark was so good with them and showered them with love. I hadn't realized until recently just how much they had distracted me from grief. Their unconditional love was immensely helpful.

I keep my life very simple, and that helps me make it through the days, weeks, months, and years. Losing Mark has shattered my life. I had lived alone many years before we met, and I'm now starting life over again. It's not where I thought I would be at age fifty-four.

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RHONDA NORRIS

Rhonda's 56-year-old husband William  
died from small cell lung cancer in 2010

"I wished for my husband." That always gets people's attention. I saw him in the paper one day when he won a trip. I remarked to a colleague that I wished he were my husband. I had never met or seen him before, I just thought he was so handsome. Little did I know that he would indeed be my husband.

I met him the following year at the school when I started teaching. We had a fairytale relationship of love at first sight, and a romance-infused marriage for twenty years. We had one child together and I inherited three sons from his previous marriage. He was the one true love of my life, the other half of me. He was always so full of jokes and laughter. He had a nickname for just about anyone he liked.

We found out he had cancer shortly after shoulder surgery. They initially thought he was having an allergy to pain medication. He was rapidly diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer with very poor long-term results. He was given less than six months to live due to the aggressive nature of the cancer. He asked the doctor how long he had. The doctor replied, "Maybe six months. Get your affairs in order." I

hated that doctor for his blunt, matter-of-fact words. But perhaps that better prepared us for what was ahead.

He lived eighteen months. His goal was to see our only daughter graduate from high school. He presented her with her diploma, and the very next night he looked at me and said, "Well, Rhonnie, the rest is lagniappe."

He had met his goal. He died early Labor Day morning and was buried a few days later in the family plot at sunset.

In one final gesture of laughter, the hearse leaving the church wouldn't start. My son was parked behind the hearse and I was in the next car. He came to me and said, "Your hard-headed husband won't let the hearse crank." My son had to jumpstart the hearse. The funeral director was mortified, and we were the talk of funeral homes for a while. We all thought it was humorous. One last joke before he left.

I did not cope for a long time. In one weekend, my child left for college and the love of my life died. A week later my mother was in intensive care. Without my sister and my daughter annoying me with constant questions about whether I ate, changed clothes, got some sleep, or had quit drinking, I would not have made it.

I am not healed yet. I still deal with bitterness over this entire situation. Fueling the bitterness is the absence of many friends who abandoned me when I needed them most. I cope and get by one day at a time. I'm learning to live my life even if I don't love it anymore. I'm doing the best I can.

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MARY POTTER KENYON  
Mary's 60-year-old husband David  
died from heart failure in 2012

David and I met in 1978, when I was working as a waitress the summer before attending college. We married in 1979, and the first of our eight children was a honeymoon baby, born less than ten months after our wedding.

Graduating with degrees in human services, neither of us were slated for a high-paying job. We struggled financially much of our marriage. David worked jobs as a social worker and in maintenance. I ran home businesses and picked up freelance writing work. We lived a frugal lifestyle to make ends meet. Despite our struggles, we loved each other and our children very much.

It wasn't until David was diagnosed with cancer in 2006, that I, as his caregiver, put him first. Our marriage changed dramatically during that time, and we learned what it was to become true partners in life. For the next five and a half years, we enjoyed a revitalized relationship, appreciating every moment we shared.

In 2010, David lost his job of fourteen years. It seemed like the worst thing that could happen to a cancer survivor, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Once he was home, I saw how weakened he was from chemotherapy and radiation and wondered how he'd managed to hold on to his job at all. He qualified for disability and for the next eighteen months he was home to help with homeschooling and watch the kids while I helped my mother who was dying from

lung cancer. A month after my mother died, our grandson Jacob was diagnosed with cancer. That was one of the few times I'd seen David cry, when he realized what that little five-year-old would have to endure.

During these months, David encouraged my writing. He believed my book would sell, and gave me time alone to write.

