

# Grieving can be a lifelong journey



Sandy Amish and Susan Wood

## By Susan Wood

STATELINE – By the looks of the Christmas tree filling up with ornaments, there appears to be no shortage of loss and grief on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe this season.

About 60 people showed up at MontBleu on Wednesday night to mark an evening of remembrance called “Light Up a Life,” an event hosted by Barton Hospice.

I entered the convention center room with an open heart as well as tear ducts as the emotion set in. I was honoring my beloved sister, who, at 55, died unexpectedly July 4. As I walked up to the microphone to announce her name, I let the room know that she wasn’t the average sister. She was “the best” to me. And with that, my clear ball ornament with her name in gold metallic ink found the perfect branch on the memorial tree. When the tree was lighted, I was sure her name glowed.

As hospice registered nurse Natasha Stone put it after the ceremony: “There’s something about a sister.”

That’s all she needed to say. Sandy and I grew up together –

as children and adults. I'm still growing up as I deal with such a significant loss. Stone reminded me that loss is all part of the human experience and helps your heart evolve beyond our day-to-day joy.

Whether it's for a sister, brother, mother, father, child or spouse, grief hits all members of the family, albeit differently. Many filled this room as groups, with lots of hugs to go around.

South Shore local Judi Brown got a long one from a family member after setting the ornament on the highest branch.

"I love you Dad. I always will," she said, choking back the tears.

She later told *Lake Tahoe News* that her father, Mack Brown "was everything to me." He succumbed to cancer last August. Brown admitted the experience was "quite overwhelming."

She seemed to find peace that evening.

"I'm glad we did this," she said.

The ceremony started 14 years ago as a way for loved ones to honor those who have died. The event evolves a little bit each year, with 2013 being the first one at the casino. The memorial tree stood out in a sea of trees the hospital erects for its annual Festival of Trees and Lights.

Even hospice's director of patient care services, Barbara Kaufman, was affected and couldn't make it as the Dec. 4 event fell on the same day as the anniversary of losing her mother.

"It's just a little tender," hospice services coordinator Tina Bruess told the crowd, before leading them into the "Blessing of the Hands."

Everyone raised their hands, as the sacred words rang true.

*“Bless these hands that have held and felt pain. ...*

*Bless these hands that have comforted grieving families and friends. ...*

*Bless these hands that have reached out in caring and have been received with gratefulness.”*

An instant kinship came over the room. This was indeed a safe place to be at the holidays – grieving with other family members who are dealing with loss.

After Bruess offered the group sprigs of rosemary because the herb is considered one of remembrance, I let out a sigh. I had stared my grief in the face and embraced it. I knew the holidays would be difficult.

“With the holidays, there are so many long-term traditions and memories, and they’re all brought up again. Holidays resonate family, and the grief is accentuated by the one place that’s missing at the table,” Bruess told me after the ceremony. She was dead-on correct.

Bruess runs grief workshops using the book “Understanding Your Grief.” I was comforted by this since that’s the book I turned to months ago when I felt I was living a sad parallel life to the one the rest of the world participated in.

The most striking thing about the book?

All grief is unique and needs to be honored that way. Bruess and I agreed with the message. And there’s no rush to “get over it” because I’ve surrendered to the idea that I never will.

My grief still lingers and can overwhelm me at significant as well as insignificant times. I use writing as therapy.

For one excruciatingly difficult time, my sister’s birthday on Nov. 15, I wrote an ode to her life even though I could barely

see the keyboard through the tears. It goes like this:

*Today is my sister's birthday, and even though she has left the Earth, I feel closer to her than I ever have.*

*Death works that way. It makes us appreciate what we have – in the moment. I must say, I've never felt so alive or more keenly aware of how precious life is since July 4, when she was ripped from the living. My heart was ripped to pieces. How could I even live without my only sister?*

*We protected each other for so many years. What kills me is that I couldn't protect her this time. I didn't know it was her time. I wish I did. I would have told her how much she meant to me. Then again, my words would have seemed shallow. It didn't seem to matter that I showed her and told her that I loved her at each visit. For every goodbye, there was a long hug – as if one of us was leaving the country or thought that later we'd become disinterested in each other's lives.*

*Yesterday, I inadvertently ran across some pictures of a time she lived in Colorado and I lived in California. We didn't stay in touch. We were so different 35 years ago. At least we learned to embrace our differences in the last 25 years. It was like we were kids again when we got together. We danced and joked and shared small pleasures. Her smile was radiating. Her essence was the epitome of joy. She trusted people in a way that I never could. She looked for the good in everyone. She lived to love.*

*How I miss her. I can't even begin to tell you what this deep pain is like. Thank God it's not consistent.*

*Even now, I can barely restrain my tears. I probably have cried a thousand of them in the last few months, sometimes bellowing in a too-sad-to-describe moan that only the grieving know of.*

*My memories will have to sustain me.*

*Mostly, I remember how we could talk about anything and often confided in each other. She had a hard life and was often under so much stress that I took some comfort in seeing her at peace when I decided to view her body with her children. It took everything I had to not break down. They lost their mother. My mother lost her child. The sorrow is overwhelming.*

*I think what gets to me is how beautiful she was inside. I see her now through the heart of her children. I will never take their love for granted. I guess that's the message here.*

*Hug those who matter most to you because our time together is finite.*

*So in spirit: Happy birthday, Sandy. I'll love you every day forever.*