

Talking to Teachers About Grief

By Michael and Pam Bennett-Santoro

December 10 is the anniversary of my daughter Paula's death. Michael is her twin brother. It is said that twins share a special sibling bond. I remember him saying that the night she died, he had a dream that Paula came to say good-bye to him. He told her she couldn't go, she was his best friend.

The first year after Paula died, Michael's elementary school was supportive as he grieved. I spoke to his teacher about keeping Paula's picture up on the classroom wall after she died, so that Michael wouldn't think people were forgetting her and to encourage people to talk to him about Paula.

Michael still wants to talk about Paula, but as the years have gone by, it doesn't happen as often and it's never easy. As grieving parents and siblings know, people speak of our child and/or sibling less as time goes on. But it's important to us to continue to speak her name.

Last year Michael moved to middle school, and we needed a way to let his teachers know about December 10. Michael and I decided that I should write a letter to all his teachers. Michael prefers to go to school and be with his friends on that date, but wanted to let his teachers know that he may feel sad, perhaps a bit out of sorts, irritable and certainly, forgetful. Also Michael plays the trombone in the school



band and their holiday concert was on December 10. The letter went to school, and when December 10 rolled around, no one said anything to Michael about his sister's death. Not even a single "I'm sorry this happened to you."

We've been going to a family therapist to help us cope with all the changes in our lives since Paula's death. The therapist is a bereaved sibling herself, and Michael finds it easy to talk to her. She knows how he feels. When we met with her and began talking about how to deal with Michael's school, we realized how angry we were that no one had even acknowledged Paula to Michael last year. We talked about how hard it is for kids, who are 13 like Michael, to talk about their feelings and how they sometimes say "dumb" things when they mean to help. Nicci, our therapist, helped us realize that the teachers probably felt the same way. They didn't know what to say to Michael either, so they didn't say anything.

Nicci told us that the letter we wrote the previous year was a good idea, letting them know about the date, but it didn't go far enough. She helped us see that Michael had to tell his teachers what he wanted to hear. It would be more powerful coming from Michael than a letter from his parents.

First he had to decide what he wanted them to say, so we talked about it with Nicci. Then we wrote a letter together that he would

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Thursday, December 04, 2003

Dear Team 7-3 members, Mr. Manahan, Ms. Rhodes, Ms. Montemurno, Ms. Liguori, and Ms. Brown,

As you are all aware, it is December. Many joyous things are associated with the month of December. Snow days, Christmas, Hanukkah and the start of the New Year.

Unfortunately the first thing that comes to my mind when December rolls about is not so joyous and cheerful. My twin sister, Paula Rosina Santoro, died on December 10, 2000, due to complications of Cushings Syndrome.

My sister's death affected many people and it continues to hurt today. Next Wednesday, when I come to school, I may feel upset or my temper might spark or I may not participate in class as much as I should. Last year nobody mentioned my sister to me all day at school and I don't know if it was purposely or if they just were not informed, but it made me feel worse.

When I talk about my sister, or when someone mentions her, it doesn't hurt. It makes me feel better. It hurts when no one mentions her to me. Please mention her name to me any time you want, but next Wednesday especially.

Sincerely,
Michael Santoro



Sammie

by Chelsea Carlson

My name is Chelsea Carlson. I am 11 years old and in the 5th grade. My sister, Samantha, died in 1998 from being hurt in a riding accident. Sammie was 8 years old when she died. She was not only my sister, but my best friend. Sammie and I loved to play secret agents and house. It's six years later, and a part of me feels terrible every day because

she died and my life will be completely different. I wish I had more time with her.

Before Christmas this past year, my classmate's brother died. His brother was 8 years old, just like my sister. When I went to school, everybody was saying, "I know exactly how he feels." I said, "No you don't, because you haven't lost a brother or a sister." It made me very, very mad to hear this. After I came home from school, I cried, because I was remembering how I felt when my sister died. My mom and dad hugged me and that made me feel better. I told them that I wanted to help my friend. We talked about ways I could do that.

I thought it would be a good idea to talk to my class about what they could do or say that would help our friend and classmate. My mom talked with my teacher, and she said she would give me some time during the day to talk with my class. I made a list of things that I thought were important to share. I sat on my desk and told them what was said that helped me when Sammie died, like, "I'm sorry," "You can talk to me about it," "It's okay to share your memories".

I also told them what was said to me that didn't help at all, like, "I know exactly how you feel", "I don't want to talk about it", "Aren't you over it by now?" I explained how Sammie died and how I felt at the time. That when I went back to school and no one talked about Sammie, it scared me. I thought everyone had forgotten her. I didn't want our friend to feel that way. I wanted my classmates to know that it was okay to talk about our friend's brother. I passed Sammie's picture around the classroom so my friends could get to know her. It made me feel like they were remembering her even though they had never met her. That felt great.

I've been sitting next to my friend in class. He feels a lot better because he knows we can talk about his brother anytime. He knows I really understand. I gave my friend books to read about dealing with death and grief that were given to me. I'm always talking to him to see how he is doing and, personally, I think I'm helping him a lot. It makes me so happy to help him.

My sister, Sammie, would be pleased with what I'm doing. ☺

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give to his teachers. This time, though, we asked to meet with all seven of his teachers, face-to-face, so he could talk to them.

I called for the appointment, and one of my friends suggested that we ask the guidance counselor to join us. The meeting was in early December. We gave them a copy of the TCF flyer *For Teachers*, and also told them about TCF's annual candle lighting, which was going to be held the Sunday after Paula's anniversary.

To our surprise, we found out that the counselor, who joined us, was also a bereaved sibling! At the meeting, Michael read his letter to the teachers. They all told him that if he needed to leave the classroom and go to the counselor's office at any time, he could do that. Each of his teachers said they were glad to have Michael tell them what he needed them to do, because they didn't know what to say.

On December 10, Michael came home from school and he had a bag all decorated with stars, a card signed by many of his teachers, and some star candles. He told me that the teachers had all taken up a collection, and had donated money to the International Star Registry for a star named in Paula's memory! We were very touched.

His friends at school had signed a card and given it to him at lunchtime, letting him know they were sorry that his twin sister died.

Michael's letter was short and simple, but, as many of us know, sometimes we need to let people know what we want to hear and what will help us on our grief journey. ☺