Our grandson's cancer went into remission for a brief period and then returned. I don't think David's heart could take it. He had had shoulder pain since radiation, so when he began having terrible shoulder pain, we didn't recognize it as a heart attack until the damage was done. He underwent stent surgery, came home from the hospital, but died in his sleep on the night of March 27, 2012, the day before his sixty-first birthday. I was fifty-two. Our youngest child was just eight.

I had a good eighteen months of writing and grieving before I needed to find work. I wrote furiously and frantically. Seven months after David's death, I signed a contract for the book he had believed in. In the ensuing six years, I'd go on to sign six more book contracts.

I found work first as a director of a small library, one that allowed me to bring my two youngest girls with me. Eighteen months later, I became a reporter for a local newspaper, then worked in library programming. I started speaking on grief a year after David's death. By then, my grandson was also dying. In 2018, six years after my husband's death, I began working as a program coordinator for a spirituality center. It's as if every life experience and every job I've held since 2012, has prepared me for this job.

I've discovered I feel most alive when helping others; doing programs, coordinating grief and other support groups, and talking about faith and spirituality.

Nearing seven years out from the loss of David, I can honestly say I barely recognize myself. It was through brokenness that I became a more caring, more empathetic person.

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MARY LEE ROBINSON

Mary Lee's 63-year-old husband Pat  
died from a sudden stroke in 2013

My husband Pat was sixty-three years old when he died. We met late in life and had way too little time together.

Pat was a West Virginia boy who joined the Army to get his education. He was very fortunate and was never called to combat overseas. Instead, he had a stateside assignment in Aberdeen, Maryland, where he put himself through school. After two years at the community college, he transferred to University of Baltimore and got a bachelor's degree in accounting. Upon graduating, Pat was recruited by the Department of Defense. He had his first assignment in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, and then transferred to Sacramento, California. He met his first wife in Sacramento and had two sons. It was also in California that he obtained his CPA and his master's degree.

Wanting to be closer to his folks in West Virginia, he put in for an assignment in Aberdeen again. He spent twenty-three years there as a civilian employee of the Army as a price cost analyst. Raising boys,

umpiring baseball games, and starting a tax practice on the side occupied most of the time until his wife died at age fifty-three. At that time, we had no idea we lived little more than a mile apart.

Pat wasn't home much while the kids were growing up, a truth that later reared its ugly head. His time was largely tied up trying his best to be a good provider. His relaxation came at the end of a pool cue when he could spare the time. He first learned to play pool from his dad, at age fourteen. As a teen, he lived in the downtown poolhall and became really good. In short, the kids and his wife rarely saw him.

Both Pat and his first wife were adult children of alcoholics, and his wife was an alcoholic as well. Neither had any idea what healthy family life was. I don't know much about what his wife thought, but Pat thought good parenting meant his kids never wanted for anything material. They didn't. When they broke things, broke furniture, well, they just went out and bought another. Pat's own dad wasn't home much and while he clearly loved his son, home life was chaotic and bizarre. Praise was offset by nasty criticism. Pat didn't have the faintest idea what a good dad looked like.

By the time his wife died of alcohol-related disease, the kids were in their late teens and had been in some trouble—skipped school, car accidents, drug experimentation. That's the trouble Pat knew about. Long after, the true extent surfaced after I came into the picture.

I met Pat on Match.com. On our first date, I thought he was the saddest man I'd ever met. I was divorced, but he'd been widowed for about eighteen months. His wife was gone and the kids were out of

control. I didn't plan on a second date but Pat was persistent, and the second one went better. A very shy yet handsome guy, he started to open up and relax. On date two, I learned he could dance. He had me with that question, "Would you like to dance?"

The more time we spent together, the more he came out of his shell and along with it came his wry sense of humor. We shared a similar world view stemming from military service, not only ours, but our family's service. Our upbringing was very different and there was considerable West Virginia suburban Maryland culture shock. None of Pat's family life ever involved entertaining at home or volunteer work. Mine was centered on it. Pat's home life was very insular. Mine was filled with friends and family all the time.

Our courtship proceeded and it was clear things were getting serious. At the time, his boys were both out of the house and seemed to be turning a corner. The youngest was talking about entering an apprentice program and the eldest was out of rehab and wanted to go to college. Both had dreams and goals.

