

# One Foot Forward

Stories and Faces of  
Widows and Widowers

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By Judith Fox

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## Introduction

My husband, Jerry Fox, was two weeks shy of his 54th birthday when he died from an inoperable adenocarcinoma of the lung. The oncologist had predicted that he might have six months before the aggressive cancer would take his life. But Jerry died on a lovely spring day—exactly one month after he was diagnosed. It was 12:30 in the afternoon and Jerry—who said he wasn't hungry—headed upstairs to our den to read. While I was eating a sandwich in our kitchen, my husband took his last breath; he was sitting in his favorite chair with a book by his side when I found his body. After the initial shock, I spent much of the following year in tears.

I was a relative innocent when it came to death and loss. After Jerry died, though, the scrim that had been in place between me and those around me suddenly dropped, revealing a universe of private hurt that had previously been concealed: one friend told me about the death of her child (seven years earlier) from a drug overdose; another told me about several painful miscarriages that she had never discussed; conversations with strangers immediately and easily extended into personal and painful corners. My life and my world had been altered—and deepened.

In time, I fell in love again, and three years after I was widowed I married Edmund Ackell. Three years later, the man I loved and shared my life with was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease.

I began photographing Ed in 2001 as part of a personal photography project. I had been a photographer and writer for several decades. Shortly after beginning that body of work, I found myself thinking often about Alzheimer's, mortality, love, commitment, and resilience—and I began creating the book that became *I Still Do: Loving and Living with Alzheimer's*.

In recent years, aware of the likelihood that I would be widowed again, and surrounded by friends who were being widowed for the first time, I began reflecting on the significant losses and changes that accompany the death of a spouse or partner. I had lived the experience, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to understand how others navigated widowhood and moved forward with hope. And I wanted to learn from—and tell the stories of—a diverse group of widows and widowers whose varied journeys would help me frame my own. So, I talked with people whose spouses died gradually and I talked with people whose spouses died suddenly; I conversed with the young, middle-aged, and elderly; I spoke with people who had been in complex marriages and people who had lived in marriages that were uncomplicated. *One Foot Forward* was born of personal knowledge and candid conversations with generous people who believe—as I do—in the power and solace of shared stories.

Judith Fox

## Foreword: Our Need for Stories

Joanne Lynn, MD

If grief for the death of someone dear were a country, no one would want to live there or even visit. But grief is a country that comes up on your itinerary unwanted, unavoidable. And when you arrive, you have little sense of when or how you will leave, or how the experience will change you. Some deaths in *One Foot Forward* were sudden, some quite complicated, and some seemed just a breath away for years. The poet John Stone, a physician himself, observed, “Death / I have seen / come on / slowly as rust / sand / or suddenly / as when / someone leaving / a room / finds the doorknob / come loose in his hand.”

The death of a spouse—a person heavily interwoven into the very fabric of your life—is especially troubling. The anchors of everyday life go missing, and the widow or widower must keep living through minutes stripped of their meaning. Grief marks the other side of the coin of caring relationships. We cannot live a life enriched by the love and intimacy of a spouse without feeling the wrenching disorientation of that spouse’s death. However, the response of a bereaved spouse to death shows remarkable variety. The character of the marriage and the particulars of the spouse’s death undoubtedly affect the grieving, but not predictably. Each of us must find our way “home” in our own way.

One of the modern-day challenges facing survivors is the silence surrounding death. Our political leaders and movie stars rarely share their personal stories of dying, death, and grief. Our newspapers and television shows do not explain or instruct how survivors manage to get through this day, and then the next. Often, we are almost embarrassed to find that a person in our midst is bereaved; we are at a loss for words, even for appropriate platitudes. We need stories that can show us available paths and can teach us the language of healing.

This book collects a set of searing stories about the death of a spouse, illuminated by evocative photographs of the storytellers. It is not easy to read. The emotions are palpable, and the confusion, despair, and pain are sometimes overwhelming. But the stories here illuminate the miracle of enduring—stories of survival, gradually finding ways to reconnect with the world, and the arrival at an emotional standing where the widow or widower once again feels life is fulfilling.

