Unexpected loss leads to grief — and inspiration

After Lauri Bauer's death, husband finds Barr-Harris center, helps build branch in Deerfield

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Scott Bauer's 43-year-old wife, Lauri, died unexpectedly last Jan. 5. Though it has been a tough year for Bauer and his three sons, he calls the holidays a particularly "awful" time for children dealing with grief.

"It's like walking on eggshells," he said. "My sons can't wait for Jan. 5 to be over. Thanksgiving was my wife's big holiday and we went to my brother's house. And now (for Christmas) we're going on vacation with another family."

He said he recognizes that many children have experienced a similar, devastating loss, but have neither the resources nor the support system that his family has to reassemble their lives.

After his wife died, Bauer knew he wanted to start a foundation to honor her memory, but its exact mission — which I'll tell you about in a minute — didn't become crystal clear until he learned about the Barr-Harris Children's Grief Center in downtown Chicago.

"There's not a lot of help out there for children who are dealing with sudden loss, and it doesn't have to be about death, it could be due to divorce or abandonment," said Bauer, a former trader who lives in Long Grove.

Barr-Harris has been around since 1976 and is one of the few places in the Chicago area where a child or teen, no matter his or her family's income, can go for one-on-one grief counseling and other services and not have to worry about being turned away for lack of money.

Judy Schiffman, the director of Barr-Harris, told me that patients pay on a sliding scale and that although the center sees children from upper-income groups, a very high percentage of patients pay less than $10 per visit.

She said the center serves a diverse group of children, ages 2 to 18, and a large number are from poorer communities. They've often experienced many different kinds of separation and have been exposed to multiple traumas.

"We see children whose parents have died because of an illness, murder, suicide or an accident," Schiffman said. "On the other end, we see kids whose parents are in the military and have been deployed (or are fallen soldiers), and children whose parents have been deported."

Barr-Harris emerged out of a 1960s project for adults at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. The project studied grown-ups who as children had been devastated by the loss of a parent or a loved one and who were in analysis working through the long-term effects.

In many cases, patients had struggled to maintain relationships, and battled depression and substance abuse.

Schiffman said the center tries to intervene early on with children by providing access to social workers and psychologists who help youngsters work through bereavement and loss. Last year Barr-Harris served 400 children for about 2,300 hours of treatment.

"Some children come to us because they've been disruptive and their lives are in such chaotic states," Schiffman said. "The goal is to help them get a better understanding of what sets them off as well as help them develop techniques to handle situations in a more appropriate manner."

The center, which is funded by donations and grants from foundations, also has sent staff members into schools and communities to help kids traumatized by violence.

Schiffman said that though many of Barr-Harris' patients come to the main downtown office, some children visit satellite offices at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Evergreen Park, La Rabida Children's Hospital in Chicago and Family Focus in Evanston.

In November, Barr-Harris opened a new center. And this is where Bauer comes in again.

The Barr-Harris/Lauri Bauer Children's Grief Center, which opened in Deerfield, is funded by the Lauri S. Bauer Foundation for Sudden Loss (tulipsforlauri.org).
“Our goal was to partner with Barr-Harris and help as many children as possible,” Bauer said.

He said he began to understand how important finding the right grief counseling setting was earlier this year as he and his sons, ages 17, 14 and 12, sought therapy. He said he wanted a group setting, but his sons preferred a one-on-one experience.

Eventually, each landed in the right place, but Bauer said all of the jockeying made him realize that if seeking help was difficult for someone — such as himself — who had resources, then it must be nearly impossible for someone who lacks means.

He said the economy has left a lot of people without jobs and health insurance.

“Grief doesn't wait until you find a new job,” he said. “My kids and I, we talk, we have a great, open relationship. But sometimes you need an unbiased, unemotional ear and we don't want people to be turned away because they don't have the resources.”

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