

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

ONE OF AMERICA'S GREAT NEWSPAPERS

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2010

## Health Calendar

Compiled by Rick Nowlin

## Charity Events

Family Hospice and Palliative Care is sponsoring its annual Memorial River Walk at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 10 at the South Side Works and proceeding along the Heritage Trail. The cost is \$25; children 12 and younger may walk for free with children's T-shirts available for \$10. Registration and pre-walk festivities begin at 5:30 p.m. at the South Side Works Town Square, in front of the Cheesecake Factory. Call 412-572-8812.

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THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2009

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## Bereavement groups can help during the holidays

By Dave Zuchowski

This time of year we're bombarded with greeting of "Happy Holidays," "Merry Christmas" and songs that remind: 'Tis the Season to be Jolly."

But for those who've recently lost a loved one, remembrances of Christmases past and the experience of Christmas present can be a real ordeal.

"The holiday season incorporates all five senses: Christmas lights, the smells of baking and cooking, the taste of holiday dinner, the tactility of presents and gifts and the sounds of holiday music," said Marilyn Cartwright, bereavement specialist at Family Hospice and Palliative Care in Mt. Lebanon.

"Christmas is on the radio and television, at the workplace and streets are filled with decorations, all of which can contribute a sense of dread to someone who's in mourning," she said. "There's no way to get away from the spirit of the season which only magnifies their sense of aloneness. Many people in mourning seem to just want to go from November 1 to January 1 and bypass Thanksgiving and Christmas altogether."

Ms. Cartwright, a social worker and counselor in hospice since 1996 and in bereavement since 2000, went through the pain of her own mother's death in July 2002 while she was working as a counselor.

"That first Christmas was very difficult," she said. "Going

**"Although the pain of their loss has lessened over the years, it's still there. My mantra has become put one foot forward and move ahead."**

— Joyce Kosanovich,  
Castle Shannon resident

to Mom's house and into her bedroom during the holidays and knowing she'd never come back was a very tearful experience."

Because family traditions are often part of the holiday experience, Ms. Cartwright recommends in her counseling that each person in mourning must do what feels right for them. This involves either keeping the traditions going, omitting some or creating new ones. One thing that seems to help is lighting a candle to remind the person in mourning of the light and joy the deceased brought into their world.

"The worse thing is not talking about their absent loved ones because they did make a difference in their life," she said. "Keeping silent about them would be as if they never existed, and hiding grief creates more tension. It's better to let the tears flow because they're healing."

The Mt. Lebanon Hospice and

Palliative Care Center offers both one on one and group bereavement counseling. The groups meet once a month, and the frequency of the one on one sessions is left up to each individual. All of the services are free of charge and are paid for by Medicare, insurance funding, grants and donations.

"We get a lot more calls for help around the holidays, especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas," Ms. Cartwright said. "People also call on the anniversary of their loved one's death or the diagnosis of their illness, because that's when their grief starts to reemerge. That's when people phone in to say they're getting an overwhelming feeling of sadness."

For Debbie Altamara of Castle Shannon, this Christmas will be the second with out Rick, her husband of 24 years, who died at the age of 50 in August 2008. A couple of months after her husband passed on, she found out about bereavement counseling from his hospice care facility and joined a group session.

"I felt I needed to talk to people who were going through the

same set of feeling as I was," she said. "That first Christmas, I was in a fog and learned in bereavement it's O.K. to change your holiday traditions. I used to have people over for the holidays, but haven't since Rick died. I also don't decorate or bake as much as I used to."

Another Castle Shannon resident, Joyce Kosanovich, suffered a double whammy when two loved ones passed away within six weeks of one another. Her sister, Linda Daugherty, died of pancreatic cancer on April 15, 2004. Then her husband, Mark, 49 died of melanoma on May 30 that same year.

"I was very close to my sister and wanted to be with her, but I had to take care of my husband," she said.

After both passed on, she joined the bereavement group in 2004 and stayed with it for three years.

"Having people to talk to who had the same feelings and experiences helped me tremendously," she said. "That first Thanksgiving and Christmas without them were not easy. I remember getting up from the dinner table

and going in the bedroom to cry and cry. Fortunately, I am close to my two sons, and spend the holidays together with them and my five grandchildren."

Coming up on her fifth Christmas without her deceased loved ones, she finds that burning a candle in their memory during holiday dinners helps ease her

sorrows.

"Although the pain of their loss has lessened over the years, it's still there," she said. "My mantra has become put one foot forward and move ahead."

Freelance writer Dave Zuchowski can be reached in care of [suburbanliving@post-gazette.com](mailto:suburbanliving@post-gazette.com).

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