The stories here can help make some of the experience of grieving a little more familiar, granting a measure of peace to widows and widowers and enabling others to relate to them more readily. Remarkably, most people do keep putting “one foot forward,” and most even construct new and often more meaningful lives. In that sense, these are stories of triumph—of the human spirit finding a way to blossom, even in very difficult circumstances.

# Margaret

Abdun-Nur

“While my kids are trying to reach me at home to see if I’m dead or alive, I’m at Arthur Murray’s dancing the waltz with a 16-year-old boy.”



# Margaret

## Abdun-Nur

An hour and 30 minutes into their first date, just as the cheesecake was being served, John Abdun-Nur proposed to Margaret Haddad. A month later, the two were engaged. “It was love at first sight,” Margaret said before adding: “He knew what he was looking for.” And though only 18 at the time, Margaret acknowledged that she liked what she saw in John—someone who shared her values and was kind, gentle, and responsible. Her voice broke as she continued, “You couldn’t help but love him.”

Margaret and John, a physician, had been married for 59 years when John died of colon cancer. He had an earlier diagnosis (of rectal cancer) which had been treated by a painful surgical procedure. After six years of good health the cancer metastasized to his colon and, when it was obvious that his health had again changed, the doctor diagnosed himself and told no one—including his wife—about his condition.

“There’s something about his generation...” Margaret said, her voice trailing off in thought. John, a gunnery officer in World War II, played football in school

and grew up believing that men didn’t cry. “He was strong,” Margaret said. As a sudden smile illuminated her expression, she added, “He did things his way, like Frank Sinatra.”

Months later, Margaret accidentally discovered the secret John had been concealing when she found blood in the toilet bowl. “I forced him to get in the car to see his doctor,” she said. But when they arrived at the clinic, she couldn’t convince him to talk with his physician or agree to an examination. Margaret recalled what John said at the time, “I’m a doctor and I’m going to do what I want to do.” Her husband went on to explain that at the age of 83, he didn’t want to prolong his life with additional harrowing treatments. Margaret, his practical and devoted wife, eventually relented.

Early in their marriage, when John was still involved in his busy and stressful medical practice, Margaret would tell their five children, “Dad’s been dealing with people all day, so when he comes home give him hugs and kisses, but don’t tell him about the fights you





had.” When John was dying, Margaret was equally committed to making sure his life was as tranquil and comfortable as possible. She kept her husband company, kept him occupied, and—to the best of her ability—kept him laughing. “That’s all you can do, really,” Margaret said.

The couple was alone in their home when John took his last breath. Margaret cried as she recalled her last words to him: “I love you forever. Take me with you.”



She added, “We grew up together and when he died there was a huge void in my life. My kids kept telling me that I had to adjust.” For a year after John’s death, Margaret’s grief was great and she suffered his loss deeply.

And then, one Christmas, her children gave her a gift certificate for dance lessons. “‘Mom, you’re always dancing in the kitchen,’ they told me, ‘go do some ballroom dancing.’” It was three months before



Margaret went to her first class and she’s been moving to the music ever since. “I got hooked on ballroom dancing. And now my children complain that I’m never around,” Margaret admitted with a laugh. “While my kids are trying to reach me at home to see if I’m dead or alive, I’m at Arthur Murray’s dancing the waltz with a 16-year-old boy.”

When Margaret turned 80, her children wanted to hold a birthday party in her honor. “It was a lovely thought,”

she said, “and they’re all great cooks and love to bake, but their parties are boring as hell.” So she told them that she would throw the party and that she (like her husband and Mr. Sinatra) would do it her way. “I hired a disc jockey,” she said, “and served hot fudge sundaes for dessert instead of cake. And everyone danced.”

# Octavio

Cardona-Loya

“Oddly enough,  
I still feel married  
even though  
I’ve been widowed  
for more than  
three years.”



# Octavio

## Cardona-Loya

Octavio Cardona-Loya was scrubbed, ready, and standing by in the operating room when his wife, Lissy, was declared dead. The previous morning, Lissy, who was 58, had told her plastic surgeon husband that her arm was hurting and she wasn't feeling well. While examining his wife, Octavio noticed that her pulse was abnormal and that her skin was cool to the touch. So he immediately called the hospital ER and told them he was bringing his spouse in. "She probably has a clot in her arm," Octavio recalled telling the person who was on the other end of the line. Lissy, who was a nurse when she and Octavio met, didn't want to go to the hospital. "Love cures all," she insisted. And then she repeated it in Spanish: "El amor cura todo."

