

Did They Know There Were "Angels Among Us?"

by June Proctor

At the Annual Gathering of the Bereaved Parents/USA in Las Vegas, Nevada, last July, I presented a workshop on journaling through grief to recovery. As the author of *The Night the Angels Cried: A Mother's True Story*, I had been invited to describe the journaling method I created to support me on my grief journey, after a drunk driver killed two of my sons and my three granddaughters on Christmas Eve. In the workshop sessions I shared how the suicides of my two remaining sons compounded the grief of the survivors. Fortunately, my guardian angel also accompanied me to the Gathering, disguised as my sister Ruth.

The first evening several of us met informally to get acquainted. We sat in a circle, not knowing whether to greet the person next to us or fight back the urge to run for the door. Each parent wore a photo button of the deceased child or grandchild and a name tag identifying parent and child. I couldn't do it. I couldn't wear the photo buttons. Where would I pin seven photo buttons? It was bad enough that people looked at my name tag and recoiled when they saw the list of seven names. How could they look at my children's faces?

The facilitator introduced herself in a style which all the speakers would follow throughout the conference. If I had done likewise, I would have begun my two workshops in the following manner. "My name is June. I am the mother of Michael, Terry, Ricky, and Roger. I am the grandmother of Becky, Paula, and Ruth Ann. Two of my sons and my three granddaughters were killed by a drunk driver on Christmas Eve. My other two sons committed suicide." But I just couldn't do it. Instead I passed around the children's photos during my presentation.

The last morning a photo memorial service was held. In a darkened room, against a projected backdrop of a rainbow arched over a winding mountain road, a picture of a child appeared on the screen. Beneath, in bold letters the name of the child and the dates of birth and death were noted. When the child's name was announced, the parents stood. A moment of meditation followed. The parents sat down. The next child's photo appeared on the mountain road. Thus all the children were commemorated.

But I had provided no photos. For those of us who were unable to do so, the child's name and dates appeared with a butterfly perched on the child's name. No child was forgotten. I heard my granddaughters' names called. Ruth and I stood. "Pauline Marie Jeanette-Rebecca Anne Jeanette." I reached for my sister's hand before the next name was called. "Ruth Anne Jeanette." Ruth Ann was named for my sister Ruth. The baby was only five weeks old the day she was killed.

When my sons' names were called, Ruth and I stood again. It seemed like we would never sit down. "Michael Lee Proctor-Richard Lowell Proctor-Roger Owen Proctor-Terrell Glen Proctor." The service closed with a father and the siblings of deceased children singing and signing, "Angels Among Us." Later, as Ruth and I rolled our luggage through the casino at the Imperial Palace where the Gathering convened, I wondered if the other hotel guests knew that there were "Angels Among Us."

At the airport a young woman ran through the crowd to me waving my book. "I bought the last copy. Would you sign it please?" We hugged and promised to meet again next year at the Annual Gathering in St. Louis. I'll be ready this time. I'll be wearing a daisy photo pin with Ruth Ann featured in the center, surrounded by her sisters and uncles on the petals.

"My name is June, I am the mother of . . ."