Pat was close to retirement and wanted to move south, and he wanted me to go with him. We got married in South Carolina, and tentatively looked at homes while there on our wedding trip.

Some months later, we learned his dad was gravely ill. Pat was able to spend the last of his leave with his dad during his dad's final days. We then turned to attending to his mother's needs. Between the two of us, we had six elderly family members in three states for whom we were responsible. His mother was the eldest and the most needing

of care, and now her spouse was gone. It was pretty obvious where we needed to be, so we moved to his hometown. South Carolina would have to wait.

As the first few years passed, we learned his boys had been in a great deal more trouble than anyone knew, and were headed for more. They were in their early twenties, and Pat didn't have much authority over them anymore. Both were heavily involved with hard drugs leading to more wrecked cars and more arrests. The best thing that happened was that we were geographically away from them. After a time and more disasters, we were detached from them in more substantive ways.

When Pat's mother died and my dad was gone, there was no need to stay in West Virginia. We finally moved to South Carolina and built a home of our own design. We lived in it together for eleven months, and it was the happiest time of my life and certainly of our life together. We loved our new home, relaxed on the patio overlooking the lake, and enjoyed more peace than either of us had ever known. Pat would walk around with a coffee cup saying "I just love this place! It's so calm!"

For Valentine's Day 2013, we planned to share a bottle of wine by our new patio firepit. The day before, Pat walked out of the house looking healthy and about as happy as I'd ever seen him, with a big grin on his face. He had his pool cue and was headed to the poolhall to spend the afternoon with his new buddies. He never came home.

About 4 p.m., the phone woke me from a nap. On the other end was one of Pat's buddies saying Pat was having a stroke and was on his way to the hospital. When I got to the emergency room, Pat wasn't able to speak. He squeezed my hand a lot but would never recover. The bleeding was too bad.

For Valentine's the next day, I took a red marker and a ballpoint pen and on the palm of Pat's hand I drew a red heart with the words "my heart" inside, and closed his hand around it. I told him that he held my heart in his hand, and always would.

The nurses told me that he resisted opening his hand for them when they wanted to see what I wrote.

He was cremated with those words still on his palm.

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VALERIE STAGGS

Valerie's 47-year-old husband Ken  
died from a pool drowning in December 2009

I was always a sucker for guys who played in bands. Ken was the guitarist in an alternative rock band when I first met him. As his girlfriend, I eagerly slid into the life of a groupie, following him around town to gigs at hole-in-the-wall bars which I would never have ventured into if I wasn't "with the band."

Ken was a southern boy from the mountains of North Carolina, and I was a northern girl from upstate New York. When he took me home to meet his parents, his mom was mystified to hear that my

grandparents were farmers. To her, New York was one big city; none of Ken's family had ever traveled north of the Mason Dixon line. On the other hand, my parents were wanderers who joined the Peace Corps. In 1993, Ken proposed to me while we were visiting them in Poland. In 1995, we married.

Ken had been recruited by Pratt & Whitney in West Palm Beach as soon as he graduated from North Carolina State University. He worked in jet engine testing as an engineer then moved to other technology companies including IBM and Crossmatch then eventually to Motorola. Although the band broke up a few years after we met, Ken's true passion continued to be music and he played guitar as much as he could in his time off from work.

In 2002, I gave birth to our son, Ryan William Staggs. Although he hid his inclination during my pregnancy, Ken was quite obviously overjoyed to have a son. He cherished teaching Ryan golf and guitar and being a Cub Scout dad. I can still picture them snuggled on the couch, an open bag of Ruffles potato chips between them, playing video games or laughing at Sponge Bob together.

A few days before Christmas 2009, Ken was off from work and home with Ryan. My housekeeper, Cheryl, was at the house that day, tidying up before Christmas. She brought her son, Santino, to play with Ryan. Ryan was seven; Santino a year older. Ken had lunch and went outside to clean the pool. Fifteen minutes later, Cheryl glanced out the patio doors and saw Ken at the bottom of the pool. She tried to get him out of the pool, but he was too heavy. She yelled to the boys,

telling Ryan to call 911 and Santino to go get help. Santino found a neighbor who helped get Ken out of the pool then gave him CPR until the medics arrived. He was transported to the hospital with a heartbeat, but not breathing. He never regained consciousness.

