

Compassionate Friend: Woman Puts Pain To Use As Volunteer

by DONNA HEALY of The Gazette Staff Jul 2, 2005



Arlene Priest is getting a national award for her work with Compassionate Friends, a group for people grieving the loss of a loved one.

For the past 23 years, whenever a parent in the Billings area has lost a child, Arlene Priest has felt compelled to send a personal note to the family.

"I have to do it because it meant so much to me," Priest said.

Her son, Marc, died of viral encephalitis in 1980, at the age of 21.

"At that time, it was just like my heart was ripped right out of my body. ? I was sort of moving around like a robot," she said. "I went to work, but I never knew how I even got from point A to point B. The first eight or nine months I can hardly remember."

Priest, 78, who lives in Billings, found solace through The Compassionate Friends, an organization for parents mourning the death of a child.

She cried through her first support group meeting of The Compassionate Friends and left determined never to return. But the monthly meetings kept drawing her back.

"You have to work through grief," she said. "You can't go over it, under it, or around it. You have to go through it, as painful as it is. Some people try to just close the door, but eventually it's going to erupt."

At the meetings, she found others who understood. Eventually, she became what the organization describes as a "seasoned griever," who could reach out to the newly bereaved.

For 20 years, she has been the group's treasurer. For 10 years, she was the Billings chapter leader and edited the chapter newsletter. In 1998, she became the organization's regional coordinator, overseeing 14 chapters in Montana and Idaho. In 1989, she started a sibling group for the Billings chapter. During the past 18 years, Priest has only missed two national conferences.

But this year's national conference, in Boston, will always be special. At the conference Saturday evening, Priest was to receive a national appreciation award from The Compassionate Friends. Past award recipients include Harriet Schiff, author of "The Bereaved Parent," and Karen Taylor Good, a singer who wrote the song "Precious Child."

As a Compassionate Friends volunteer, writing notes to bereaved families has never been part of her job description.

"I do it from Arlene, I do it as another mother," she said. "I tell them my son died at 21 and I know how devastating it is. I know that pain. I want them to know there's somebody out there that understands and cares."

She also sends notes to chapter members marking the birth and death dates of their deceased children and letting the families know she will light a candle for their child.

"Every night, I light a candle for someone," she said. "There's just something about lighting a candle."

She describes The Compassionate Friends as a group that no one wants to join. The average member stays about two years. Priest has stuck with it because she cares and because her own grief was so intense.

Reaching out to others was instilled by her hard-working parents, although the family was extremely poor. Raised in Great Falls and in the mining town of Neihart in the Little Belt Mountains, she was the youngest of 11 children. Her father, a miner, also took painting jobs and gave haircuts to keep the family afloat. But her parents commonly helped others who were in even more dire circumstances.

Priest also points to her son as her inspiration, her motivation for doing something that would make him proud.

"I just knew, I had to bring back some meaning back into my life," she said. "And I hope, when I see him, that when he says to me, 'And Mom, what did you do with your life after I was gone?' that he already knows."