



HEALING THE SPIRIT

# Donor Family Services Winter 2025 Newsletter

Welcome to 2026. For some, last year felt like it would never end. For others, it was smoother than you expected in your grief journey. Wherever you find yourself, you are here breathing into a new year that may hold both gratitude and uncertainty.

It is common to feel thankful for having made it through some of the hardest moments of your life, while also feeling anxious about the firsts ahead such as birthdays, anniversaries, and meaningful dates. These feelings are a natural part of grief.

At LifeNet Health, our Donor Family Services team is here to support you. We offer opportunities for connection, encouragement, and remembrance through events, workshops, and shared experiences with other donor families. In this edition of the Donor Family Quarterly, we share stories, reflections, and upcoming opportunities created especially for you and your loved ones as you continue to grieve and create new memories.

## Upcoming Events

Sunday, March 1 at 1:30 PM  
*The Role of Music and Heart for Healing*  
Museum of Popular Culture  
Seattle, WA

Ages 10 and up  
Limited tickets available

Sunday, March 8 at 2:00 PM  
In Celebration & Remembrance  
Beaches Museum  
Jacksonville Beach, FL

Sunday, May 3 at 2:00 PM  
In Celebration & Remembrance  
Edmonds Waterfront Center  
Edmonds, WA

To register, scan QR code or visit:  
[https://www.lifenethealth.org/  
healingthespirit/events](https://www.lifenethealth.org/healingthespirit/events)



If you would like more information about any of our programs, contact us at 800-847-8731 or [DFS@lifenethealth.org](mailto:DFS@lifenethealth.org)





## How do I help my husband grieve and be united in our loss?

Dear Dr. Leary:

*Our son died 3 years ago, and my husband's lack of response has been painful. He refuses to share his feelings with anyone and has been drinking to excess. How can I help him grieve and help us to be united in our loss?*

- Feeling Alone

Dear Feeling Alone:

You are experiencing the pain of grief, and it feels exaggerated by your interpretation of your husband's silence and drinking. It is more than probable that your husband's withdrawal into silence has to do with his lack of skills rather than lack of feelings. He may be unable, rather than unwilling, to identify his feelings, to name them, and uncomfortable expressing strong emotions. If he is drinking more than usual, this could also be a lack of skill to tolerate overwhelming emotions. Most people have not been taught, and do not have confidence in their ability to tolerate feelings. I call it "sitting in the pool" of grief or disappointment or betrayal. It is easier to distance, distract, or ignore an uncomfortable feeling than to face it: to identify, explore, feel, and learn from pain.

I spend a lot of time companioning people while they move closer to feelings that they have spent their lifetime distancing from. They distract themselves with social media or alcohol or even anger rather than admit the unhealthy ways they are living in the world. They are often terrified of being "swallowed up" by their grief and so they will do anything to avoid that fear. If they knew a better way, they might do it but so many of us have not been given the skills to live close to such powerful emotions. None of us are born knowing how to do this, and most of us did not have parents who could teach these competencies. But they are necessary skills that we can learn and practice if we are to live an authentic and thriving life. There are strategies we can use to develop tolerance for big feelings. One can learn the skills to move closer to these feelings through:

1. Modeling: Watching and learning from someone else who can talk about their grief rather than shut down and cut off from the experience. They can observe what grief sounds like; what it looks like to; and how one moves through it. In other words, they can learn how to survive strong emotion. Role models can be fellow LifeNet parents in a group, or even unknown actors in a deeply cathartic movie.
2. Coaching: A therapist can help identify obstacles and sabotaging behaviors; teach language; encourage new behaviors; and provide a presence as a mourner opens to deep pain.
3. Practice, Rehearsal, and Repetition: Allowing oneself to "try on" new language and new ways of being without expecting to do it right. Giving oneself permission and encouragement to "just do it differently" can be the first step toward a healthier response. Repetition builds confidence that we "got through it once" and we can face feelings again.
4. Receiving Feedback: Finding someone you trust who can provide feedback and encouragement as you experiment with new language and ways of being with grief.

In all areas of our life, we need to master the ability to be with our pain: our losses, disappointments, regrets, and disillusionments. In learning to live whole-heartedly with our pain we also open to the fullness of our joys.

