

Finding comfort after unbearable loss

Emmaus Bereavement Ministry to help R.I. parents cope with the death of a child



FINDING SOLACE: From left, Barbara Murray, of Tiverton; Joelle and Paul Elliot, of Montreal; and Peggy Hassett, of Chelmsford, Mass., remember their loved ones who have passed as they participate in a session at Miramar Retreat Center in Duxbury, Mass., this past weekend. The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents retreat will be offered at St. Theresa Church in Tiverton on Saturday, Nov. 21. All are invited to attend regardless of the age of the child lost or the amount of time passed.

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BY RICK SNIZEK, EDITOR

DUXBURY, Mass. — They came from near and far in search of healing through a very special ministry dedicated to providing comfort to parents who have lost a child.

In a chapel, amid the warm glow of candles, each labeled with the name of a child who has passed – from newborn through adult – parents gathered to remember their loved ones, sharing laughter, as well as tears.

In a corner near the windows, during a break between sessions of the weekend retreat, parents bond over the same heartbreak they both have experienced. A mother from Montreal leans in to comfort a mother from Tiverton, R.I., both knowing the feeling of loss in their lives.



Joelle Elliott at the Emmaus Ministry Weekend Retreat in Duxbury, MA

Joelle Elliott drove with her husband Paul to this seaside Massachusetts hamlet from their native Montreal after reading online about the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents.

This unique, Catholic ongoing program serving the spiritual needs of parents was started in 2009 by the Franciscan Friars at St. Anthony Shrine & Ministry Center in Boston, in collaboration with Diane and Charley Monaghan, who sought healing following the death of their son Paul in 2002.

The parents of three, the Elliotts lost their fourth child, Thomas, to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome on August 19. He was only five weeks old.

“It’s hard to get time to grieve and to think about all these things with the other three kids at home,” Joelle said of the opportunity for reflection on their loss afforded by the weekend retreat.

“So, just time being away and being together has been really helpful and seeing everybody else going through different, but similar things too, they understand and you don’t have to do anything. You can just be yourself. That’s really nice too.”

While the mother with whom she shared an embrace while holding candles lighted in remembrance of their departed loved ones traveled a much shorter distance to take part in the retreat, the journey for any parent who outlives a child is no less arduous.

Despite the very methodical way of thinking that Barbara Murray employs in her career as an engineer, she still finds it difficult to process the death of Melissa, her beloved daughter who died nearly two years ago at age 32, a loss she describes painfully as “sudden and accidental.”

Murray, a parishioner at St. Theresa Church in Tiverton, learned about The Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents and has now become involved as a team leader. Murray has been working with Father Przemyslaw “Shemek” Lepak, pastor of St. Theresa and St. Christopher parishes in Tiverton to make the program accessible locally.

On Saturday, Nov. 21, St. Theresa Parish, in cooperation with The Emmaus Ministry will offer a “One-Day Spiritual Retreat for Grieving Parents” at the church, 265 Stafford Road in Tiverton, from 9:30 a.m.-7:30 p.m. The retreat is open to anyone whose child of any age has died by any cause, no matter how long ago. All are welcome, regardless of situation or religion.

Participants will share in several activities during the course of the day including a prayer service, candle lighting in memory of their loved one, small group sharing sessions, reflections and letter writing. They will also celebrate Mass together. “It’s a beautiful ministry. I hope it will be helpful for many parents,” Father Shemek said.

The pastor said he knows from experience how difficult it is for a parent to have to cope with the death of a son or daughter, whether young or grown, having been called upon to help bring comfort to several parishioners through the years in their times of loss.

“They wonder, how can this event — the death of a loved one — be part of God’s plan?” he said. They can either hold it inside or share it and acknowledge the suffering and pain, and Father Shemek views the retreat as an opportunity for parents to seek healing from the hurt they have been holding inside.

“We all need this on many levels,” he said. “We don’t have all the answers, no human being does.”

Murray said that parents who suffer the loss of a child have both a physical and emotional part of themselves ripped away, along with all the hopes and aspirations they had completely invested in their child.

“Many well-intentioned attempts exist to assist parents in recovering from their loss, including psychotherapy and support groups,” Murray said. “However, in an attempt to be all-inclusive and ‘politically correct,’ the spiritual need — or even the existence of God — is absent from many of these resources.”

For more information, or to register for the Nov. 21 retreat at St. Theresa, Barbara Murray may be reached at 401-624-8746. For more information on other upcoming Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents programs, visit www.emfgp.org.