But Lissy's protests were unsuccessful and, once at the hospital, she was given medication to dissolve her blood clot. The treatment was successful and everyone was relieved to learn that the clot in her arm had dissolved. The next morning, Lissy underwent a series of follow-up exams given by a team of specialists that included: a hematologist, vascular surgeon, primary care physician, and pulmonologist; pleased with her

medical condition, the physicians gave her permission to walk around and receive visitors.

A relieved Lissy told Octavio (who had spent the night with her in the hospital) that she was fine and that he should go to his nearby office to catch up on work. She then asked their daughter, Michelle, who was also present, to get her some makeup so that she would look good when friends visited later in the day. Their son, Octavio Jr., remained in the room with his mother. A short while later, Lissy went to the bathroom and when she came out she told her son that she was having trouble breathing. After he alerted the nurses, a team of specialists hurried to Lissy's side and began resuscitative efforts.

Octavio, after receiving a frantic call from his son, ran back to the hospital. By that time, Lissy's physicians had determined that she had a pulmonary embolism and she was rushed into the operating room. Octavio, who had hospital privileges, was allowed to join her. Once there, surgeons opened her chest and removed the blood clot. But it was too late. Octavio touched his

wife's heart—it was no longer beating. "The strange thing is that I was optimistic until the last minute," Octavio said. His eyes filled with tears as he recalled that awful day: "I didn't know how I was going to tell our kids that their mother had died."

The 64-year-old surgeon is emphatic: he doesn't plan to marry again. Neither is he interested in a serious relationship. "Oddly enough, I still feel married even though I've been widowed for more than three years. And that's the first thing I tell women who make advances." He grows quiet before adding in a barely audible voice, "I haven't gone to bed and awakened with someone next to me since my wife died. If I did, I would feel as though I were cheating on Lissy—physically—and on the other woman—mentally. I don't feel totally free." And then there are his adult children to consider; he doesn't believe they are ready to accept another woman in his life.

