

the
SISTERHOOD
of WIDOWS

SIXTEEN TRUE STORIES *of*
GRIEF, ANGER *and* HEALING

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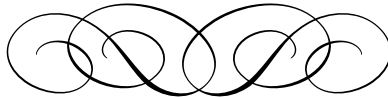
Chapter 1

TAKE THE TIME TO REALLY LEARN WHO YOU ARE

*By continually facing your problems honestly and objectively,
you become a more confident and competent person.*

You become stronger and more self-reliant.

—BRIAN TRACY, *Maximum Achievement*



I had lost a pregnancy and thought it would be hard for me to get pregnant again. Adoption was a long wait unless we would consider a non-white child, so when the opportunity came to adopt James, at eight months of age, we simply took it. Little did we know what was about to happen. A few months after adopting our baby boy, I scheduled a doctor's appointment for what I thought was a bladder infection.

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“I have the flu and maybe a bladder infection. I’m getting up in the middle of the night to pee.” The doctor started laughing and asked if it had occurred to me that I might be pregnant. That’s how we got started. Our three boys were within three years of each other. James appeared to be the catalyst to the next two boys and our family of three was now five.

James was just this great kid until his fifteenth year when drugs took control of his life. I don’t know whether the fact that he was adopted or that he was half black in a white family was what drove him into this dark period of his life.

As parents, both of us dealt with what James was doing much differently. Mike, a Police Officer, believed in strict discipline. He wouldn’t meet James half way; give up the drugs, period. I, on the other hand, reacted by crying and begging Mike to work with him, but they would always end up fighting. Several times James was told to leave. He would eventually come back home, but the effect on the two younger boys was not good.

James was living in the south end of the city and was in constant trouble. He decided to move across the country, and we were relieved because with all of the torment and troubles, we just wanted him out of our lives. It was too much stress on our marriage and on the other two boys. James’ name had been in the paper and Mike was extremely ashamed. You couldn’t buy James a job because he had such a bad reputation. James would call once in a while for money or to talk and even once to tell us that he had gone to a rehab center. He sent us a wonderful letter but when he got out, he went back into his old life and once again drugs controlled him. Mike still had contacts with the police force and a friend would check the system to see if James was in or out of jail.

James was out of our lives, but the guilt we lived with was unbearable. We never went to visit him and kept hoping he would get well and come back home with his act together. But that was not in the cards and James ended up committing suicide.

The last six years of his life he lived alone and I didn't want him to come home, because I didn't think my nerves could take it. Mike couldn't take it either and our marriage suffered greatly, but how can you turn your back on your child and live with it? I can't even begin to tell you the guilt I felt.

James was one tough little customer and I never would have thought that he would consider suicide. I am not sure what he was thinking, but he must have felt that he couldn't pull himself up again and just gave up. Losing our son, James, is something I will never get over and there are really no words to express how I feel. Your children just shouldn't die before you.

At one point James had a really nice girlfriend that we used to talk on the phone with. I spoke with her when they broke up.

She said, "I just can't take it anymore. He has sold my TV and this and that."

James would get frantic for drugs and would do anything for the money to buy them. As a youngster, he would sell all the stuff we bought him for drug money. Mike and I never really talked about it and so it became another unresolved issue in my life. I wish we had gone to visit James before he died. There are still so many things I don't have closure to and now I never will. James died alone and must have felt we never loved him. How can I live with that? I went to a counselor because I was tormented that I had not made an effort to go see James when he was alive.

I was always a good girl, but if I did foolish things I knew it was my decision and not the fault of my parents. I have so much guilt over the death of my son that sometimes it just chokes me. Mike's parenting policy of tough love and my much gentler approach caused many arguments.

Counseling didn't help repair the rift that was growing between us during James' life nor repair the damage that was done when his life was over.

When Mike started drinking again after eight years, I was very angry. Whenever he got upset he would escape to the Legion and leave me at home alone to deal with whatever was making him mad. I couldn't always count on him when I needed him the most.

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I felt that he was nothing more than a hypocrite when he talked about James' drug habit. Our family of five, once surrounded with joy and full of life, was suddenly immersed in darkness and anger.

It was about six months after James died that we moved out to the country. Despite all the troubles with James, I have a lot of good memories of our old home. Memories of the kid's tree house, the pool table, the basketball games and the wonderful family times still remain with me today. This new house in the country helped Mike and I grow closer, but the core of me still blamed him for the troubles we had in our family. Little did I know there were more troubles on the way.

Mike was losing weight and seemed tired a lot. His stomach bothered him and at one point I thought he had gallstones. We thought they would have to remove his gall bladder, but he golfed every day and seemed healthy so I really wasn't all that concerned. By the time they diagnosed him with pancreatic cancer it was too late. There are no words to describe the impact of that single word: CANCER.

When my father died ten years ago, they said they couldn't treat the cancer, but they could treat the man because they knew he wouldn't live long enough to receive chemotherapy treatments. I remember telling him that they just wanted to build him up for it.

I couldn't bear to tell him the truth because Dad was in his seventies and he wanted to live longer. But when Mike first got sick they were going to put him on chemo and that gave me hope that he was going to be o.k.