Over the course of four days, I was faced with questions about organ donation, quality of life and taking my husband off life support. The doctors told me he was brain dead. I had to make the heart-breaking decisions about how to end his life. On December 26, 2009, Ken's heart and liver were donated to two people hoping for a chance at a longer life and my husband's life was officially over.

Trying to put Ken into words is like trying to describe a butterfly in flight. The blur of color and motion intoxicates your senses, leaving you with a buoyant feeling that words defy. After his death, a close friend defined him as accurately as anyone could. "Ken has never met a stranger," she told me. Although these words have described others before him, they have never more aptly applied to a person than they are to Ken.

Early on in our relationship, I realized that Ken was that once-in-a-lifetime person who managed to leave everyone he encountered with the gift of genuine friendship no matter how brief his contact with them. From the girl in the checkout line to the stranger at the bar to the man handing out paper towels in the restroom, Ken treated everyone with kindness and sincere interest in who they were and what they had in common. I could take Ken to a party where he knew nobody and by the end of the night, he had a dozen new friends.

I often asked how Ken got to know people so easily, people with whom he obviously had nothing in common. He genuinely enjoyed people. All people. Waitresses were always “sweetheart.” My friends were “sunshine.” He called strangers “my friend.” He found a common bond with everyone no matter what age or walk of life. He was just as likely to make friends with someone at Motorola as he was with someone from his little hometown in backwoods North Carolina.

The myriad ways that my life has changed since Ken’s death cannot be chronicled in the short space allotted here. In some ways I am lucky, and my life has remained somewhat the same. My parents are now, as they have always been, my support system, stepping in to fill the void wherever they can. I am blessed to have financial stability; I have my own career and can provide for my son just as Ken and I always did. Most of all, I have my son, my light and joy in a world that I have come to find can be very dark at times.

I have, however, discovered that death brings many challenges. For years after Ken’s death, I fought with school officials, trying to find help and understanding for my grieving child. Teachers and school counselors are ill equipped to deal with grief, a fact I found astonishing in light of the not inconsequential numbers of children who will lose a loved one before age eighteen. Adults have difficulty understanding grief, too. “I can’t come to Ken’s funeral,” one of my friends informed me. “Funerals just make me too sad.”

Unlike many widows who lean on old friends, I found little comfort in the friends who knew me as Ken’s wife. I found more solace

in women like me, who were alone and damaged perhaps not from grief, but divorce, difficult marriages or life's tragedies. These friends knew nothing of the person who was Ken's wife. With them, I could now be whoever I wanted, alone and damaged, but a survivor nonetheless.

I am closer to my son than I believe I would have been if his father had lived. We mourn our loss in different ways but share our grief with stark honesty knowing we alone can understand.

Most significantly, I was given the unique opportunity to help kids and families like mine. As I struggled to help Ryan with his grief over the loss of his father, I realized that the many grief services I hoped would benefit him were unable to provide the support he most needed—that of connecting him with other kids in grief who, through shared friendships, could provide support and understanding to each other. In 2014, I co-founded Pandora's Kids, a nonprofit organization that connects kids and families in grief through monthly events.

Watching the difference Pandora's Kids has made in the lives of the kids and families is a daily reminder that, out of tragedy can sometimes emerge newfound hope. This is the thought that keeps me moving forward on a path that is not the one I once traveled with Ken by my side. I don't know where this road will lead me, but I have hope that along with the sorrow I carry with me, I will also find joy in the people and experiences I have yet to encounter.

"Hello, my friend," Ken would have greeted them. And so shall I.