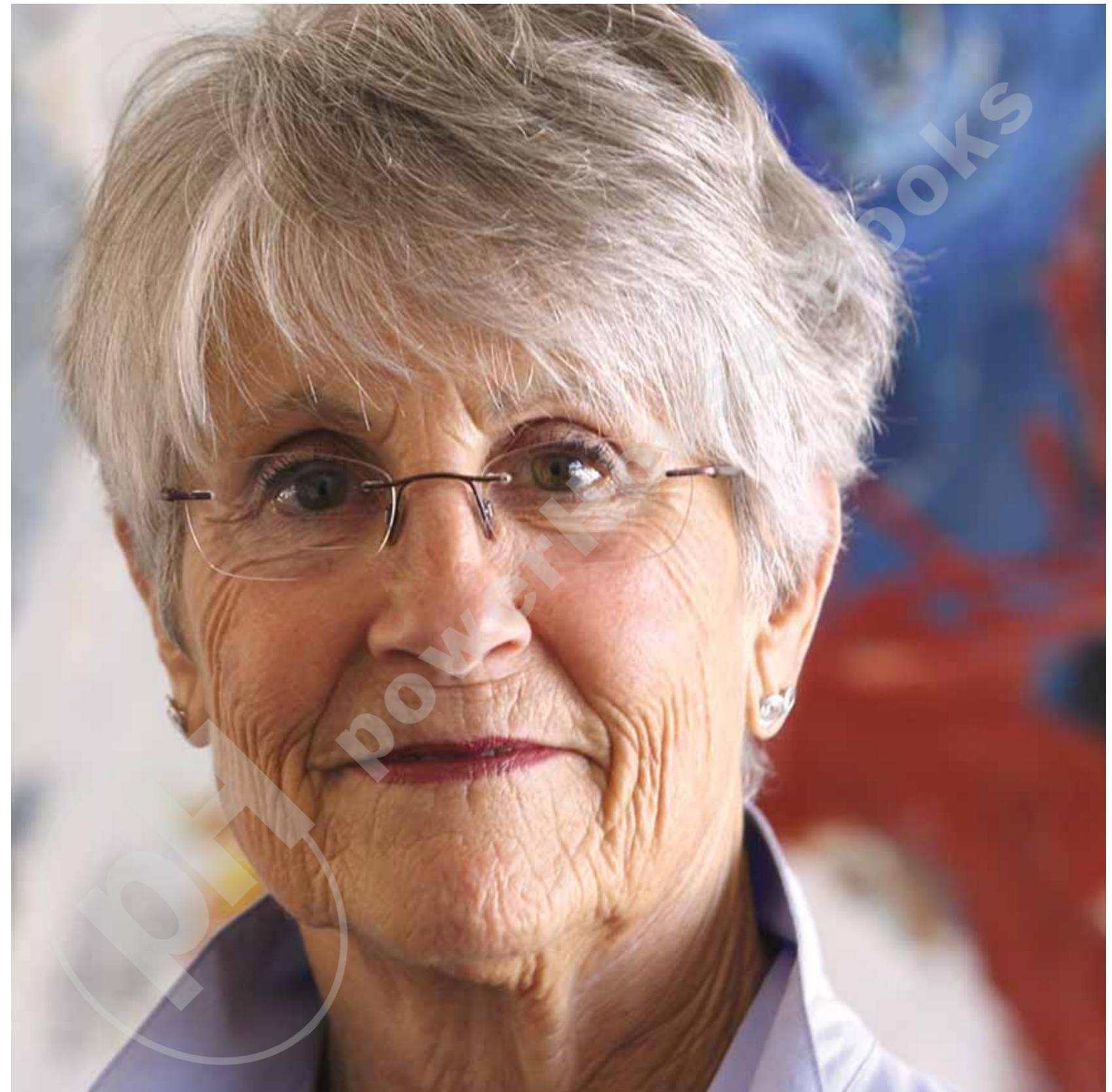
During their 33 years of marriage, Lissy and Octavio had occasional conversations about end-of-life issues. They agreed that the most important job of

the surviving spouse would be to take care of their children. Family is very important to Octavio, and his is exceptionally close. Octavio Jr., 28, lives with his dad, and Melissa (who is a couple of years older than her brother and is married) resides 12 minutes away. Octavio spends weekends and holidays with his son, daughter, and son-in-law. Together, they try to fill the void Lissy's death left in all their lives.

# Marilyn

Colby

“The hospice facility  
wasn't a place of sadness;  
it was magical.”



# Marilyn

## Colby

Ten days after Marty Colby's death, just as the sun was starting to set, his eldest stepson pulled a kayak across the sand and into the sea. A box containing Marty's remains rested on the floor of the kayak and following behind the boat, on surfboards, were another son and two grandchildren. Marty's widow, Marilyn, and other family members watched from the beach as birds screamed their early evening calls and seals and porpoises played in the ocean near the shore. As the brilliant yellow sun vanished from the pink sky, the biodegradable container containing Marty's ashes was placed in the water and slowly sank below the surface.

"It was an exceptionally beautiful evening," Marty's wife of 37 years, recalled. Marilyn had been widowed for one month and three weeks when she sat in her art-filled home overlooking the ocean discussing the evening her husband's ashes were lowered into the sea. "I wanted to watch the ceremony from the beach; I didn't want to go out in the kayak," she said. Marilyn was quiet for a few minutes and then added, "I wasn't there when Marty died, either."

Seventeen years Marilyn's senior, Marty had been in declining health for about a year before his death. While celebrating his 88th birthday, he suffered a fall from which he never recovered. "I didn't think he was going to die," Marilyn said while reaching for a tissue to dry her tears, "he had survived so much." After ten difficult days in the hospital, when it was clear that Marty wasn't going to pull through, he was moved to a hospice facility.

The tightness in Marilyn's face changed to a soft smile when the conversation shifted from talk of her husband's hospital stay to their hospice experience—she was by his side during both. "The hospice facility wasn't a place of sadness; it was magical," Marilyn said. "The nurses, doctors, psychologists, bereavement counselors, and musicians made us feel comfortable and comforted. They filled Marty's room with their smiles, their empathy, and their love. They were angels."

