

## Saturday Diary: Rebuilding ... from the outside in

Saturday, September 26, 2009

By Helen Fallon, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When I drive down the hill to my house, I can't help but smile. It looks cheerful and orderly, the freshly stained cedar planks glowing in the sunlight and the summer flowers and neatly trimmed bushes adding gorgeous color against the red bricks and green lawn.

In the nearly two years since my husband died without warning, I have worked at taking care of the outside of the house we built together 24 years ago. It's a signal to me, my family, friends and neighbors that I have got it together, that I am handling this unexpected loss. This is how I am on the outside. Anyone who has lost a spouse, a child, a parent, a partner, particularly suddenly and tragically, understands what I am still working out on the inside.

John died after taking our son back to college on a beautiful October evening. Life as we knew it changed in an instant.

The weeks and months that followed were horrible -- I had to sell a dental practice that he loved. A family trip to London in the spring for our 25th anniversary, planned renovations to our home and his office, visits all over the country to see family and friends now that we were empty-nesters ... would never happen.

Facing all this, I couldn't pull myself out of bed in the morning. To get where I had to go and do what I had to do, I set my alarm hours early to rouse myself and face the realities of life without John.

Every day forward, our good friend Tim Kish, who has helped me with matters large and small, would remind me. My wonderful cousin Mike Doyle, who also unexpectedly died four months later, sat beside me as I waded through financial documents and set me on course, along with the wonderful Bill Winschel, our attorney and accountant. Our good friend and neighbor Joyce Giangarlo checked on me every night and remains my staunchest ally. My co-workers at Point Park University and the Post-Gazette covered for me through those first three horrible months.

But still I needed more. Thanks to my friend Sue Abramson and the Good Grief Center, I found a wonderful support group. It's a pretty big club -- those of us who have lost husbands, wives and partners -- and one that nobody wants to join.

The unbelievable loneliness hurts the most at first. Then you start having to make decisions alone. When my washing machine needed to be replaced, it took me three tries to enter stores and summon the courage to buy something alone.

Replacing a broken cell phone was complicated by the fact that John was listed as the owner. "Well, he'll just have to come in and ask for a new phone," the young woman told me curtly in front of other customers. I barely made it out of there. But I went back the next day and a more sympathetic young man helped me through the cumbersome process.

As the months passed, I threw myself into my work and traveled as much as I could to start to recover. Slowly, I made progress.

I started the outside major house projects with some wonderful contractors (thanks, Don and Mike) and finished some landscaping (great work, Nicholas). Another good friend, Larry Ross, taught my son how to cut the grass, and he helps me get him back and forth from college. My daughter has stayed with me for now, so my house isn't so empty all year long. I met wonderful new friends through Leadership Pittsburgh and started looking for new outside-of-work activities, too, to change my routines. For me, that was critical.

I join my mother and some cousins for coffee and talk every Sunday after Mass. The group has four widows, and we have a lot of fun amid sorting through each other's problems.

I go back to the support group led by the marvelous Sandra as I need it. I reached out to others with similar losses, especially my longtime friend, Helen Patrick. I increased my exercise routine at the Downtown YMCA gym alongside the great group of early morning regulars, all of whom keep me entertained with lively debate and conversation.

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The path to this new single life has presented other obstacles. Late this summer I experienced some unexpected turmoil at work. The response was swift: My mother brought meals; comfort food always helps. Friends called, sent cards and offered advice. Best of all, my children stepped up, filling in for their dad.

One night after I dragged myself home and began to worry over the situation, my son said to me, "Mom, come on. You have a good life. You have good kids. You have friends. Work is going to be OK. You're going to be OK."

It wasn't a big Kodak moment. But I realized he was right and how wise he has become for a 20-year-old. I am going to be OK. I've taken care of my outside. I need to concentrate on working on my inside. It will take time, just like my house.

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