



Bobby and Denise Orsak lost their son Scott to an unknown viral infection on July 14, 2007

# Compassionate Friends

Sugar Land parents find solace and hope after enduring the devastating loss of a child

Written by Wendy Teng | Photography by Rebeca Cortes



Don and Patricia Scherer lost their 23-year-old son Donald in a car accident on February 9, 2003



Marguerite Ward lost her daughter Brandi after her two-year battle with brain cancer on February 17, 2006

It is a dark journey no parent ever wants to travel. The heart-wrenching experience of seeing a child's struggle for survival and their ultimate death can emotionally turn a parent's world upside down. Some Sugar Land families have unexpectedly traveled this journey of loss and share how they are dealing with the intense, tragic pain of the death of a child.

## Finding Support

In 1992, the Sugar Land chapter of the national organization, The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded by a group of bereaved parents. For more than two decades, the Sugar Land chapter continues to provide resources and offers self-help tools and support for parents and families struggling with grief over the loss of a child of any age.

Bereaved parents are able to confide with others who went through similar pain and struggles, find comfort, share precious memories of their children, and discuss grief issues through monthly meetings. The national motto is: "With Compassionate Friends, you need not walk alone." Many beautiful friendships are formed, and parents are able to find hope and healing among their new support system.

Every meeting has a different topic of discussion on grief. However, members are encouraged to openly discuss their struggles and can even repeat their stories again at the meetings. "Memories are all we have left to cherish, and we treasure them," says Marguerite Ward, co-leader of the Sugar Land TCF chapter. There is also no requirement to talk at any of the meetings. "We understand how difficult that can be when our grief is so fresh," says Ward.

## Remembering the Laughter

Ward remembers her daughter's laughter the most. Brandi Ward was a sweet, young lady just stepping foot into her promising career as a fourth-grade teacher at Anson Jones Elementary in Bryan, Texas, when she was first diagnosed with brain cancer. Brandi fought cancer for two years, but eventually lost the final battle on February 17, 2006.

Ward was overwhelmed with grief after Brandi passed away. She sought professional help, took medication, and read many grief books, but she realized she needed more support from others who shared the same pain. Ward's first meeting occurred eight months after Brandi's death, and she had a difficult experience. However, she knew she had to confront the pain directly in order to start the healing process. "I feel Compassionate Friends was the life raft that kept me from drowning in my grief." Members who were farther along in their grief journey gave hope to Ward that she would find joy and laughter in life again.

Today, she honors her daughter by creating a website that tells Brandi's story from birth to death and taking on the responsibility of being the TCF chapter's co-leader and newsletter editor. She is inspired to give others hope and comfort who have faced or are facing the same situation of losing a child.



For Denise and Bobby Orsak, it was a parent's worst nightmare that started with a call on Wednesday, July 11, 2007. They were on vacation in Ohio at the time. In the middle of the night, their son Scott was sick and had to be life-flighted to the medical center. They flew back the very next day to see Scott, but unfortunately, three days later, on July 14, 2007, he passed away from an unknown viral infection.

## Letting Go of Guilt

Denise felt guilty for not being at home when her son first got sick. She also had many questions about why it happened. She started reading grief books and heard out about TCF. "My husband and I went to our first meeting three months after Scott died, and I believe it was life-changing," says Denise. At their first meeting, another couple shared their story about how their son also died from an unknown virus, and that is when Denise began to let go of the guilt for not being at home when Scott first got sick.

Bobby was there for his wife from the very beginning, holding his wife's hand at the very first meeting. Although Denise couldn't talk for several months, Bobby helped share their story and his thoughts with others at the meetings. The Orsaks continue to honor Scott by continuing to meet at the local chapter to help other families going through the same grief journey.

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## Lost and Looking for Answers

Patricia and Don Scherer's son, Donald, nicknamed "Joker for Christ," was a young man "who loved life and loved the Lord" and became a youth minister at a Methodist church in Corpus Christi. He was only 23 years old when his life was ended by a drunk driver in a fatal car accident on Sunday, February 9, 2003.

Patricia learned about TCF from a friend at work, and her first meeting was at the Katy TCF chapter a month after her son's death. "I was lost, felt alone, and looking for answers." At the meetings, Patricia realized she was not alone, and other members understood how she was feeling. "I had lost my father, all my grandparents, several aunts and uncles, but I expected them to die before me. A parent is not supposed to bury their child," says Patricia.

Whereas it may be uncomfortable to talk about her son with some friends and family members, she is free to talk about Donald at the TCF meetings. After all, Patricia remarks, "What parent does not like to talk about their children?" Patricia's grief has become softer because TCF has helped her through the journey the past several years.

One of the ways Patricia and Don chose to honor Donald was by planting an oak tree in their front yard to remember him. Patricia and Don are both currently co-leaders of TCF Sugar Land Chapter and hope to be there to help other

bereaved parents in Sugar Land who come their way needing help. Patricia says, "The grief journey of the bereaved parent is a 24/7 job. It never ends." **SLM**

*WENDY TENG is a freelance writer who enjoys reading, writing, volunteering, trying new restaurants, and learning about new organizations.*



### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*We would like to thank the families in The Compassionate Friends Sugar Land Chapter for sharing their stories and for their continued efforts to help others in their grief journeys.*

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