



True Stories from JFS

## Moving on from Lifelong Heartache

“Toni is a true survivor” is how JFS geriatric counselor Elaine Kapperman thinks of her client. Considering the long history of abuse, self-doubt and other hardships Toni (not her real name) has endured, to even survive would be an accomplishment for most of us. That she has found ways to live with her grief and actually greet the future with optimism is indeed a tribute to her inner strength and Elaine's counseling skills and compassion.



“Toni came to us about a year ago, in the midst of dreadful family upheaval and the unbearable stress it created,” recalls Elaine today. Randy, Toni's third husband, had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Sadly, he has since passed away.

Toni's daughter was dealing with terminal illness herself. Long and painfully estranged from her husband's family, Toni also continued to suffer from the effects of childhood sexual, physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her alcoholic father. She had also been abused by her two former husbands.

But the third time was her charm, for Randy had at last brought a ray of sunshine into her life. Toni sums up her relationship with Randy this way. “He was wonderful to me, intelligent, kind to everyone, comical and simply a joy to be with.”

Yet just as her life seemed to be taking a turn for the better, the life of the loving companion she had longed for was slowly stolen from him - and from her. With his passing, it began to appear to Toni that her own desire to live on had passed as well. “I began to convince myself what I had suspected all my life – that I was a failure,” she says. “I can't say I was suicidal, but I also can't say I felt my life was worth living after all I'd been and continued to go through.”

Toni acknowledges the damage she suffered as the victim of her father's abuse and that this may have played a part in her choice of mates in her two failed marriages.

“I couldn't trust anyone, and it all became too much to carry any longer,” she says. Though she was in and out of therapy over the years, Toni confides, it wasn't until Elaine came into her life that she started to deal more constructively with her situation.

“Elaine is wonderful - loving, gentle and giving,” Toni says. “She's found ways to motivate me to become more healthy and functional after a very difficult past. She incorporates a little humor in our interaction, and I do the same, so we've really hit it off.”

“For many years I didn't think I could make it on my own without Randy,” she adds. “With Elaine's help and a lot of work, I know now I can manage on my own. I finally know the bad things that have happened to me aren't my fault, so my self-esteem has improved. And I can deal with what life has handed me. I'm pretty much OK now.”

“We work on coping and centering skills, tapping into her considerable inner strength and focusing on her resilient spirituality,” says Elaine. “Toni's an exceptional example of the progress people in dire circumstances can make. In the end, it's a tribute to her willingness to acknowledge her grief and build from there toward a life that embraces her past for the good of her future.”

Toni says one of the most effective paths to healing is through giving of herself to others. Randy had been an accomplished scientist and educator. Following his death, as she went through his belongings, Toni decided to give his treasured books to friends for which the volumes would have real meaning.

“This has been an exercise in the bitter-sweet,” she confides. “But it's helping bring closure to one chapter in my book of life and begin another with a hopefulness I don't remember ever having before now.”



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