



In the beginning ... ~excerpts

Was it fate or a higher being that brought Simon Stephens in early 1968 to assume his duties as assistant chaplain at the Coventry & Warwickshire Hospital in Coventry, England? Newly ordained but full of confidence, Simon quickly discovered he was not prepared to deal with the death of a child. And he was needed to help not just one set of parents, but two.

Joe and Iris Lawley came face-to-face with death May 23, two days after their 11-year-old son, Kenneth, was rushed to the hospital with severe head injuries suffered when he was struck by a car while riding his bicycle to school.

“Our family stood around in stunned, agonizing disbelief,” Joe wrote later. “The nurses in the intensive care unit cried; they never quite got used to the death of the young.”

Simon Stephens delivered a prayer requested by the Lawleys as Kenneth’s death neared. Simon also prayed for young Billy Henderson, who lay dying nearby in the same hospital from terminal cancer. A few days after Kenneth died, Billy also died.

At Iris’s suggestion, the Lawleys sent flowers to the Hendersons. “We did not then know the significance of that act but, looking back, it might be said that The Compassionate Friends started there,” wrote Joe. “Joan and Bill telephoned their thanks and we met for a cup of tea.

“Together, midst freely flowing tears, the four of us were able for the first time to speak openly of our children, without feelings of guilt that we were endlessly repeating the virtues of our children and of our vanished hopes for the future. Together, we were all able to accept, for the first time, the words used by many well-meaning friends but rejected almost universally by parents who have lost a beloved child: ‘I understand.’ We *did* understand, all four of us, and, in the immensity of our grief (and in reality is there any other tragedy of quite this enormity?), we all suffered together.”

For the rest of the year, Simon Stephens stayed in close contact with both couples and observed their ever-growing friendship and encouragement. “You are helping each other in a way which I, and virtually everyone else, am unable to do, because of your shared experience; do you think it could work with other parents?” he asked.

In January 1969, six persons, including Simon, attended the meeting that resulted from this question, talking of an organization that would help other bereaved parents.

“What about a name?” wrote Joe Lawley later. “The word ‘compassion’ had been featured frequently in our

conversation, and eventually the “Society of The Compassionate Friends” emerged. It sounded right then, and now . . . in a slightly shorter form, it still sounds right—perhaps even inspired.

Crossing the Atlantic

On October 8, 1970, a car-train accident caused the death of 10-year-old Gabrielle Shamres. Her parents, Arnold and Paula Shamres, suffered through overwhelming grief, guilt, and anger, without guidance, and, though they “functioned,” it was without direction. Then one day in 1971, they read an article in *TIME* magazine about the British Society of The Compassionate Friends. They quickly reacted to the article.

“Theirs was the very first letter to arrive at my Coventry office seeking help and understanding as they walked together through the Valley of the Shadow,” wrote Simon Stephens. “The loss of one of their dearly beloved children was indeed a bitter blow to them; but through their tears they could see the Valley’s end, and the founding of TCF Britain gave them the belief that a new day would dawn in which broken hearts and lives would find their healing balm.

Simon came to Florida to meet with them and was inspired by the selflessness shown by the Shamres. “In 1972, Arnold and Paula Shamres kindled the TCF flame, which now burns so brightly in every state of the union,” recalls Simon. “It was hard work. There were tensions and misunderstandings as men and women, the early pioneers of TCF, did the hard work of grieving in a society which was reluctant to acknowledge the very special needs of the bereaved parent. But the vision became a reality.”

Please read the entire story of TCF growing in America, its incorporation and how it grew over 3 decades to include printed brochures and newsletters, a website and is still growing with the recent addition of Facebook.

The entire story, “The Story of The Compassionate Friends,” is at:
http://www.compassionatefriends.org/pdf/128471_TCF_histor_1A.pdf

Update

In 2007, TCF’s Credo was revised to include siblings and grandparents. The Compassionate Friends is celebrating four decades of growth worldwide. It has been a lifeline to hundreds of thousands of bereaved families through national organizations, local chapters, and newsletters.



Its growth continues because of the gentle love and light so many have been willing to share with those seeking support as they walk through the darkness of the valley.

Years later, those who have been helped often sum up the support they received with the simple words,

5 “TCF saved my life!”