

## **I NOTICED.....MY WORLD HAD CHANGED**

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Prior to becoming a bereaved parent, I thought I had a glimpse of what parents who have lost a child go through. I was an emergency room nurse. The sad part of my job was to inform parents that their child had died. After delivering this most devastating news, I would sit and cry with the parents. When I'd go home at night, I would think about the parents, and pray for them and thank God my two little boys were safe and that my family was intact.

Four years ago on September 13, 1997, I became a bereaved parent when the police informed me that my son, Andrew had an auto accident and was dead. My life stopped. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to breathe again without my son, let alone survive his death. In the days that followed, I found out one thing was for sure, I didn't have a glimpse about what happens to a person when their child dies.

As I walk this journey of a bereaved parent ..... I notice my whole world changed. My beliefs aren't the same. My priorities weren't the same and my future was changed forever. My whole life was shattered and I didn't know where to begin to pick up the pieces or if I had the will to pick up the pieces. Everyone around me, even though very attentive to me, continued functioning in their own lives. I didn't know where I fit in any more. I was alone ... trying to figure out what happened in that split second, when they told me Andrew was dead.

I noticed many things about my new world that I didn't like. I knew then, if I was to survive my son's death, things must be changed and it was up to me to change them.

I noticed ... . The silence of people not mentioning Andrew's name or his life was deafening to me. There were no stories about him anymore. It was like out of sight out of mind. I wondered what this world was doing to me. My son lived. He was a part of my life. I had dreams for him. He was my future. I was so frightened that everyone would forget him. I needed to hear other people say my Andrew's name. I needed to say his name and to tell stories about him. I could not stand the thought of going through the rest of my life not ever hearing or saying his name again. I knew then that part of my survival was going to involve keeping the memory of my son alive.

I noticed .... People removed Andrew's picture and other remembrances of him from their homes, thinking it was going to upset me seeing them. I needed to know that he was important to other people. Just because he died, it didn't mean that memories of him couldn't still exist. As part of my healing I gave framed pictures of Andrew to family and friends to display in their home. This let them know I needed to have him around me.

I noticed .... People would shy away from me, run down the other aisle of the grocery store rather than chance running into me. I needed more than ever for people to come up to me and give me a big hug, rather than shy away. Depending on how I felt that day, I would hunt those people down in that other aisle and show them that talking with me was not going to be a painful experience for them and that being a bereaved parent was not contagious.

I noticed .... I struggled with something as simple as not being able to sign a birthday or anniversary card from our family because to do that, I would have to leave Andrew's name off the card. I had signed his name for 23 years and there was no way his name could be left off the card. I also knew I needed to continue to write his name or people would forget him. I now sign all cards "With Love and Memories of Andrew." It's funny, I rarely sent Christmas Cards before Andrew died. Now I make sure that I send cards to everyone I know so I can write his name to keep his memory alive. What's great is that people sent cards back to me with the same message.

I noticed .... People were uncomfortable about what to say to me, so they would avoid mentioning Andrew's life or death for fear they would remind me of him. They would also feel bad if they thought they would make me cry and then "what would they do with me?" It was easier for them not to say anything. What these people didn't know is that they don't remind me of Andrew. I think about Andrew every minute of every day. I will never forget his life or his death. Their mentioning Andrew's name only made me feel better. After experiencing a few of these encounters, I knew then, I had to make people feel that it was okay to talk about Andrew and that if there were tears, that was okay too. I always thanked people for bringing Andrew's name up and remembering him. If tears came first, I would explain that they did not make me cry and I really appreciate them talking to me about Andrew.

I noticed .... When I entered the room at my first bereaved parent meeting, I was surprised to find other people in that room smiling, some laughing, and some making small talk. I thought ...boy, I am really in the wrong place. It was inconceivable to me that I would ever smile or laugh again. I thought that they must love their child as much as I did. Once the meeting began, I learned that these parents did love their child as much as I loved Andrew and that maybe I too, would someday smile and laugh again. Just maybe...there was a glimmer of hope that I might survive and they would lead the way.

