

Haven Herald

Widowhood - A Woman's Issue

by Virginia McDaniel, MS

Director of Senior Living

Good Samaritan Society-Denton Village

Among older persons, more marriages end in widowhood than by divorce. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly half of the women over 65 are widows. Because women have a greater life expectancy and because they often marry men who are several years older than they are, widowhood is a much more common marital status for women than for men.

Though widowhood is statistically a "normal" part of life, and most women adjust over time, becoming a widow affects women financially, socially, physically, and psychologically. Depending on the woman's marital dynamics and one's support system from family and friends, the adjustment to widowhood can be very difficult.

I spoke with a gracious and stately 87-year old lady who had lost her husband due to illness just a few months ago. They had met in high school and married shortly after. Before he died, they celebrated 66 years of marriage. She noted that although her husband had been physically ill for 20 months, she was devastated to lose him because she had not expected to be left alone. One might assume that an older woman with many years of marriage would be better prepared to say good-bye and face life alone. As we discussed this further, I came to understand that in addition to the loss of companionship and love, she had lost the decision-maker in the family. She lost the leader of her family. He had been raised on a farm and later became a business owner. He had continued to direct their day-to-day decisions, even during his lengthy illness. Now, as a widow, she was faced with daily decisions that were daunting to her. She regretted that she lacked the courage to talk to him about dying. In hindsight, it might have helped her face the reality of losing her husband and transitioning to a new life in the days ahead. Now she finds that it is difficult to fill the hours of the day, and nighttime is even worse. Dealing with her husband's death has been the most difficult task she has faced in life.

As friends and professionals, we need to be very sensitive to the needs of widows, regardless of their ages or circumstances. A new widow may feel out of place among her friends who are couples. Extra efforts need to be made to help with this new stage of life. We need to go beyond offering sympathy; we need to help them discover new opportunities for growth and accomplishment.

Letter from the Executive Director

Fall approaches as a welcome friend after a long, hot summer. We adjust once again. We learn quite emphatically from the natural world that change is inevitable. What we've become familiar with will move forward to yet another transition. We adjust, and for the most part, we are grateful for the changes of the season, but for someone who has lost a life's partner, this could be time of painful reminders of what will never be again. The newsletter this fall is dedicated to the challenges and difficulties faced by widows, as they struggle to adjust to life without their spouse or partner. What has been familiar and predictable in their lives is no longer a constant, and the daily journey of life can become an overwhelming struggle.

We see many widows at Haven, and we try to help them through this painful time as they cope not only with their sadness and loneliness, but, also, with how to move forward. Every loss is significant, but losing your life's partner and best friend can be especially difficult.

We hope this newsletter will be helpful to all who have suffered this loss.

Jill Bellacicco



Simple Gifts

by Carol Jones

On September 11 of this year, I paid a visit to my husband's grave, something I do frequently. Yet I knew this visit would be set apart from all the others. Today was our 35th wedding anniversary and the first since my husband's death. It was also the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks on our country. While cities and towns planned their observations, I pondered how I would personally commemorate this day.

At first I recalled, like many others, where I was and what I was doing ten years ago. My husband and I, college sweethearts, had begun to celebrate our silver anniversary with a quick trip to New York a week earlier. Upon returning home, we selected engraved rings to exchange on our anniversary. Because it would be a Tuesday and a workday, we had planned a quiet dinner out that night to exchange gifts. When Tuesday came, I was too excited to wait.



"Let's exchange our gifts this morning. You never know how the day will turn out." So we slipped on our new gold rings, kissed goodbye, and began our day like everyone else, completely unaware of what was to happen.

Brushing these memories aside, I was determined to face this day. It was sunny, beautiful, and a Sunday, so I first took solace in church. Afterwards I went to the store, bought a small anniversary balloon, and then drove to the cemetery. It was filled with people lingering with their departed. I inserted the balloon into the vase of flowers on my beloved's grave. "Happy anniversary, honey," I said.

On the way back to the car, my hand reached down to clasp his wedding and anniversary rings, which I now wear on a necklace chain as final keepsakes.

