

How to survive the loss of a partner

by Lainey Millen
Q-Notes Staff

"Do not go gently into that good night!" These immortal words of poet Dylan Thomas remind all of us of the way in which the impending death and subsequent passing of someone for whom we care deeply touches each of us. Few of us are immune to unexpected death and the emptiness, loneliness and reevaluation that such occasions bring.

Recently, I revisited a television movie on the Castaldi custody battle in Florida. I believe these issues continue to be worth exploring.

A few months ago, I lost a dear, old friend. He and his partner owned a home together and had shared some wonderful experiences. However, a couple of years ago, the partner I'll call "John" was diagnosed with a terminal illness. John mustered all his strength to battle the disease only to fail at last. He outlived all estimates, but eventually was forced to surrender and die.

Like in the Castaldi film, John's partner was forced into a protracted legal battle with the surviving parents. Property, money, and even the choice of last rites were all disputed. John's parents excluded "Sam" from the final arrangements, ignored him at the visitation, made no mention of him during the funeral and the interment. He was omitted from the obituary and was not acknowledged during the services.

Only after the graveside service did the officiating minister learn of Sam's existence. The family had completely segregated themselves from Sam to protect their own interests and lifestyle. Once the minister was aware of the relationship, he was quick to offer consolation and support. He made arrangements for follow-up visits to ensure that Sam had support from his clergy.

This story is too similar to those shared among our community to be viewed with any emotional distance. It pains me to see couples work so hard for so many years to build a life together and then when death rears its head and snatches a loved one, the agony truly begins.

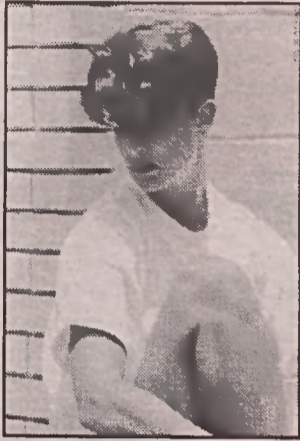
The Castaldi movie — which showcased the landmark case in Florida for the rights of the surviving partner in a lesbian relationship — brought a fresh breeze to a stagnant issue. The movie likewise depicted the exclusion of Castaldi's partner by her parents at the memorial service, and in rearing the child they had shared. How many of us know someone who has been slighted or ignored by the surviving family, and thus denied the opportunity for healthy grief? Worse still, how many of us know of someone who was ousted from a shared home because of the name on the title and the legal rights of survivorship?

When two people commit to a relationship, it is like a marriage, regardless of the gender of the persons involved. It is necessary that the couple work together to secure their future together and separately, should one die. In some cases, it may be as simple as formalizing wills, living wills, and healthcare proxies (powers-of-

attorney). In other cases, it will require educating family members about one's choice of a life mate, even when they would prefer to remain blissfully ignorant. For some, it may be even a stronger battle, requiring a visible face at work and within a rejecting community.

At any rate, each must do whatever is necessary to ensure the security and well being of one's partner in the event of accident, illness, or death.

I visited my friend Don a few years ago as he was in his last week of life in Dallas. He was cared for at a hospice facility specifically for persons with AIDS. As I watched him that week, a shell of man who was once exuberant and vivacious, I was touched by his mother's devotion. Lucille was never ashamed of her son. She loved him. She was there — stroking his brow, kissing his head, helping him transition from this world to the next with dignity and grace.



When Don died, a member of his care team took Lucille shopping to select a dress for the funeral, while others provided meals and took care of the daily chores of living.

I urge those in loving relationships to begin to do some soul searching. Consider what would happen if something happened to one of you. Think about how the deceased partner's family would treat the surviving spouse. Begin to create a plan; to chart a course. Decide together what rituals, events, and traditions are important to the two of you — and perhaps what choices you can leave open to other family members so that they, too, can have a healthy grieving process.

But don't allow your private decisions to be the end. Take the time and make the difficult effort to share those decisions with extended family members, so that everyone will be clear about your wants and wishes at this difficult and painful time. That will allow healing to happen through the pain. ▼

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