



An August 2015 note from Joan Shirley, as one victim to another and as the Victim Advocate for the Resource Center for Victims of Violent Death

- SIBLINGS -

The definition is from Old English - sibling - "relative, kinsman," from sibb - "kinship, relationship; love, friendship, peace, happiness,"

Are you a grieving sibling or have a sibling survivor in your family or have a friend of any age who is grieving the loss of a brother or sister? Then this newsletter is for you!

My daughters, Kirsten and Karen, have helped me write this month's newsletter, sharing their thoughts and memories of their experiences as grieving sibling survivors; they and I hope it helps other siblings out there. It can help the rest of you as well.

Sadly, surviving siblings of any age may become what is often referred to as the "forgotten mourners." While parents usually receive most of the support of relatives and friends, siblings generally receive less; especially adult siblings. Our work here at the Resource Center tells us that siblings of all ages need care, information, understanding, support and so much more in their personal journey through their grief.

When a child is taken in violent death, who do you normally see on TV? Think about it, isn't it almost always just the parents unless the victim was an adult and their parents are no longer living? Most newspaper articles focus on the parents but what about those surviving siblings whose lives are no less affected than their parents? Their lives are just as irrevocably changed; however, they also have different needs from their parents. Let's quickly look at the specific needs of siblings; starting with very young children and working up to adults. Although this is in age segments; **all siblings may experience any of these different needs.**

Very young children and preschoolers sense that something is wrong and wonder where their brother or sister has gone. They

can't understand death. They are scared; they need reassurance of safety, stability of schedule and family events (Christmas, birthdays, etc.) and lots of love. They pick up on the emotional upheaval in their family and may be angry, cry, lose their appetite, have tantrums and anxiety attacks.

Preschoolers may revert to baby-like behaviors. Very young children may not go to any death remembrances; viewings or funerals. They may simply be told that "Jimmy went to heaven" and that may be enough explanation for this aged child.

Older children may realize for the first time that death is real. They may want and need the gruesome details of what happened only to have adults unwilling to talk about them. Children of any age may experience survivor's guilt; "They only care about

Jimmy now; he was the best.” They may believe that death is a punishment; becoming afraid that if they do something “bad” that they might die. They may feel shame. They may feel a strong need to support and comfort their parents. Some children may become “the adult” in the family because their grieving parents are unable to care for other siblings. Worse, they may completely ignore the pain and act like they are “just fine and in no need of help; they’re kids, they will be fine.”

Preteens, teenagers and young adults live in an intense world of self-discovery, concerned with life, identity and status and peer pressure; tightly bonded with their peers and beginning to disengage with their family. All children’s school/college work may reflect the stress and trauma that accompanies sudden and violent death. These siblings are basically insecure and they don’t like to be considered “different” in any way; many do not want to deal with death. They may start self-destructive behaviors; picking fights, dangerous behavior and alcohol or drug abuse. Often they do not participate in family therapy or support groups but may depend on their friends and adults outside of their family for support and understanding. Often, sadly, parents retreat into their own grief, addictions, or jobs which leave little room to deal with their living children of any age.

Adult sibling survivors often grieve alone, unable to speak to their older parents about their sadness for fear of upsetting them. Often siblings are allowed just 3 days of grieving by employers and expected to be

“just fine.” Siblings are often forgotten if the sibling was married and the surviving spouse and children get most of the sympathy. Sometimes there can be feelings of guilt, abandonment, and loss of innocence, fallout from the family, fears, anxiety and an inability to sleep. If the loss of a sibling leaves one as the only surviving child in a family, often siblings feel the burden of providing for all of the family’s future plans and needs; “It’s all up to me now; I have to have children, I am the only one left to carry it all on and care for my parents as well.” Often families experience breakdown as there may be mistakes, emotional blowups or neglect of some adult siblings by other siblings. Each family has its shared history and these experiences and bonds are now shattered and the history has a void that cannot be filled. Often siblings grow closer with age but now, that is impossible for the ones who are left behind.

Most surviving siblings become self-sufficient, courageous, strong people over time but will greatly benefit from seeking out support and help from others. Excerpts and paraphrasing from “Helping Children Cope with Death” Madd Victim Services

Now let's see what our (Wayne's and mine) daughters have to say about their experiences; both are women of great strength, accomplishment and courage....





Karen, left front, Kirsten, in the 2nd row, and Joan Shirley right front, on Sandia Peak in June 2015



Kirsten, (Kear/sten) age 25 in 1999, lived away from Albuquerque when Kevin was killed, said:

- “His murder shattered the underlying beliefs that I held before; I was safe, nothing bad was supposed to happen and now it can occur at any moment. If God controls these things; why did He let this happen? I was vulnerable! Bad things do happen to good people. The legal system is supposed to catch the bad guys and put them away; not having to persuade a jury to do it. I still struggle with my beliefs and faith is still difficult.
- Friendships changed/Relationships were redefined and this was natural and inevitable. People didn’t want to talk about the difficult things so I felt isolated and distant. People cared but had no idea how to help. They wanted to fix me; they couldn’t. People were unable to be with me

after a couple of years; I had changed; they hadn’t.