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KERRIE WEAVER

Kerrie's 55-year-old husband Brian  
died from metastatic melanoma in 2017

I met Brian in 1982. We had a long relationship before marrying in 1985. He was a mechanic by trade but during our early years he became a road service patrolman. He did this for over twenty-five years before the retirement of his bosses forced Brian to return to workshop mechanics. He loved the outdoors including golfing and looking after the gardens and lawns. He was a man's man with multiple handyman and building skills which meant any household problems were quickly rectified.

We produced two beautiful daughters within the first eight years which coupled with my son and daughter from a previous marriage brought our total number to four. He treated them all as his own.

It was devastating to learn just before our tenth anniversary that Brian had acute myeloid leukemia. He had two rounds of chemotherapy and was pronounced to be in remission. He then had an autologous transplant, also known as a stem cell rescue as there were no suitable matching donors for him. After three months of treatment he was allowed to return home. Six months later he returned to work which made him very happy. Ten years later he was considered cured and we celebrated this milestone with great joy.

In October 2015, two melanomas were discovered on Brian's left upper back. One was a stage two superficial spreading melanoma and the other was a stage three nodular melanoma. I was very worried for

him as I had previously had a melanoma excised from my upper arm and a skin graft performed.

In December 2015, Brian had both excised and was told that they had removed them all. His scars were huge but he recovered and returned to work, golf, mowing and gardening not only our house but his parents' home as well. In spite of continued severe pain, he had many tests and scans that showed he had no evidence of disease or reasons for this pain.

In November 2016, his specialist suggested Brian try Lyrica to ease what may be nerve pain. In December 2016, just three days before Christmas, Brian went to the hospital due to bright orange urine, thinking it was probably a urinary tract infection. I was devastated when he rang me at work to say the doctors had discovered nodules in his liver and lungs, and were pretty sure it was cancer. He had a liver biopsy and went home where we had a subdued Christmas.

Brian became quite ill and went back on December 29. He was tested again and they found it had now spread through his lungs and liver and was blocking his liver bile duct. He was sent home on palliative care however the care team was on holiday. I was left to take care of him with no support. We were also told it would be a while before his biopsy result as they were on holiday too. We set about ensuring everyone who needed to know the situation was informed.

On January 1, Brian had deteriorated further so I called for an ambulance and they took him back to hospital again. He had more scans and was told his condition was terminal. Our only hope was that

his biopsy showed the right DNA to try a special immunotherapy drug which could save him. Apparently, he couldn't have any treatment as the cost is so high that you can't start one and then switch later. He was placed in a specialist ward as the biopsy was still not done and the palliative care team was still unavailable.

Brian continued to deteriorate until his death later that month. The test for the BRAF gene came back negative. His official cause of death was renal failure caused from metastatic melanoma.

My whole life has been filled with funeral arrangements, financial arrangements, dealing with companies I needed to pay out and changing ownership of everything as the executor of his will. I went back to work after six weeks but as I work in retail there is nowhere to hide if I am having a bad day and grief attacks.

I miss him terribly. The absence of his touch, his hugs, and being told how much he loves me is so isolating. I feel so lonely and the pain is excruciating. I sit amongst his things and smell the aroma of him for comfort.

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CHASITY WILLIAMS  
Chasity's 35-year-old husband Darrell  
died from a lake drowning in 2009

Darrell was born in Carlsbad, New Mexico. He graduated from high school in 1992, and moved to the Dallas area that same year. He and I began our life together in August 1993. He had a very strong work ethic and was an account manager for Nestle Waters.

Darrell was a sports enthusiast and active as a football coach for the Lewisville Football Association. He also assisted with the Texas Tarheels Basketball organization. He played a strong role in his son's sports teams. He was his son's number one fan and mentor. Darrell enjoyed volunteering to help others and working with kids as he made an impression and touched each of their lives. Darrell was also a very strong father figure to his nephew Marcus, and we took him in as our own for some time.

Darrell was thirty-five when he died in a lake drowning on June 20, 2009. Always showing love, kindness and support, Darrell will be missed deeply.

