

THE BACONS' 6-year-old granddaughter, Charlotte, reveled in playing with their dog, Ollie. "She never met an animal she didn't love," says Dan.

a special education aide, Anne Marie Murphy, age 52, who adored him, and he adored her. When the shooting started, she threw her body over Dylan's to protect him. Her arms were wrapped around him when they found them. It was an enormous comfort to us that Dylan was with someone who loved him, and he loved back, in those final seconds. Mrs. Murphy had children of her own. I never met her, but I pray for her every night.

"Our grandson was absolutely the sweetest boy you'd ever want to meet. Every night, Nicole and Ian read the kids to sleep. When I was with them, I would do the same, and tuck them in. I visited them a week before Dylan was killed. We were reading *Going to the Sea Park* by Mercer Mayer. Before Dylan went to sleep, I asked him what the best part of the story was. 'The sharks,' he replied. I can still see him and hear him say that. When I went back to the house after the shootings, that book was still on his bed. Now every night I read it to Dylan. I think he hears me. I will read it every day until I see him again.

"It's hard to cope with your own pain when your child is so shattered. My daughter is my flesh and blood, but there is nothing I can say that can help her feel better. The first year is the worst—the birthdays, the holidays. Dylan's birthday was last March; he would have been 7. Now he'll be forever 6.

"I don't think any of us will get over this. When my daughter visits us now, I hear only three car doors open instead of four. When they leave, I have a good hard cry. I still have the pictures Dylan drew for me. And the letter he wrote to me from school is on the fridge. "Dear grandma, will you play with me, love Dylan." He loved the trampoline in the yard. He'd push back against the net and say, 'Push me, Grandma, push me.' Being autistic, he liked repetitive things. I would push him until I thought my arms would fall off. He'd laugh and laugh.

"One of the things that's really helped is advice my daughter got from Vice President Joe Biden, who lost his wife and infant daughter in a car accident in 1972. When Biden met Nicole after the shooting, he told her to rate each day from one to 10—and you may never get to 10. He said, 'Nicole, if you make it to a four one day, at



The Forgotten Mourners

Why a grandparent's grief can be especially devastating—and lonely

• **More than 160,000** American grandparents lose grandkids each year. Yet their grief is often minimized, even by family members. "Bereaved grandparents are sometimes referred to as forgotten mourners," says Polly Moore, regional coordinator for The Compassionate

Friends (TCF), a non-profit that assists bereaved families. "People think it is not 'your' child that died," so the pain must be less intense. And because grandparents have more life experience, they are often assumed to have better skills for coping with tragedy.

least you know you made it to a four. And then you know you can do it again.”

“I’ve adopted that approach into my life since Dylan died. I rate every day. So far I’ve had one day that was a five. I got there, so I think I can do it again. It helps.”

Annette & Carmen Lobis

WEST CHESTER, PENNSYLVANIA

GRANDPARENTS OF BENJAMIN WHEELER, AGE 6

“We were always a close family, but this has drawn us even closer,” says Carmen, 76. “It’s made us more sensitive to one another’s feelings. We can sense when one of us needs a hug or a hand to hold. Now when we are together, we never fail to say ‘I love you.’ You never know when you will have that chance again.

“My wife and I are still grieving for our grandson. And we are grieving for Francine and David, our daughter and our son-in-law, and for our older grandson, Nate, who’ve had to live through this horrendous experience. Their pain is much more severe and intense than even ours is. They’re all in therapy to help them work through it, but it’s very hard.

“Our lives aren’t the same without Ben. He was truly an amazing little boy. He had a steel-trap mind, almost a photographic memory. I remember once driving somewhere with him and taking a new route because the normal one was backed up with traffic. Ben immediately noticed and told me I was missing a turn. ‘You are supposed to take Route 252 to Route 3 to Malin Road,’ he told me. This from a boy of 6.

“He liked to say he wanted to be an architect when he grew up. But sometimes he wanted to be a paleontologist, because that’s what his brother, Nate, wants to be. I don’t think I knew what a paleontologist was until I was in high school.

“Ben had boundless energy. He loved the local soccer program. He loved his swimming lessons. He was a Tiger Scout. You always knew when he was around. He didn’t

sit in the corner quietly. Nate is the opposite, quiet and reserved. When Ben would see Nate reading a book on the floor, he’d jump on top of him. They had a remarkable relationship, even though they were entirely different. After Ben died, Nate told his mom, ‘You have to do something. I don’t want to be an only child.’ With Ben’s passing, their house is a totally different place. It’s so quiet.”

“We dream about Ben,” says Annette, 72. “I say ‘Good morning’ to him every day. It’s as if he is still here. Sometimes it feels like he really is. Recently we were all at a beach condo in New Jersey. We walked into the place, and sitting on that table was a little truck that Ben had adored: the one from the movie *Cars* that looks human

“The plaque in our kitchen reads, ‘Faith, Family, Friends,’” says Lindie Bacon. “We thank God we have that. Our close-knit family has been a big part of our healing.”

and has headlights that look like eyes. It wasn’t Ben’s; the last tenant must have left it behind. But it was as if Ben had put it there for us, to let us know he was with us.”