At about 10:00 p.m., on what would turn out to be the night Marty died, an exhausted Marilyn left the

hospice facility. She arrived home to a ringing phone with a nurse on the line. Marilyn was advised that the end was near and that she should return immediately if she wanted to be with her husband when he passed. "I decided I didn't need to be there," Marilyn said emphatically, adding, "He had chosen this time for himself."

Marilyn had often heard that "people die when they choose to die." She was also told that it is not unusual for a spouse to stay by the side of their loved one only to find that he or she died after they left the room for a quick snack or a bathroom break. These were the stories that flashed through Marilyn's mind when she made her decision not to return.

"I didn't go back to the hospice facility. And I'm glad I didn't...I think his soul went to heaven before his body did," she said softly. And even though she chose not to be on the boat with her husband's ashes, or at his side when he took his last breath, she has created her own ways of memorializing, remembering, and celebrating Marty.

"His favorite ties hang next to my shirts in my closet, and they always will," she said. And she now wears his wedding ring below her identical, but smaller, simple gold band. Every evening, as part of what has become a loving ritual, Marilyn moves Marty's ring to her middle finger so it won't fall off during a restless night of sleep. And then she climbs under the covers—on what used to be Marty's side of the bed.

# Lydia

Lewis

“It’s because of my personal experiences that I’ve really come to understand death as a continuum of life.”



# Lydia Lewis

“I saw my husband, Reggie, on the floor of our living room,” Lydia Lewis recalled. “I thought he was doing yoga stretches, but I didn’t see a mat and wondered why he’d be exercising on the hardwood floor. Then I realized that his arm was positioned in an awkward and strange manner...” It was at this point that Lydia, who couldn’t lift her fallen spouse on her own, dialed 911. “Reggie pleaded with me not to call,” Lydia said, “because that would mean something was seriously wrong. But something was seriously wrong.” Reggie had just suffered a stroke.

A practicing psychotherapist, Lydia said that she is usually able to remain focused and controlled during a crisis. “But I became frantic in the ER,” she said. “The scene was chaotic and the staff had trouble locating my husband. Most of that evening was a blur; but I did know that the prognosis was bad and that Reggie was going to lose the quality of life he had treasured and counted on.” The couple met when Lydia was 32 and Reggie was 48. She was at the start of her career and he had recently retired from his job as a chief detective in the New York Police

Department. In search of a leisurely lifestyle, Reggie veered from chasing bad guys to painting, reading, cooking, and managing the couple’s household. He also introduced into their world people whom his wife, who had lived a fairly sheltered and protected life, never thought she’d meet. One such person was a Mafia Don who wanted Reggie to escort him to and from court appearances because he trusted the retired detective’s integrity. Lydia understood that trust. “Reggie did exactly what he said he was going to do...when he said he was going to do it.” It was one of the many things she loved about her husband.

Almost 20 years into their marriage, Reggie was diagnosed with prostate cancer. After treatment by Western and Eastern doctors, his disease went into remission. Fifteen years later—while he was in the hospital recovering from his stroke—the couple learned that the prostate cancer had returned. Reggie spent most of the remaining nine months of his life at a rehabilitation center. The formerly vigorous man began to decline; he grew thin and frail, his memory started to fail, and he had difficulty speaking.

Lydia continued to work, and she created a schedule so that Reggie was never alone when she was seeing clients. She hired one of her husband’s closest friends to be his primary caregiver. “My husband could tell him to ‘Go to hell,’” she said, “and he wouldn’t be insulted or take it personally.” And Reggie’s son from his first marriage flew across the country to help care for his father. Lydia’s best friend came and helped, as well. And Lydia spent quiet evenings and weekends with Reggie. But she never stopped working. She was helping others deal with loss as she, herself, was struggling to keep her feelings at bay. “This is how I avoid pain,” she said with a shrug of resignation. “I work.”

