

# Parents need support after death of a child

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Maryanne Amisano summed up the feelings of many parents who have lost children through miscarriages, stillbirths, disease and accidents.

"You're not supposed to bury your children — your children are supposed to bury you," commented the parishioner from St. Mary Our Mother Parish in Horseheads.

Amisano knows those feelings firsthand. She experienced the death of her twin infants five years ago when she lived in Rome, N.Y.

To help her grieve during her loss, she turned to a local SHARE chapter, part of a national string of support groups for parents and grandparents who have lost children before birth up until their second year.



Patty Anuszkiewicz holds her late daughter, Nicole Michelle, shortly after she was born last December. Nicole died in February.

After moving to Horseheads about a year-and-a-half ago, Amisano took over the area SHARE group's administration, which meets the second Thursday of each month at a hall in Elmira's Arnot-Ogden Medical Center.

Such support groups are important to bereaved parents, Amisano said, particularly in the case of those who have lost a child through stillbirth or miscarriage. Mourning such a child can overwhelm parents, she noted.

"It's not just a matter of turning a switch and saying, 'OK, I'll just forget all about that bad stuff,'" she said.

She also explained that miscarriages and stillbirths can be especially difficult for parents, because to outsiders — and even close relatives — the baby "was a stranger." Not so to the mother, who carried the baby, nor to the father, who might indulge in pressing his head against his wife's stomach and talking to the child inside, she said.

Such sentiments were echoed by

Mary Mahoney, president of PARALLEL, a Rochester-based organization for parents who have lost unborn or stillborn children. PARALLEL matches grieving parents with other parents who experienced similar losses, Mahoney said.

Society has not developed adequate rituals and answers for parents who have experienced the loss of unborn children, Mahoney said. Hence the deaths of unborn children often compel parents to grieve privately. In addition, grieving parents often search endlessly for causes of their child's death.

"It's that aspirin they took, it's the drugs they took in college," Mahoney said, citing a list of "causes" she's heard parents concoct when they mourn the unborn child's death.

The loss of an infant child brings forth many of the same emotions in parents as those felt by parents whose joyous anticipation is dashed by death in the womb.

One Rochester couple coping with such a tragedy credit their Catholic faith and the support of family, friends and co-workers for helping them deal with the death of their baby daughter.

Born Dec. 23, 1991, Nicole Michelle Anuszkiewicz, the daughter of Michael J. and Patty Anuszkiewicz, died from a heart condition on Feb. 12. The girl's parents are parishioners of Rochester's St. Josaphat Church.

Patty cited the 11th chapter of St. John's Gospel as a source of spiritual comfort. Verses 25 and 26 quote Jesus as saying:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he should die, will come to life; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die."

"I believe Nicole's soul is still alive, just in a different place up in heaven," Patty said. "Even if the body dies, the real soul lives."

The fact that they believe in Nicole's new life does not diminish the pain the Anuszkiewiczes feel over her loss — and their desire to talk about her.

"I look for a good listener," Patty said. "I like to talk about the baby — how special she was."

Just as important as knowing when to listen to grieving parents is knowing when to leave them alone, said Michael, who added that he was "devastated" by Nicole's death.

"Be sensitive to when it's time to stop asking questions," he observed, though he added that figuring out when that time comes can sometimes be difficult for concerned people.

In such cases, parents generally agree that the best way to comfort them is to simply ask, "Is there anything I can do for you?" This can mean anything from bringing them a food tray, taking them to a grocery store, or listening to their stories.

Michael added that a parent's employers can play a particularly valuable role in this respect by giving an

## How Can I Help A Parent Who's Lost A Child?

- Don't try to find magic words that will take away the pain. There aren't any. A hug, a touch and a simple, "I'm so sorry," offer real comfort and support.
- Don't be afraid to cry. Your tears are a tribute to both child and parents. Yes, the parents may cry with you, but their tears can be a healthy release.
- Avoid saying, "I know how you feel." To say so may seem presumptuous to the parents.
- Avoid judgments of any kind. "You should ..." or "You shouldn't ..." is not appropriate or helpful. Parents may act in manners that appear to be somewhat extreme, but this is normal behavior, particularly in the first years following the child's death.
- Be aware that, for parents with religious convictions, their child's death may raise serious questions about God's role in this event. Do not presume to offer answers. If the parents raise the issue, it would be better to listen and allow them to explore their own feelings. They will need to arrive at an individual philosophy about this.
- Give special attention to surviving children. Don't assume they are not hurting because they do not express their feelings. Many times siblings will suppress their grief to avoid adding to their parents' pain. Talk to them and acknowledge their loss.
- Mention the name of the child who has died. Don't fear that talking about the child will cause the parents additional pain. The opposite is usually true. Using the child's name lets parents know that they are not alone in remembering their child.
- Be patient. Families respond to their pain in different ways — some verbally, some angrily, some by withdrawing and some by not talking.

Condensed from a brochure provided by The Compassionate Friends, Inc., National Office, P.O. Box 1296, Oak Brook, Ill. 60522-3696.

employee needed time off to deal with their grief — a sentiment Mahoney could understand.

To illustrate her point, she recalled how a former employer seemed more concerned with finding her replacement rather than in inquiring into her grief when she suffered three miscarriages — including one involving twins — over the course of one year.

"We aren't a society (concerned with) deep-seated rituals of death," Mahoney continued. "It's such a sin to rob people of that much-needed time."

Parents who suffer the loss of a child also generally dislike suggestions that the child's death was "for the best," observers agreed. Particularly galling to parents are comments about the child to the effect that "God must've loved him more than you," Mahoney said.

"They want to believe that God thought they were good enough parents," she said.

Eric Storath would wholeheartedly embrace Mahoney's comments.

"(Parents) want that child with them," he said. "They don't want them in a 'better place.'"

Storath's 13-year-old son, Jim, was killed when he rode his bicycle into a car six years ago. A year later, Storath and his wife, Sheila, joined an Irondequoit chapter of Compassionate Friends, a non-denominational international organization started in England in 1969 to help families who had lost loved ones. The Storaths currently direct their chapter, which meets the third Monday of every month at St. Margaret Mary Parish, 401 Rogers Parkway.

Storath explained that many fathers face another struggle in confronting the death of their child — the struggle to express their emotions freely. A number of fathers in his chapter have acknowledged their desire to mourn their child more openly, but because they have been socialized to keep a stiff upper lip, they subsequently repress some of their feelings.

"The guy is hurting as much as the woman," he said. "(But) the man's not supposed to cry."

To exemplify his point, Storath recalled that when his son was killed, many people would hug and support his wife, but "look past me."



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