I noticed.... At my meeting I learned a lot about my new world from parents who have walked the path before me. They brought to my attention the situations I may encounter and offered suggestions in how they dealt with the issues. They didn't theorize grief; they lived it everyday and shared their coping skills with the group. They gave me strength and confidence and validated that I was on the right path in keeping the memory of Andrew alive. They were patient with me. I knew I was in a safe place where people understood me. They wanted to help me get better. They knew something I didn't know at the time....that I was going to survive.

I noticed .... Some people thought that because my son was 23 years old, somehow he wasn't my child anymore. Even though I was his parent, they assumed the grief would not be as intense as if he were a baby or young child. I'll never forget a 70 year old man coming into the ER, dead on arrival after a heart attack. I was told his mom was on her way to the ER. When his frail, 90 year old mom entered the room, she screamed out "My baby, my baby." She sobbed. She hugged him. She held and rocked him. She kissed him all the while saying, "My baby, my baby." I learned that night, it doesn't matter how old your child is because the parent child relationship is for life. That night her baby died. The night Andrew died was the night my baby died. Our children are our children forever.

I noticed .... I didn't know what to say when people asked me "how many children do you have?" This caused me great anxiety when it came up in a conversation. I let them know, I had two boys. Most of the time that was sufficient. If the conversation required more information. I told them that my oldest son, Andrew, died in an auto accident and he was a mechanical engineer. My younger son, Elliott, is alive and well and is a graphic designer. I told them about Andrew, not so they could feel sorry for me, but, because I will always be his mom, he will always be my child and I could not deny he had lived.

I noticed ....That people compared my loss to their father dying, grandmother dying and yes; I had one person compare my loss to their dog dying. I knew these people didn't have any intention of hurting me. They were just trying to relate to probably the very worst experience they had ever had with death. I needed to let them know my father had died, my grandmother and grandfather, my friend, my aunts and uncles and even my dogs died. My Andrew dying was like no other experience I have had with death or hopefully will ever encounter again. My life didn't stop with all the other deaths...like it did when Andrew died. Even though I grieved the other deaths, they didn't hit the core of my existence...like Andrew's death. My heart didn't ache every minute of every day of every year, like it did when Andrew died. The difference...I would have given my life to let Andrew live, but I wasn't give the choice.

I noticed ....That the old family traditions at Christmas, Andrew's birthday and other holidays needed to be changed to include something that kept Andrew's memory alive. We started new traditions. At Christmas, I give everyone an ornament that reminds me of Andrew and his life. Friends and family give me Christmas ornaments that reminded them of Andrew to hang on our new "Andrew tree." We continue to gather on his birthday to celebrate his life. It's not about the ornament, the tree, or his birthday. It's about family and friends taking the time to remember Andrew. To say his name. To let me hear his name. To tell me a funny story they remember. It means so much to me and has allowed me to continue to survive.

I noticed .... That even though it's been four years Andrew continues to live in the lives of others. What I love most is when my nieces say "Aunt Sharon, I felt Andrew today all around me" or "I heard his song and remember when..." Or when my nephew comes into the house with a new friend and asks, "Where are the pictures of Andrew? I want to

introduce him to my friend.” When the little guys say “I needed to get to first base last week and I asked Andrew to help me and I made it.” Or when friends and family send me cards or mementos on his angel date or birthday. I will forever need to know that Andrew has not been forgotten. These little mentions of his name let me know, I will survive.

I noticed .... After a year or two people were expecting the “old Sharon back.” They wanted me to move on with my life, to be happy and to try to forget my son’s death. I guess they read one of those psychology or medical books that give bereaved parents one year to recover. I know now, that the writers of those books never consulted a bereaved parent. Society doesn’t understand or seem to want to give us the time it takes to get better. I let people know that I was working very hard on my recovery. I didn’t want pity. I wasn’t attention seeking or being a martyr when I cried. I wanted more than they did to feel like my old self again. I wanted the intense pain to stop. I hated where I was in my life and feeling this bad.

I let them know....I heard...that as the years pass, the pain gets softer, and the tears less, but I will never fully recover. I will always miss Andrew. I will always grieve his death. He will always be apart of my life and I will never forget him.

My wish for you is that you will find peace and to know that your child is with you and will never be forgotten.