After Reggie died, Lydia added more hours to her

office schedule. She exhausted herself and rarely spent time at home. It took more than a year for Lydia to realize that she was too tired to continue at that pace. And when she allowed herself to slow down, her longing for Reggie increased. As part of her work as a therapist, Lydia helps clients understand and explore the stages of grief; it’s what she was educated and trained to do. “But,” she said, “it’s because of my personal experiences that I’ve really come to understand death as a continuum of life.” Lydia, whose grandparents, parents, siblings, and husband are all deceased, said. “I believe protracted grief is unhealthy and doesn’t allow the ‘spirit’ of the dead to be free. I make every effort to release my hold on those who have died.”



# Michele

Linn

"He cried like a baby.  
He was scared."



# Michele

## Linn

Before heading to Iraq, Staff Sgt. Aaron White and his wife, Michele Linn, sat together on their living room couch and watched the Academy Award-winning film *Black Hawk Down*. Aaron, who was 27 years old and assigned to a Marine helicopter squadron, put his head in his wife's lap and broke down in tears as he watched the gripping war scenes and helicopter crashes. "He cried like a baby," Michele said. "He was scared." It was the only time the Marine—who had joined the military after graduating high school and had wanted to fly since he was a child—expressed any concerns to Michele about his upcoming mission.

Aaron left for Iraq in March of 2003. Two months later, he and three other Marines from Camp Pendleton were flying in a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter when it crashed into the Shatt al Hillah Canal south of Bagdad. All of the men on board died along with a fifth Marine who drowned after diving into the canal in an attempt to rescue them.

At the time of Aaron's death, Michele was with her parents in Texas celebrating their daughter Brianna's

first birthday. Michele was watching CNN when breaking news about a fatal helicopter crash in Iraq appeared on a crawl at the bottom of the screen. Although she knew that the details on the ticker dovetailed with Aaron's equipment and location, she couldn't accept the possibility that he might have been involved in the fatal crash. Hours later, and free from worry, she was able to go to sleep. The Marines, after sending a team to Michele's Camp Pendleton home and finding no one home, sent a second team to Oklahoma to break the news of the crash to Aaron's parents. Michele was awakened a few hours later by her father (who had been called by Aaron's father) and told that her husband had been classified as "missing in action." The next day, after the bodies of the missing servicemen were retrieved from the canal, uniformed Marine officers and a chaplain were dispatched to the home of Michele's parents. That's when Michele was officially informed that Aaron was dead. She, at 27, was a widow.

Despite initial concerns about how she'd raise her daughter without a job or a college degree, and filled



with fears that she would end up homeless, Michele was allowed to continue living on the Camp Pendleton base for the next two years (rent-free for the first six months) and she used the educational benefits afforded military widows to earn a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice (she went on to earn her MS through an online program). Although she receives



numerous benefits for herself and Brianna, Michele had become frustrated by aspects of the military system and procedures (although, as the daughter of an Air Force Major, she was familiar with both). "I started having trouble after my CCAO [Casualty Calls Assistance Officer] was deployed to Iraq," Michele said. "My paperwork was getting lost and I wasn't



hearing back from people or getting my questions answered. I didn't receive Aaron's personal property or autopsy for years after I had requested them. So I started searching for answers myself." On the Internet, Michele came across the site for Gold Star Wives, a nonprofit organization that provides support to widows and widowers of military personnel and advocates to improve the benefits and services they receive.

"GSW had a chat room and I began bonding over computer screens and keyboards with a dozen or so local military widows," Michele recalled. "When we finally met in person there was a lot of crying and laughing. And I no longer felt alone." A few of the women decided to formalize the group so that they could reach out to other military widows who might be feeling isolated or struggling to understand the system. And that's how SSSG [Surviving Spouse Support Group] was born.

"I became involved because I had done tons of research, had resources, and knew where to turn for help," Michele said. And when the group appeared to



be running out of leaders, and steam, she stepped in to make sure that it continued—and expanded. "I feel a sense of responsibility," she said, "I know what it's like to search for answers and support and I know I can help others who are in the same position I was in." Michele has a tattoo on the ankle of her right foot which she has systematically, and symbolically, been adding to over the years. A cherry blossom represents the time she and Aaron spent stationed in Japan, and a butterfly was added three years after his death. But perhaps the most significant addition to her tattoo is the quote that she chose to have placed on her ankle six years after the helicopter crash that ended her husband's life: "Freedom is not Free."

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