



Helping grieving parents and families rebuild their lives after the death of a child

www.bereavedparentsusa.org

BEREAVED PARENTS USA, INC. HISTORY

BPUSA founders Joe Rousseau, Mitchell Dudnikov, Mary Cleckley, Shirley Ottman, Chuck Saulisberry and John Goodrich believed that a national bereavement organization was needed in order to serve the needs of all bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents. This organization, called Bereaved Parents of the USA, was founded in 1995 and relies solely on contributions from its chapters, and other interested individuals or entities. The founders believed then, as now, that no one should be denied membership because of an inability to pay for BPUSA services. They emphasized that BPUSA remain strictly a volunteer organization and that no one serving BPUSA, in any capacity, be salaried.

BPUSA, Inc. was incorporated in Illinois on February 2, 1995, at which time the national organization had only individual members and no chapters. During the fall of 1995, however, about 25 intact chapters of another bereavement organization requested to become charter chapter members. Our numbers continued to grow as new chapters were established nationwide. This included satellite groups, as well, which contributed to the increase of monthly meetings being held throughout the country. One of BPUSA's ongoing goals is to help every bereaved family in need as we strive to develop and support chapters in every state.

Another BPUSA goal was to provide a *Chapter Leader Guide*, as a notebook, to be readily available to every chapter chartered by the national organization. The first such guide was distributed to chapters in 2000; this hastily produced guide was replaced by an updated version in 2006. Most recently in 2016, a revised booklet has been published in digital format, enhanced with interactive links and the title was changed to *Chapter Leaders Handbook*.

The founders were also dedicated to providing an annual national conference, to be called the National Gathering. The first Gathering was held in May 1996. From 1996 – 2000, the Gatherings were held at university conference sites and smaller hotels, which was affordable for most to attend. Because BPUSA had few potential host chapters close to universities with such accommodations, and because the Gatherings' attendance had tripled in recent years, it became necessary to contract with larger hotels at a slightly increased cost, but still hosted by different willing chapters throughout the country.

Beginning In 2015, the BPUSA Board of Directors began to take on more of the tasks of running the National Gathering Conference under the guidance of the Gathering Chair and supported by a Gathering Committee comprised of local chapters located near the geographical area of the Gathering site. Today, the Gatherings are the sole responsibility of the BOD and the Gathering Chair.

Keynote speakers and many workshops with a variety of topics are provided throughout the conference weekend to inform and inspire bereaved families on their grief journey. Strong bonds develop quickly among bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents. The Gatherings provide an opportunity for members to reconnect with each other from year to year, to meet new bereaved families attending for the first time and to remember and honor all our children, siblings and grandchildren who left this world too soon.

Chapter Leadership Training is provided for Chapter Leaders and their Steering Committee members on the day before the Gathering conference as a time to meet together, ask questions, share ideas and learn how to effectively support all bereaved families.

An annual business meeting is held during the National Gathering Conference each year to give all attendees an opportunity to suggest new ideas, to raise questions, and to call attention to chapter or individual needs. The founders strongly believed that the local chapters, who carry out the mission of BPUSA, would work hand in hand with their elected BOD members for the greater good of the national organization

To help carry out this goal, the board created an in-house newsletter, *Chapter Chat*, so that the board could maintain regular contact with its chapters. Each chapter is encouraged to share their activities, meeting programs and topics, awards and accolades or any other newsworthy events with the board and with each other through this quarterly publication. The BOD is proud to celebrate its chapters' successes and grateful for the work they do serving bereaved families in each of their communities.

BPUSA publishes an online quarterly newsletter, *A Journey Together*, filled with articles, quotes and poems written mostly by fellow bereaved parents and siblings. It also contains book reviews and links to current grief-related research. Subscribers are encouraged to submit their own writings to be published within the pages of the newsletter.

Members of the BPUSA Board of Directors are available by phone, email or regular mail to any bereaved parent, sibling, or grandparent to answer questions or to be a friendly, understanding person to talk to. The national organization also has a website, www.bereavedparentsusa.org that is continually updated, so that anyone needing our services may easily find and contact us. All BPUSA chapters' contact information and meeting sites are listed by state on the website. Many chapters maintain chapter websites as well. Social media, especially Facebook, has further enhanced our ability to reach out to bereaved families across the country.

In 2018, BPUSA introduced the following mission statement: "Bereaved Parents of the USA - Helping grieving parents and families rebuild their lives following the death of a child." A vision statement was added to the mission in 2019: "That every grieving parent and family receive the support that they need for as long as they need it."

Although BPUSA began humbly, it has made great progress in a relatively short time. We encourage each chapter to take an active part in helping BPUSA to advance our common mission. By all of us working together, we continue to grow, to broaden our outreach, and serve the needs of all bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents.

To date, BPUSA is consistently trying to find new and improved ways to support and educate the bereavement community, while balancing the vision of our founders and expanding our presence throughout the USA.

Original history statement by:

Shirley Ottman with additions and updates by Lee Ann Hutson, Delain Johnson and Kathy Corrigan.