

To ease the grief for others, family revitalizes bereavement box fund

The hospital elevator doors open. The kindergartner and his father walk on and press the button for the maternity floor. An older woman walks on behind them, smiles at the little boy and innocently asks, "Did you have a little sister or a little brother?"

The boy replies matter-of-factly: "A little brother. He died." The woman's smile freezes. "I'm so sorry," she stammers. The father nods, and in awkward silence they watch the numbers lighting the way to their floor.

"It's amazing how many lives this little guy touched and changed."

— Julie Woodling



For Julia and Michael Woodling of Williamsburg and their son Maverick, seeing the grief on other people's faces each time they had to break the news of little Daniel Mark's stillbirth showed them how much he was loved.

"It's amazing how many lives this little guy touched and changed," Julie said. "He didn't breathe outside of me, yet he affected so many people."

Many of the people whose lives Daniel touched remain strangers to the Woodlings, but their hearts share the same grief. The Woodlings channeled the donations made in memory of their son to Altoona Regional's Neonatal Bereavement Fund to help provide special keepsake memory boxes to families who experience the loss of a child through stillbirth, miscarriage or neonatal death.

Called bereavement boxes, the kit contains a place for photographs, locks of hair, footprints, outfits and any other mementos the family wishes to treasure.

Five days away from giving birth via C-section, Julie woke up on Saturday, Feb. 5, 2005, and didn't feel her baby's usual movements. "I'd just had a checkup Thursday and everything



Julie Woodling looks through Daniel Mark's bereavement box, which contains his footprint cards, locks of hair and other mementos.

was great," she remembers.

She speaks highly of the sensitivity and compassion shown to them by her physician, Edmundo Grab of Altoona OB/GYN Associates (now retired), and the maternity staff.

"It's one of those moments that's emblazoned on your brain," she said. "He told me, 'There's no easy way to say this ... your baby has died.' I don't remember everything he said after that except he said all the right things. Then, he left us alone to start to call our families. He came back a while later and just sat and talked to us. That meant a lot."

Maternity nurse Cindie Huhn also provided comfort and support. It was she who explained the bereavement boxes to Julie before she left the hospital.

Before returning to work as a librarian at Juniata College, Julie asked coworkers to spread the word of the family's loss among other coworkers and associates. She also asked them to tell those

she came in contact with in her daily routine outside the college, such as the local convenience store.

It made returning to work a bit easier if she didn't have to answer a flood of "How's the baby?" and "What did you have?" questions from well-meaning people who may not have heard that her baby had died.

After her experience, Julie was surprised to discover how many other families have had such a loss.

"What amazed us is how many people shared with us stories of their own losses that we didn't know about," she said. "Even though for some of these women their loss happened 20 or 30 years ago, it was obvious that it still grieved them, and our loss brought it all back."

Unlike many of them, though, Julie and her family will have Daniel Mark's memory box to provide some comfort through the years.

This summer, Julie, Mark and Maverick Woodling placed a plaque in front of a tree in their yard. The tree was planted in memory of Daniel.

COPING with the aftermath...

Here are some practical suggestions on how to cope with a neonatal loss and what to say to those who experience it. Express your sympathy in the way that is comfortable for you. Don't just avoid the couple/family.

"People who avoided us were the hardest to face," Julie said. "There's never going to be a 'normal' again nor should there be. Things are never the same. You have to find a new 'normal.'" The couple received telephone calls, cards, letters, poems, books and cash donations.

WHAT to say

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I don't know what to say."

"Even an understanding or sympathetic look is fine," Julie explained. "What you say doesn't matter as much as your presence."

WHAT not to say

"You can have another child."

"There must have been something wrong with him or her."

"You still have your other children."

Friends of Altoona Regional recently donated the \$1,284 proceeds from a jewelry raffle (pieces donated by Your Jewelry Box) at the 2006 Women's Night Out event to fund the bereavement box program. You can donate to the Neonatal Bereavement Fund by using the donation envelope included with this magazine and checking the box for "Neonatal Bereavement."