

Share Line offers support for those who live with loss

By Teresa A. Parsons

Nineteen years ago, Art Mearns thought his life was over.

That's when, without warning, his wife committed suicide, ending 13 and one-half years of marriage.

Mearns credits his survival to supportive friends and to his children, for whose sake he felt he had to recover. "There were no support groups, nothing like that when my wife died," he recalled. "Most pastors were just not equipped to handle my kind of grief. It was a long, hard struggle."

The struggle included a second marriage that ended in divorce. A year later, Mearns, a Geneva resident, began looking for a way to help others who had dealt with similar losses. His search brought him to Carl Ritz and the fledgling Finger Lakes support group for divorced, separated and widowed persons, founded in 1984.

These days the group sponsors an activity at least once a week. But Ritz, program director of the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, and others felt that too many people were still cut off from support by fear and distance. So they conceived the Share Line, a telephone network of caring people willing to listen and share common experiences of loss and grief.

The Share Line program began last October with a workshop and retreat for potential participants. A month after a follow-up program in January, 1986, the network went "on line," publishing a list of willing listeners and their phone numbers, along with codes that indicate what type of loss each has suffered. Since then, the Share Line has attracted more than 20 people to answer calls from Auburn to Canandaigua, and countless callers seeking a friendly voice and a receptive ear.

Share Line callers "run the whole gamut," from the lonely and mildly depressed to those who are ready to give up. They are nurses, teachers, bankers and salesmen.

Codes for listeners are needed because those who are divorced suffer from a different type of pain than those who are bereaved, Mearns said. "Death is final. You can't talk to the person. You can't ask for forgiveness. Suicide leaves a feeling of

rejection on one side. Divorce is a hurt of a different type because there is rejection on both parts to some degree," he explained.

Bereaved persons are often haunted by chance remarks or things they neglected to do or say. One caller told Mearns she had remained by her husband's side in the hospital for days without a break. Finally, a relative convinced her to get away for several hours. After her husband died, however, the woman was obsessed with guilt over those few hours.

Another caller whose wife had committed suicide asked how he could have loved her and not have realized how disturbed she was.

"When someone calls over the suicide of a spouse, I know how they feel. I was in exactly the same frame of mind," Mearns said. "They say 'You seem to be doing all right.' I tell them it's a growth process. You don't do it overnight."

The "w" beside Agnes Herbert's name on the Share Line list represents two decades of learning to live with loss. Her husband died 20 years ago of a sudden heart attack, leaving her with a young son to raise. "Three people were there for me when I needed them — I had nobody else," she recalled.

"I said if I survived I would devote my life to children and old people — the underdogs. I always felt I owed Him (God) something for bringing me through everything. I felt I must be here for a purpose."

Much of the training Share Line participants receive focuses on what not to do. "We do not want you to perform a counseling function (We leave this to those trained for it!)," a Share Line brochure explains. Instead participants offer empathy and referrals when necessary.

"We're warned not to be judgmental and not to offer any more than your own experience," Mearns said. "I just listen and tell people what's happened in my life."

Next to the phone in his Geneva home, Mearns keeps a recommended reading list. From it, he introduces callers to his favorites, which include "Fully Human, Fully Alive," and "I'm not much, but I'm all I've got."

Herbert encourages callers to "think positive."

"I don't say too much. I tell them 'We've



Art Mearns



Agnes Herbert

all gone through traumatic experiences. If you want to pull out of it, you've got to think positive and pull out of it yourself," she said. "I tell them 'just do for today.'"

Both Herbert and Mearns also refer callers to various programs sponsored by the Finger Lakes support group, from Stage One, a program for people dealing with the initial shock of a loss, to Beginning Experience weekends, which are geared for a later stage in the grieving process.

"I try to get them to come out to something and meet people — just a little change," Herbert said. "Sometimes you can talk till you're blue in the face. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

"When they come out and see that they're not rejected, that people accept them for what they are, they begin to help themselves," Mearns added.

Occasionally, Herbert's callers are concerned about their confidentiality. "I tell them not to worry — it's between the telephone and the wires and that's it," she said.

Others, both Catholic and non-Catholic, are misinformed about the Church's teaching regarding divorce. "Some divorced people say 'I can't go to church. I can't receive the sacraments,'" Mearns said. "I tell them of course they can as long as they have not

remarried without an annulment."

Ninety percent of Mearns' callers are women, a fact he attributes to men's innate reluctance to admit they need help. "It doesn't hurt us to be able to confide in people," he said. "This group helped me to learn to come out with my feelings."

Year-round, he receives an average of two Share Line calls per week, but their actual frequency varies. Sunday afternoons and holidays, especially Christmas, are days when people are most often alone. And there are times during the winter, when his phone rings "all night long."

Fortunately, his employer, his son and his girlfriend each support Mearns' efforts. "I couldn't do what I do without them," he said. "But I don't really help people. I just listen."

If you would like a list of Share Line names and phone numbers, contact Carl Ritz at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, (315) 789-2686.

Although the Genesee Valley area ministry to divorced, separated, bereaved and remarried persons does not support a share line, there is a 24-hour hotline that lists upcoming activities and contact persons throughout the diocese. The hotline number is (716) 235-1090.

St. John Fisher offering program for gifted children

A second session of the Summer Arts Institute for Gifted Children will be offered Tuesday, August 5, through Saturday, August 9, from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at St. John Fisher College.

The program is designed for gifted children ages nine through 13 who are interested in sharing and learning a variety of art forms. The program includes a field trip to the Renaissance Faire in Sterling, N.Y., with transportation and fees included in the program's cost.

The fee for the program is \$105. For information, call (716) 385-8320.

Support group sets breakfast for Finger Lakes bereaved

Widowed people are invited to a breakfast Saturday, August 2, at 9 a.m. in the Sheraton Canandaigua Inn, 770 South Main St., Canandaigua.

Residents of Ontario, Seneca, Yates, Monroe and Livingston counties are welcome to

attend the informal get-together, meet new friends and share their hurt and loneliness.

For more information, call Claire, (716) 554-3420; Jean, (716) 394-5181; Nancy, (716) 526-5629; or Carl at the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, (315) 789-2686.

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