Later Mike was very sick, but they released him from the hospital. I suppose there wasn't anything they could do for him there than I couldn't do for him at home. I asked the nurse when I should bring him back. She just looked at me and said, "you will know." I had no idea what she meant at the time, but she was right. When the time came I just knew.

Even though he was so sick we never talked about the cancer or what the future might hold. We avoided the subject. I'm sure Mike knew he was dying,

but he didn't want to talk about it. What could either of us really say that would make any difference?

Mike didn't want to hear anything but positive thoughts that spoke about the future. I remember the Minister that came to visit Mike in the hospital. He didn't want her "talking gloom and doom" all the time. She would ask him if he was 'ready' and he didn't want to hear it. He did welcome Extra Mural; however, because they would talk about booking tests for him in a week's time and that gave him hope that he would recover.

We were married for thirty-five years when Mike died. We didn't preplan our funerals but I had an idea of what I wanted because of James funeral three years earlier. We had our cemetery plots because Mike's parents had bought them as part of the family plot. Paul, our second son, was thirty years old at the time of Mike's death. He took on such a leadership role in the preparations. We had Mike cremated and then held a memorial service at a local church. There was standing room only and I got Christmas poinsettias to place around his picture.

I think a lot of people saw the writing on the wall, but I was still in a daze. I wasn't anywhere near ready to accept that Mike was dead. The ladies in the church put on a luncheon and it couldn't have been better. Everyone was just so helpful and willing to do anything for me. The funeral parlor kept the ashes and in the spring we had a private burial service.

Mike had a lot of friends and he was involved in so many things that I just couldn't invite everyone to the burial. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to keep it contained and too many people would be there so we kept it to a small service.

We had already put up our tombstone when James died and so all that was left was adding Mike's death date. Mike had everything organized so that it was easy for me when I went to the bank. It's hard to fill out all the forms and it all seems more difficult than it is because you just can't think. Even though everything was organized, there was still so much to do; different people to contact, death certificates to deal with and so much more.

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I had to have \$10,000.00 within thirty days to pay for everything when Mike died. It all went on my Visa until I got the paper work completed. I couldn't believe how expensive it was.

Thinking about it now, if I have any extra money I might look into prepaying my own funeral. I went in last fall to update my will and I also did a living will. After Mike's death, I realized how important it was to have your paper work done so your family doesn't have to deal with it.

Years ago Mike was on his way home from work when he came across a huge accident with lots of cars piled up on the highway. Mike got out of his car to help and was hit by a bus. He was hurt really bad and was never able to go back to work so he took an early pension.

Afterwards Mike went to university on student loans to get his degree. At that time he was on crutches and it was hard for him to get around. He had been admired for getting his degree with his leg all beat up. They had done over twenty-one operations on his leg. They really tried to save the leg, but in the end he lost it.

On the first anniversary of Mike's death we wanted to do something special in his memory. Paul went to the club his father had been a member of and arranged a golf tournament and dinner. It was a massive undertaking and over one hundred and fifty people attended. The auction raised a lot of money and all of it went to the university in Mike's name as a bursary to help students with disabilities get their degree. At the time, I wasn't really up for participating in the event but I knew that it would be a healing process for both the boys and I.

Time was moving on, but I was still locked in a sea of emotion ranging from guilt to grief to anger. Last summer I was visiting a friend and she knew I was having trouble coping. She knew this counselor and suggested I see him. I called him and we spoke for awhile on the phone. I told him about James dying and how I partly blamed my husband but then he died. I asked him to explain to me how I could be mad at a dead man.

I shared my feelings of grief and guilt and I told him I was angry and hurt. We talked about being stuck in the middle of two very different painful experiences and that I had to find a way to break through it all. I knew then I needed help and so I sought a counselor closer to where I lived. In time, she did help me to understand all the emotions I was going through.

All my friends would say, "You and Mike did everything you could do for James" but in my heart I didn't feel that we did. I had yet to realize that Mike did the best he knew how to do and I did everything I could. I had to learn to forgive Mike and myself.

Not an easy task and one that I am not sure I will ever truly achieve. Now I feel less anger, but I still have a lot of sadness and grief.

I said things to my counselor that I have never been able to say to anyone. There are some things that we just need to keep close to us. People knew James got into a lot of trouble, but I loved him because he was my son and people knew that there were issues with Mike, but I didn't want to tarnish his reputation or lead anyone to think anything bad about him.

The anger and hurt I was feeling after James and Mike died was eating me up inside. I had to find a way to rid myself of it. How could I be mad at Mike for dying? How sad that James was so hurt, so troubled inside that he felt he had no other choice but to take his own life?

I was terribly depressed after James died and then when Mike died three years later it almost sent me over the deep end. I was spending all my time in my bedroom watching TV. I wanted to do something, but I wasn't sure what. I didn't want to spend another Christmas feeling sad and off balanced.

I knew I had to pull myself together and that's when I decided to go to the Grand Cayman Islands. I had a place to stay for two weeks because my friend's daughter was coming home for Christmas. I didn't know when I would return and I didn't make any specific plans, so I purchased a one-way ticket and just went. I think I was willing to do just about anything to get out of my surroundings for awhile.