- *I depended on friends in support groups, work and acquaintances. I left behind old friends because they didn’t want to hear that I was sad, angry or constantly hurting. My best friend didn’t understand my anger but anger was easier than the sadness of grief. I needed more than she could give so we aren’t close as we used to be.*
- *Support groups and counseling were critical to my recovery and acceptance of the loss. I needed people who would just understand without wondering if it was too much to deal with. I could just be myself, talk and support others.*
- *Information flow was difficult since I was away from home. I found out later than everyone else that Kevin was killed and didn’t know what had actually occurred until I read the newspaper after I returned to ABQ since information started with my parents and filtered down from there. Info was 2nd hand and I had to ask several people to try and put all of the pieces together.*
- *Lack of an arrest for 7.5 years and lack of “justice” for many more years. Then the trial and reliving it all again was difficult; I was unable to be in NM for the trial.*
- *People constantly asked how my parents are handling it, which inherently diminishes my grief; as if sibling grief was less profound.*

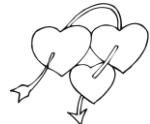
- I had lost 10 years of Kevin's life while I was away living mine; people forget that siblings grow closer again as we age; I had hoped to recover some closeness as adults.

It was always difficult to know what to share, how much, watch people struggle with how to respond, loss of friendships, and different roles within our family. Things that got me through it: support groups (sibling and homicide), 1:1 counseling and EMDR "Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing" helped to lessen the rawness and allow things to "float away" (it might take a while to find the right person to do it,) journaling and drawing, reading books, validating and embracing my emotions, learning about the legal process, my victim rights and what resources were out there for info.

**Friends who hung with me beyond the 1st couple of years* Doing what I could to help raise money for the reward fund away from home; being part of the family. Accepting that I would never be the same, calling it what it was, and realizing there are things that I couldn't control or change. Understanding how others grieve and how to accept the different ways of others. I had to create new rituals; doing things to remember Kevin in my own way. Finding ways to remember his birthday and death and eventually enjoying those days rather than being miserable. I don't watch the news or listen to news radio anymore. Practicing self-care and nurturing my needs. I avoid murder*

movies and books. Learning to ask for help and letting others help me; letting go of relationships and things that no longer worked for me. Lastly, I took medication; I was so hyper vigilant, not sleeping, depressed and anxious that I needed something to "take the edge off" of the post-traumatic stress disorder that we all had.

Now: I control with whom I share my information or stories, when and how. The question "how many siblings do you have?" still gets to me; it should be two, but I don't want to say (2) if I don't want to tell the story again. Things still get to me but they are less painful and immense. Sadly, you will inevitably forget some things about your brother or sister; gather the family pictures, tell the stories, write it down and take pictures of your family now. I have greater empathy and understanding for people who are dealing with difficulties or grief; I can help them if they want help."





Karen, age 22 in 1999 lived in Albuquerque at the time of Kevin's death says"

- *"My closest relationship with my boyfriend went from a partnership to him feeling like he was my caretaker; I leaned on him as my primary confidential source and he took the brunt of all of my sadness. It changed the relationship and it took a long time and hard work to change that perception. Then years later, the trial happened and we went through it again. He also leaned on me but it was a different perception for me.*
- *Realizing that people definitely grieve in different ways but that they also react to those grieving in different ways was a lesson to learn.*
- *I lost my significant other, which is not uncommon after this type of trauma, because we couldn't figure out how to navigate the grief together. That may be why counseling and support groups are often recommended; I went to a couple of groups but they didn't seem to work for me.*
- *One of the hardest things was the trial. Knowing the realities of the system has hardened my heart. Knowing that money can buy justice for the guilty is rough; that defense can be bought with high paid attorneys and the prosecution is paid for by the local town budget. Knowing how important the jury is, it is angering to me when people avoid serving on juries; they hold the whole decision in their hands. Knowing that the DA was able to pick and choose which cases to take on and those to pass onto other Assistant DA's; thus making it a game of career moves and not about justice is hurtful. I feel resentment about the trial knowing that justice was just a "figment of the imagination" because it doesn't really work. There were too many issues from staff to the jury to the rules of what could be said that made it not work. The police did all of the hard work and investigation to solve the case and then the justice system couldn't put the guy away. This is the ultimate failure on the system and it is extremely hard for me to have any trust in the system now.*
- *Access to information from the police department made it easier in the initial stage and onto the end as we tried to figure out what happened; that was really important for me. Then, having one person to lean on helped me, although, it was rough for him. There is nothing that makes it easier, really; it is something that you*

*learn to adapt to one day at a time
and learn to live with differently.*

- *Some days are still rough and sometimes I still struggle with forgiveness and understanding. I have been changed, as Kirsten said, and I would not say the changes have been positive. However, I work to change that part of me so that the guy who did this doesn't get away with murder and making me more like him."*



*Kevin Shirley, Matt Hunt and Luis Garcia
Memorial Sandia Park, NM*

My sincere thanks and love goes out to our/my daughters whose lives, like yours, have been turned upside down by their brother's death. I am so very proud of each of them for their candor and willingness to help me write this newsletter for you!

Joan