

The Glengarry News

Griefshare Program Returns to Alexandria

September 4 2019 BY TARA MACDONALD News Staff

They lost their son when he was 16 years old, now they are helping others work their way through grief.

On June 12th, 2001 Alex and Mary Cumming faced every parent's worst nightmare. On that tragic day, their son Eric was in a fatal car accident as he was leaving school. He died no more than a kilometer away from his home.

Death is never an easy burden to bear, but the death of a child is perhaps the hardest of all. While Mr. and Mrs. Cumming sought private counseling through a trauma centre in Ottawa, they continued to struggle with the loss of their son. It wasn't until eight years later that Mr. and Mrs. Cumming learned about GriefShare.

'You don't have to go through the grieving process alone.'

A grief recovery support group, GriefShare is a 13 week Christian-based program that helps people work their way through loss on their journey towards healing.

Although there are many other types of loss – divorce, pets, jobs or moving and loss of friendships – GriefShare specifically targets those who have suffered the loss of a loved one through death.

However, it's important that people want to heal in order for the program to have a successful impact. "It takes a lot of courage for people to walk in the door and admit that they need help to work towards being in a better place," explained Mrs. Cumming. "We see a big change in people especially if they take on the work of wanting to heal."

Using a three-pronged approach, the program includes a video portion featuring professional grief counselors who address various aspects of grief. The second prong includes a workbook with lessons and other resources to help participants recover from their loss and look forward to rebuilding their lives. Finally, the third prong consists of the group itself, wherein participants are encouraged to share their experiences and talk about the daily struggles related to living with loss.

"We thought it was amazing and wanted to bring it back to the community," said Ms. Cumming who has been facilitating local GriefShare workshops along with her husband for the past ten years.

Everyone has, or will, experience grief in their lives be it the loss of a parent, a sibling, a close friend, or even a child. "It's a heavy burden to carry, it affects them physically, how they're relationships and how they connect with the community – whether they withdraw or connect in healthy ways in the community," said Mrs. Cumming. "We need to be embracing those people and let them know there is a safe place to go where they can talk things through and have support. We really need that in the community. "

Over the years, the workshops have been gaining momentum. “We’ve had some good turn-outs and already have a number of people who are wanting to sign up for the program,” said Mrs. Cumming.

“We don’t have a maximum number of participants, we just deal with whoever comes in through the door,” she said. “We believe god will put the people there that we’re here to help, that’s how we deal with it.”

“When something like this happens, people suffer in silence – and they are really suffering.”

“Grief makes you very self-focused, you turn inward because you are in so much pain,” she explained. “People worry that if they bare their soul by telling a friend, that person might think they’re crazy. They feel like there’s no place to go and no one who understands what they’re going through; so they stop connecting with the people around them and their communities”

While loss is an unavoidable part of being human, it’s also one of life’s most difficult experiences. Nevertheless, our society generally avoids talking about death and grieving, so it’s little wonder that people suffering with loss often disengage while withdrawing themselves socially and emotionally. However, that doesn’t mean we have to go through the journey alone.

“Being with people who’ve experienced the same kind of loss is validating. People begin to work through things and realize they aren’t crazy; it helps them start moving towards functioning well again.” That’s why GriefShare support groups are led by people who understand what you are going through and want to help. “We’ve been through it ourselves,” said Mrs. Cumming.

While some might wonder whether organizing and facilitating such a group for so many years might be draining on the couples’ emotional energy, Mrs. Cumming and her husband find it ‘exhilarating’.

“I think God uses our tough life experiences, if we allow Him to do that, to bring comfort to others,” said Mrs. Cumming. “So in that sense, I believe we are being used to help others.”

“We don’t carry their grief for them, we just facilitate the meetings and listen to them. We give them a place to come together.”

“People think you’re dealing with loss and sadness, but we’re watching people move and change in response to someone coming along side and help them,” said Mrs. Cumming. “It’s hugely rewarding.”

‘Moving from mourning to joy’

“When people understand what’s going on with their grief, they begin to deal with it and look outwards. As soon as they begin to do that you see a difference,” described Mrs. Cummings.

While sharing of experiences is a key feature of GriefShare, it’s also about providing participants with the tools they need to reconnect with their communities and become a contributing member of society.

“We try to encourage people and give people strategies for coping,” said Mrs. Cumming. “For example, some people who’ve lost their spouses start spending more and more time alone. They eat alone, they aren’t eating well and they stop going out.”

“We’ve seen people come in who were so overwrought that they couldn’t speak but by the last session they are laughing, smiling, talking to people and saying they are reconnecting with friends and doing things again. That’s huge.”

“When you’re facilitating that and you see people moving, changing and reconnecting their lives again, it’s wonderful to see,” she continued. “We give them a strategy to start having meals with other people and to invite people into their homes by encouraging connections within the group so they can invite each other into their homes once or twice a week. It makes it less lonesome.”

As participants learn how to reconnect within the group, they are encouraged to apply those lessons within their spheres outside the group.

“It takes time, one grief share won’t heal you but it’s a step in the right direction,” explained Mrs. Cumming. “You’ll still be sad, I still miss Eric and I’m still sad occasionally but I’m not sitting in a rocking chair on his birthday not able to move,” she said. “It’s not that way anymore and hasn’t been for a long time.”

GriefShare is sponsored by REVIVE Alexandria Church and Alexandria United Church (the Church on the Hill). Sessions start on September 10th and run every Tuesday evening from 7 pm – 9 pm until December 3rd. While the program is Christian based, all of those who are grieving the loss of a loved one are welcome to attend regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation.

Would you like to learn more about GriefShare or sign up for the Fall session?

Contact Alex and Mary Cumming at 613-347-3428.