



The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc.

Bereaved Parent & Sibling Support & Information

Patron: Rhonda Galbally, AO

CASE STUDY

Beyond the Death of a Child: Social Impact and Economic Costs Following the Death of a Child

authored by Dr Jon Stebbins and Dr Trevor Batrouney has one chapter dedicated to case studies of bereaved families [Chapter 8].

Chapter Eight presents seven case studies of families selected from the respondents to the questionnaire.

The deaths of the children in the seven families cover the major types of deaths (post-natal, congenital, accident, transport, suicide) and age ranges from infant to young adult.

Each of these deaths was accompanied by its own set of pressures, derived from the particular circumstances of the deaths, the nature of the families and the pressure of keeping a relatively normal family life going, mainly for the sake of the other children.

The seven deaths studied are (*pseudonyms used in all case studies):

- The first is that of Liz and Andrew's twin, Claire, who died at the age of only 11 days from brain damage after failing to breathe after birth.
- The next-youngest death was that of Jeffrey, the son of Jenny and Gary, who died of a rare degenerative nerve disorder at the age of two years and four months.
- Trudy and James were living and working in Singapore when their seven-year-old daughter, Carrie, an asthmatic, collapsed and drowned in 15 centimetres of bath water.
- Lena, the daughter of Kylie and Paul, died at the age of 13 years after suffering from a rare congenital bowel disorder for all of her short life.
- Kira, the 18-year-old daughter of Merle and Piero, died in a car accident while she was driving not far from her home at two o'clock one morning.
- A car accident also took the life of Sandra, the 21-year-old daughter of Tonia and Terry. Sandra was on her way to a church function after work and apparently lost control of her car, resulting in a fatal accident.
- The one suicide in the group was that of Allan, the 21-year-old son of Kevin and his estranged wife Maggie. The tragic circumstances surrounding the death included drug-taking and violence, which culminated in Allan attacking a 14-year-old boy and then, believing that he had killed him, taking his own life by hanging himself.

On the following pages is an **excerpt** from one of these case studies: Kira, the 18-year-old daughter of Merle and Piero.

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Merle and Piero*

The house was filled with people and the fridge was full. (Merle)

Kira

On a wet January night, 18-year-old Kira left her home, alone, to visit nearby friends. After stopping briefly at a local convenience store to pick up bread and milk, she apparently lost control of her car, hit a tree and was killed instantly. Her death occurred at about two o'clock in the morning.

There were no witnesses to the accident and Kira was alone in the car; however, her parents have strong suspicions, but no evidence, that an ex-boyfriend of Kira was involved in some way. His later behaviour, according to Merle, was suspicious. It included leaving a distraught message on their answering machine soon after the accident with him 'wailing and crying and saying "What have I done?"' For Merle and Piero, this added an extra layer of distress to the trauma of her death.

Financial impact

The financial impact of Kira's death was significant, but not devastating. Not only was Merle forced to take unpaid leave, but Piero also stopped working for five months and estimated that he dropped \$30,000 over that time. Two years before Kira's death, he had left his supervisor role with the railways, because of a disagreement with management.

The active involvement of both Merle and Piero in the local Catholic Church community was a central part of their lives before Kira's death. Merle, in particular, had been very heavily involved in pastoral and educational support programs, and had worked hard to prepare herself for this challenging work, with quite ambitious future plans in mind:

my original plan with CPE and the pastoral study was that I wanted to be either a pastoral worker in a parish, or I wanted to be ... because I'd had a lot of hospital experience ... I wanted to be a chaplain ...

Kira's death, however, changed all that. She no longer felt she could have the involvement and do the work that she had been doing, most of which was grief related. She found it becoming more and more stressful.

I stuck with it for about, probably 12 months after Kira died ... and you know I'd hear a lot of their woes and troubles and [it got too much] ... I was tired all the time ... even though ... it was just one day a week.

Finally she took four months leave without pay, even though, as she says, 'we were really suffering financially at that time'. Even this, however, was not a real break, because political forces within the Catholic Church at that time were working to truncate the programs she had helped develop and she was drawn in to defending these.