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CARRIE WORTHINGTON

Carrie's 50-year-old husband Robin died  
from a ruptured abdominal aneurysm in 2011

My husband Robin and I married in 1989, had two children and knew each other for twenty-three years. He was a stay-at-home dad, so he was always home doing the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of the children and me. We were very intuitive with each other. Our love let us finish each other's sentences, or I would have a thought and Robin would say it out loud.

Because only one of us worked, finances were always a struggle, but we tried to find things to do with our children that were cheap or free. Robin saw beauty in everything. He taught us how to look at the stars and recognize constellations, or walk through the forest and

discover things high above or on the forest floor. One of his favorite things to do was to look for birds, recognize their song and teach us to listen to them sing. As it is in most relationships, sometimes it was hard, sometimes it was easy, and sometimes it was just comfortable.

The holidays were coming up. Everyone was getting very joyful and happy, and we were feeling rather positive about our lives. One thing that was a topic of many conversations was that Robin did not take care of his health as well as he should. Both his parents had passed away in their early forties, and I was always encouraging him to take better care of himself.

I came home from work on Monday evening after running an errand, unaware that anything was wrong at home. Robin was in bed when I arrived and told me he had been vomiting all day. I asked him if there was anything he needed. He said he was fine and would let me know if he needed anything. It was six days before Christmas, so there were deliveries that needed to be opened, wrapped, and prepared for the holiday.

From time to time I called out to see if Robin was okay, and he would say he was fine. An hour or so later I sent my son for some Gatorade since I knew Robin was probably dehydrated and needed to get electrolytes in him. He drank one but couldn't keep it down. Finally, around 11 p.m. I had to go to bed. Robin sat on the edge of the bed when I kissed him goodnight, and I made him promise he would try to drink the next Gatorade slowly to see if it would stay down. I said "Goodnight, I love you," at 11:05 p.m. and he responded the same.

I woke up suddenly at 3:30 a.m. The lights were on in our room and the hallway. When I sat up, I knew my husband was dead. I have no idea how, but I knew I would find him dead in the bathroom. I rushed to the bathroom and found him there. At that moment, I felt like life had become surreal, that all logic had stopped. Somehow I called 911 while my son called my daughter, who was at my mother's thirty minutes away. I don't remember much of the next few hours.

When the first police officer came and checked out the situation, I started to scream at him to save Robin. He gently told me, "Ma'am, he is already blue."

Days later, I found out that Robin had been vomiting pure blood. Had I known what was going on, he would have been in the hospital. He knew I would call the ambulance or take him myself. I don't know why he chose not to share with me how sick he was. I don't know why he chose to give up.

The coroner ruled Robin's death as a burst intestinal aneurysm. The internal bleeding stopped his heart. They told me it would have happened pretty quickly. He was gone in the blink of an eye. In just one moment, my life would never be the same.

I had a very hard time. It happened so suddenly and I was not expecting to be widowed at age fifty-two. I was not accepting the fact that Robin was gone.

A few months after first feeling that extreme grief, I felt a slight ray of hope. I had a moment of peace while listening to a Christian

song. It was a good feeling, and I felt a sense of peace for the first time since Robin died. There was hope; I felt hope. And then I received my message from heaven that confirmed everything would be all right.

I found a beautiful, perfect white feather under my phone on the passenger seat in my car. It was the beginning of affirmation that my husband was with me. When I was making positive choices and decisions, I would get this affirmation by a miracle of the feather.

The next several years I experienced complicated grief, and wasn't capable of moving on. There were times of joy and pain, laughter and crying, hope and desperation. I had to learn to live alone as the kids grew up and moved away. I have had to learn how to take care of our home, everything homeowners have to deal with. I have even changed our kitchen faucet and put in a new sump pump. I have had many other changes in the last five years. I still attend school, volunteer wherever I can, and have been blessed with more grandchildren.

I am not the same person I was at the time of Robin's death. I had to develop and grow as a new person as well as a new life. I could not have imagined that I would ever get through the pain and grief that I experienced. With the assistance of very special people around me, my writing and blogs have made a huge difference in my healing process.

\*

THROUGH THE EYES OF A WIDOW

She who heals others heals herself.

LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL

\*

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