- Lani



Lani Leary, Ph.D., specializes in work with chronically ill, dying and bereaved clients. Dr. Leary has worked for the past 35 years as a psychotherapist in private practice and in eight hospices across the country. Have a question for Dr. Leary? Contact us at [DFS@lifenethealth.org](mailto:DFS@lifenethealth.org).

## Honoring Legacy in the Midst of Grief: Reflecting on the 2026 Rose Parade Experience

By Michelle Low, Donor Family Advocate

I was honored to be selected as the LifeNet Health Donor Family Advocate accompanying Erik Rushford's family for the 2026 Rose Parade Float with One Legacy, Treasure Every Moment Together. When asked to reflect on the week of events leading to the parade, it initially felt like an impossible task. It was an honor and privilege, one that is difficult to fully capture in words.



From the moment I met Christine Rushford, Erik's mother, her warmth, intelligence, and kindness were immediately evident. As the week unfolded and I spent time with the seven other family members who joined to honor Erik, it became clear that these qualities extend across their entire family. Their grace and unity are a powerful testament to Erik's legacy.

The week was filled with moments that felt almost serendipitous, woven together with thoughtful details down to the smallest touches. One that stands out was the tiny nametag bearing Erik Rushford's name, nestled in a bottle of bright Florida Gators orange sand we picked up before our first dinner. The University of Florida was the only school Erik ever dreamed of attending, and the one he proudly did attend. Every event offered something meaningful: connection, remembrance, and a deep honoring of the gift of donation. At no point did the experience feel lacking.

And yet, my biggest takeaway from the week was not what one might expect from such a large, high-profile event.

I could point to the breathtaking float crafted from 87,000 flowers and natural materials, the extraordinary teamwork, the meticulous attention to detail down to the tiniest bean I helped glue onto the floats, the honor of receiving the Tournament of Roses President's Award, or determination to persevere through what the news called an atmospheric river of rain.





## Rose Parade (cont.)

I could also share how meaningful it was for the family to honor Erik on a platform broadcast nationally and streamed across 77 countries. We often said, "This is a once in a lifetime experience," then fell into silence, simply taking it all in. They saw this not only as a gift from LifeNet Health, but as one last gift from Erik. The Rose Parade had long been on the family's bucket list, and knowing Erik's generous spirit, none of us were surprised.

Still, what seemed to matter most was something far simpler: being surrounded by people who were not intimidated by grief.

In that space, family could speak openly about Erik without choosing between sorrow and joy. They could grieve and celebrate at the same time. Being with people who wanted to hear Erik's story and who weren't afraid to say his name brought a deep comfort.

A loved one doesn't stop being part of your life when their story ends. Their presence remains woven into who you are. Like a favorite book, even one with heartbreaking chapters, their story is always worth returning to. And that is the true gift of the Rose Parade experience: a reminder that our loved ones' stories never disappear. They remain with us, ready to be opened again.



## Coping with Grief During the Winter Season

Winter can bring added challenges. Shorter days, colder weather, and more time indoors can affect energy, mood, and connection. Here are a few tips to support yourself during this season.

Consider sorting through a box of clothes or toys that are no longer needed. Donating items can offer a sense of purpose and a simple reason to get out of the house, while helping others along the way.

Open the blinds each morning and look for breaks in the weather. A short walk, even around the block, can help reset your nervous system. As you walk, notice something you can see, feel, and hear.

Try a creative or problem solving activity such as a puzzle or board game. This can be done alone or with a trusted person and offers connection without the pressure of a large gathering.

Be gentle with yourself this winter. Grief takes energy, and small steps truly matter.

### Grief Companion Program Renewal

We are grateful to share the renewal of our Grief Companion program. This program connects individuals who are new to their grief journey with trained volunteer donor family members who offer listening, understanding and shared time.

We match companions with similar experiences and the same gender whenever possible. As part of the renewal, we are offering updated training for new and returning volunteers to strengthen listening and care skills.

If you are interested in volunteering or receiving a Grief Companion, please contact:

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Andrew Kruse at [andrew\\_kruse@lifenethealth.org](mailto:andrew_kruse@lifenethealth.org)