Lindie & Dan Bacon

NEWTOWN, CONNECTICUT

GRANDPARENTS OF CHARLOTTE BACON, AGE 6

“Charlotte was a bright light in our lives, a pure joy,” says Dan, 74. “She had a very independent streak: In life and in coloring, she just took the lines as suggestions, not rules. She had a vivid imagination; when she told you something, you didn’t know what was fact and what was fiction. She adored pink and never met an animal she didn’t love. She’d wanted to be a veterinarian since she was 2.

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Frequently, though, the grandparents’ pain matches the powerful bond they have with their grandchildren, who embody a family’s legacy and even a kind of immortality. Just like parents who have lost a child, grieving grandparents often feel helpless, angry and frustrated, as well as heartbroken.

Here is some advice from grief experts on making this hard journey easier.

Express difficult feelings

Bereaved grandparents can write or talk to a friend or counselor, or find support from organizations such as TCF (compassionatefriends.org) or the MISS Foundation (missfoundation.org/forums).

Read up Helpful books include *The Grief Recovery Handbook* by John W. James and Russell Friedman, and *Grandparents Cry*

Twice by Mary Lou Reed. Online, try visiting The Dougy Center (dougy.org) or Grief Watch (griefwatch.com).

Stay emotionally connected to the deceased

Prayer, contemplation and dreams can provide solace; the lost person’s presence is still felt. “Love doesn’t die, and therefore the relationship doesn’t die,” says Darcie D.

Sims, director of the American Grief Academy in Seattle.

Let go of pain when possible

Some people feel guilty when their intense grief begins to ebb, fearing they’re forgetting their loved one. But there’s no need to cling to sorrow. Grievers should remember that the loved one lived, not only that he or she died. (CONTINUED ON PAGE 64)

NEWTOWN

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“Charlotte was also used to having things come easily to her, so she was surprised when she had to apply herself to learn to read. But her mom turned their yellow Lab, Lily, into a therapy dog. Charlotte would read aloud to Lily, and that didn’t seem like a chore to her. There’s no stigma in reading to a dog.

“Traumatized communities like ours can really benefit from therapy dogs. And this is something JoAnn, our daughter-in-law, wants to do in Charlotte’s memory, so that something good comes out of something so tragic. Just like Newtown Kindness, which was started by Charlotte’s best friend, Ava Carlson, and her father, Aaron. Ava, now 7, was devastated by Charlotte’s death. She asked, ‘What can we do to make things better?’ We chose to focus on kindness: Kind kids grow up to be kind adults. It’s a project where kids describe their acts of kindness, and we expected it to be a little local contest. But we’ve received thousands of entries from kids around the country, even abroad. The acts of kindness these kids are doing are amazing.”

“Life has changed for our children, their children and us,” says Lindie, 71. “Now we make sure we spend time with our kids. We often pick up Guy, Charlotte’s brother, from the school bus, and he sleeps over. As the plaque in our kitchen reads, ‘Faith, Family, Friends.’ We thank God we have that. Our close-knit family is a big part of our healing.

“We also discovered there are a lot of well-intentioned people supporting us. Our family received some 4,000 cards and letters, and are trying to respond to all of them. Lots of people sent gifts: angel jewelry, photos of children, knitted and crocheted prayer shawls. This mountain of mail has been very meaningful.

“There are days when we’d like to be anywhere but Newtown,” Lindie continues. “People don’t want to be known as being from here now.

Sandy Hook and Newtown are synonymous with tragedy. We no longer have to explain where we are from. The moment we say the name, everybody knows. But we haven’t thought of moving away. Now we know why God wanted us to be here.”

“My wife and I worked as missionaries in Asia for many years,” says Dan. “And we have lots of friends all over the world. When Charlotte died, we had to stop them from jumping on a plane—though many of them did.

“As former missionaries, we’re often asked, ‘Why did a loving God let this happen?’ Our response is always: ‘God didn’t orchestrate this. It breaks God’s heart. This is not what he would choose.’” ■

THE FORGOTTEN MOURNERS

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Create a legacy Family members can plant a tree, start a scholarship in the loved one’s name or launch a new family ritual.

Expect a bumpy ride Grief is unpredictable; it can revive old, forgotten pains, such as a miscarriage or the death of a parent. This is normal. The bereaved should honor these feelings as part of the process.

Take a breather Grieving grandparents should give themselves permission to rest. They might visit a friend or a place that nourishes—a place where they don’t have to be strong for the family. “Find what coping mechanisms help you most,” Moore recommends. “It takes time and patience—there are no quick fixes.” —*Leah Dobkin*

TK BOOMERS

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