What Worked for Me

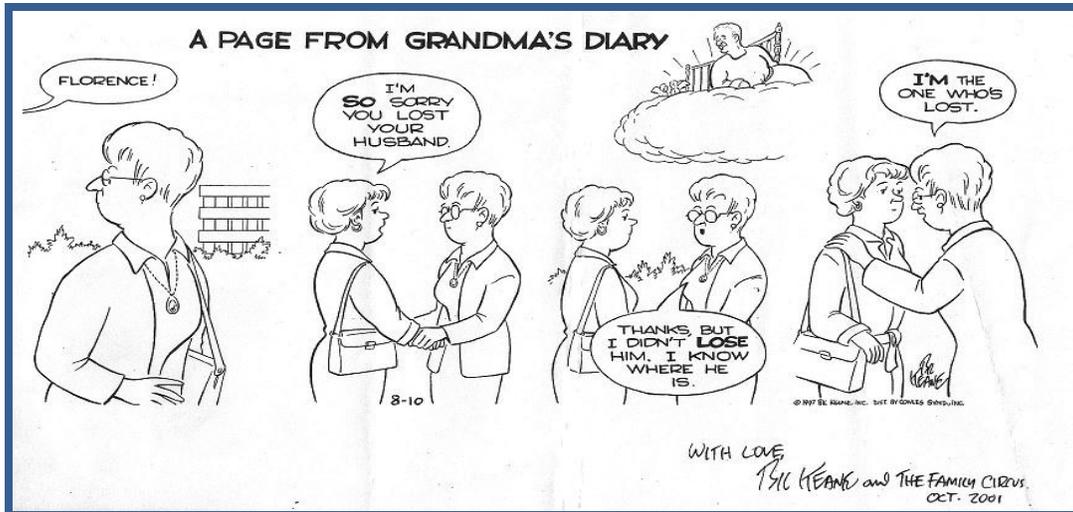
by Fran Nugent

When my husband of 25 years suddenly died, I was shocked and confused. In a daze, I went through the motions of doing what needed to be done. Notifying family and friends, planning a funeral, and figuring out the finances were all new to me. Once the shock wore off, I found myself very alone and lonely. It was interesting to me that I could feel alone in a room full of people.

I turned to what has always comforted me in the past – reading. I found many books that address the needs of the widow/widower. One of the books that I found helpful was "Healing After Loss" by Martha Whitmore Hickman. It provides daily meditations for working through grief. I read the one-page meditation each morning before getting out of bed. It was my inspiration for facing the day and its challenges. Reading helped me to recognize that I was not alone in the way I felt. Several of the books I read suggested involving myself in community activities.

Two years later, I decided to focus my attention on helping others who were grieving. I called Haven and signed up for the volunteer training. I am hopeful that through my experience, I can assist someone who is grieving. What works for me is being able to pay it forward.





Widowed at 85

by Mary Smith

He was her high school sweetheart. They married, had children and a busy life. With their retirement came twenty-five years of constant togetherness. After sixty years of marriage, he died, leaving her alone, without a beloved companion, partner and best friend.

This scenario is common. Because women generally live longer than men, most married women face the real possibility of becoming widowed in their senior years. They face the loss of their spouses, often while dealing with illnesses and physical and mental frailties of their own. They may be housebound, unable to drive, and living without many friends, having outlived most of them. They may have to endure years of decline with little pleasure and companionship to offset grim loneliness and a dark future.

So, how do these widows cope? And what words of comfort can we say to someone who has suffered such a big loss?

From my experience, which is limited, I admit, women in their elder years have gone through a lifetime of disappointments, hardships and grief that life passes out to all. They have grown a thick skin and handle their grief stoically and privately. The best example I can give is of my own mother, who was 85 when my father died. I never saw my mother cry, even while my father lay dying.

In the weeks after my father's death, my mother spent her days on the sofa, reading the letters they had written to each other during the war and other years of separation while my father pursued his education and my mother held down the home front. These letters brought my father back to life and allowed my mother to remember the sweet times and hardships they had known over their sixty years together. She didn't need to talk to anyone about her loss. She just relived their life in her mind and in doing so, accepted my father's death. She seemed to let their past fill the large hole in her heart.

So maybe we don't always have to say much to give comfort. Maybe we simply allow the elderly to remember their past.

This original drawing was donated to Haven by Frank and Sharlene Aukofer. It was given to them by Bil Keane and may be reprinted only with permission from Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Fall Schedule

Support Groups

Six Week Suicide Loss Support Group
Wednesday, September 26 – October 31, 2012
7:30 - 9:00 p.m.

Six Week General Bereavement Support Group
Thursday, September 27 – November 1, 2012
7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Six Week Widow/ Widower Support Group
Saturday, September 29 – November 3, 2012
2:00 – 3:30 p.m.

Space is limited, and reservations are required. Please contact Haven for more information.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail
after hours

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

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