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Impact on family relationships and patterns of support

Overall, Piero and Merle felt they were fortunate to have always had a strong support base around them, with its main attribute being their closeness as a nuclear family – Merle, Piero and their son, Lew. Both Merle and Piero stressed that they were a close family before Kira's death and this closeness continued afterwards. Piero and Merle did receive very helpful counselling; however, this was more to do with understanding how to manage their grief, rather than a response to stresses on their relationship with each other. As Piero said:

We talked through the issues ... I mean Merle and I could be open and just talk about things ... I think a lot of relationships break up because people don't talk ... But we always talked things through ... probably we were lucky that when I was feeling low Merle used to pull me up and vice versa ...

One interesting consequence of Kira's death, as reported by Piero, was an increase in his assertiveness. He had noticed this growing before her death when he was first passed over for promotion to supervisor on what he saw as racial and religious grounds. Eventually he got a supervisor role, but it took him some time to rebuild his confidence at that time. But rebuild he did, and after Kira's death he found himself even less likely to hold back when a perceived wrong was committed – especially when it involved family: 'don't touch my family. If it hurts my family in any way shape of form ...' The rest was imagined from the glint in his eye!

Parents' relationship with Lew

But perhaps the most important support for Merle and Piero came from their only other child, their son, Lew. When Kira died, Lew was 22 years old, living at home and carving out a successful career within a government department. According to Merle, he and Kira were very close ('Very much the big brother ... she leaned on Lew'). Lew's reactions after Kira died presented an interesting variation on the protective role usually taken on by parents in bereaved families. As Merle put it:

I think what Lew did when Kira died was swap roles. He became the parent, and we became the children ...

Merle viewed this in part as a natural consequence of the circumstances at the time of Kira's death. She and Piero were on holidays interstate at the time, and although they were contacted and set off for home straight away, for over four hours Lew was forced into the position where he was answering phones, contacting relatives and friends, and even dealing with the media. Merle said that he just continued to take this leading role – quite extensively and quite protectively:

he would do things like go and get things out of the letterbox ... so that there wasn't anything with Kira's name on it ... he came with us to identify her body, he gave her eulogy at her mass, he was involved in all the preparations for her funeral ... Every aspect where we were involved, he was involved ... and he never shook any responsibility ... [and] I found that very comforting ...

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Lew even gave a newspaper a photo of Kira – who was young and pretty – to ensure that the paper report did not show a picture of her smashed-up car, which he felt would have upset his parents. Merle saw, even back then, that in taking charge, Lew was doing more than just reacting to the circumstances of being the only family member on the spot. She saw this fulfilling a deeper need to be active and in control – an important part of his way of handling his grief:

we were aware of what was happening ... [and] we allowed it to happen because it seemed that he ... that was his survival mechanism ...

Impact on social life

In terms of their social activities, although there was a predictable pause for a time, before long they had returned to a fairly normal social life. For example, Piero and Lew went back to ten-pin bowling quite quickly, because they 'wanted to do something normal'.

One very significant experience Merle and Piero recounted involved the building of a pergola on the back of their house. Originally planned as a memorial to Kira, as well as part of the process of getting back to normal, the project grew to mean much more than that. Started in the week after her funeral, it took three very intense weeks to complete and involved Piero, Lew, a number of Lew and Kira's friends, and members of their broader family, working long days in temperatures reaching 40 degrees.

It grew into a very significant project not just because it was a substantial memorial to Kira. It also gave Piero an opportunity to pass on practical skills to the young people working with him; it involved different age groups working together, 'including tiny kids hammering in nails' and, finally, it was a 'male project', enabling the men to actively express their support for each other.

The women were involved in providing meals and cold drinks. At the completion of the project, Piero's cousin, a Catholic priest, held a special mass in the new pergola.

* All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the family. The passages are excerpts from the case study found in *Beyond the Death of a Child: Social Costs and Economic Impact Following the Death of a Child*. (Authors Dr Jon Stebbins and Dr Trevor Batrouney.)

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