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I did things that I never had an opportunity to do before, like swimming with the dolphins. I have a picture of me with the life jacket on and I just love it. I'm so proud of myself; renting a car and driving around the island, stretching myself and doing things I have never done before. I would go to the beach every day, read a book and go swimming. That was heaven to me and it allowed me that much needed time to begin healing.

When I was home, I felt like I was carrying around a two hundred pound bag of grief. I still carried the pain and grief in the Caymans, but I felt separated from it and in a way I felt lighter. It is almost impossible to explain and something that just simply existed; an entity unto itself. I felt relieved from the pressures of my life that I had been immersed in for so long a time.

I was so desperate after James and Mike died, for some sort of connection that I went to a psychic. I'm not sure if she was simply reading my emotions and then feeding them back to me, but she seemed sincere.

She picked up on the fact that James was a really troubled boy with a lot of demons and that his death was pretty well inevitable. A lot of stuff she did tell me was pretty amazing and when I went this past year she told me that I was going to go away. Perhaps she helped me to discover that I truly love living in the South. When I'm home I feel surrounded by sadness, but those feelings don't overwhelm me when I'm away in the Cayman Islands.

The high cost of going away is beginning to take its toll and I have to figure out a way of financing more visits. I thought about selling the house, but I have such great neighbors and they really look out for me. I have also thought about putting an apartment in the basement. I don't need the money to pay the mortgage, so I can save it and use it for my trips. I need to take my time and make sure that whoever I rent the apartment to is someone I feel comfortable with, someone I will enjoy having around. I want to get the back yard paved too and all of these projects are making me think that I really do have a life; a reason to get up each day.

I'm finding out things about myself I never knew. I got married when I was twenty years old, which is just ridiculous when you think about it; too young! I was so in love and it was what I wanted. Mike always took the dominant role in our relationship. For example most of our vacations were centered on the Shriners because he was a Shriner. We also went on cruises and the year before he died we went to Myrtle Beach because he was a golfer. I enjoyed the vacations because I knew he was happy and I always found a way to fit in things I enjoyed as well.

Now I get to pick what I want to do. It isn't that I don't miss him and the times we spent together, but I do enjoy making some of these decisions. All of a sudden I have no one to consider but myself. I don't have to worry about losing my home because we both had such good pensions.

My friends were always asking me to visit or go out with them. I would say yes, but later would call and make excuses for not going. I didn't want to be with people because it was just such an effort to socialize. I didn't feel like a whole person anymore. I felt like I was missing a part of myself. I sometimes find it hard to be with others who do seem whole and complete.

My friends soon figured out that my excuses were just that and began visiting me every Wednesday night. Most of the time when they arrived I was in tears and they would try to lift my spirits. I have been on sleeping pills since James died. I hate to admit that I'm dependent on them, but I know I cannot sleep without them.

It's been a long road of suffering and grief, but it does get a bit easier and I feel like I am ready to move on with my life. It's not an easy task and one that takes a great deal of effort, but I am at least ready to try.

Most of my friends are married and it's hard to find someone to do something with that does not have commitments with their significant other. I know I need to make some new friends; friends who are free to just pick up and go at a moments notice.

That first year was definitely the hardest. I tried to talk myself out of my depression by saying that I'm lucky to still have my two boys, my friends, the

house and my health. I just couldn't get myself out of it and all I wanted to do was lie in bed or sit on the couch. I think it is part of the grieving process to get past that first year and all its anniversaries. I can feel that the pain is getting less and I'm looking forward to this summer and having my friends over to sit on the deck.

When I was in the Cayman Islands, I was out in the water and there was this man swimming by. He was attractive and strong and I found myself looking at him. I was surprised by that, not that I wanted to meet him, but that I was noticing men again.

I don't know if that means that I want to do anything about it. I'm independent now and I'm enjoying making decisions on my own. But it made me realize that it is o.k. to admire another man and that I wasn't disrespecting my dead husband.

I have also come to realize that although I wish Mike was still with me, I don't necessarily want to get involved with anyone right now. If I did, it would have to be a very independent man that would let me do my own thing and I can't imagine that ever happening. I don't know how things will unfold and I'm not looking, time will tell how that works out.

I don't know how my two boys would react, but I think that they would be happy for me. My mother was a widow for five years before she got remarried at age seventy-four. She is really enjoying being married again so I know it does work.

I still get the odd thing in the mail with Mike's name on it and it's hard to see. Mike was six years older than me, but his dad lived to be in his eighties. I just thought we would grow old together and that I wouldn't be widowed young. I still can't believe that I'm on my own. Sometimes you feel like you're out there on thin ice all alone and you're not quite sure what's going to happen.

I miss him and miss not having him here to love me. I miss driving home at ten o'clock at night and having him worrying that I get home safe. Someone who loved me no matter what—that's what I miss.

WORDS *of* WISDOM

TAKE THE TIME TO REALLY LEARN WHO YOU ARE.

TAKE SOME RISKS, ENJOY LIFE AND MOST OF ALL BE HAPPY.



NEXT CHAPTER