



BY JOHN BOTTOMLEY, MELBOURNE

“He went off to work — and never came home”

“Dean was a normal, happy, mostly quiet 19 year old,” recalls his mother, Bette. “Dean was an apprentice electrician looking forward to his 20th birthday. The celebration was to be a family get-together, including a few of his close friends. Dean loved to have time with his family. Tragic circumstances changed this dream in an instant. Monday morning on the 9th of December at 8.30am he died, electrocuted in the ceiling of a Kentucky Chicken outlet.”

“The first year after Dean died was really a blur. I just existed,” Bette said. “Getting out of bed was the hardest thing to do. I just wanted to sleep and never wake up. But life was going on around me and there were other pressing matters to deal with. I missed Dean so badly. He was more than my son,

he was my wisdom, my friend. He could put any event in perspective. He was my foremost reason for being. I was not a mother any more. Who am I now? I kept anniversaries - 1 week, 2 weeks.... 1 month.... when would this nightmare ever end? Even now there are times when I feel that I am in a dream and will wake up soon.

Unless you have experienced losing a child I do not believe any one can fully understand the feeling. It is different from any other losses, a parent or other significant relative. I know this, as I have experienced all of those losses.

As life went on, I became ill through losing Dean and various other events happening around me. I had lost myself. Dean had been with me for half of my life, for I had turned 40 in the September of that year. How can such a major part of

your life disappear like that? And leave nothing to replace it?"

In the course of their work, many lawyers will be all too familiar with the distress of stories such as Dean's, as recalled by his mother. But now Bette has joined the Urban Ministry Network's Partnerships in Grieving Program, and is working to support others bereaved by work-related death. Bette is working with employers, unions, and health and safety advocates ensuring workplaces value life as their first priority.

How the Partnerships in Grieving Program began

In 1997, the Urban Ministry Network, a small Uniting Church agency in Melbourne, successfully applied to the Reichstein Foundation to establish a support group program for families bereaved by work-related deaths.

At first, this initiative moved very slowly. Trade unions had little contact with their members' families, and workplaces generally paid little attention to the needs of workers grieving a workmate's death.

The needs of bereaved families were also complex. There was little social policy that recognised their needs, so the work began in often uncharted waters. However, the monthly support group meetings began to grow as people learned of its existence. People bereaved by work-related deaths began to seek out other families who had experienced this tragedy in their lives.



John Bottomley is the Director of the Urban Ministry Network, PO Box 3072 Prahran East, Vic. 3181
PHONE (03) 9827 8322
EMAIL johnumn@netspace.net.au

Publishing "Till Death Us Do Part"

The church provided critical financial support through the Mercy Foundation and the Uniting Church's Share Appeal. This funding enabled the UMN to research and document ten narratives of families bereaved through work-related deaths. These stories were published as *Till death us do part: industrial death narratives*. There was an enormous response to this book from bereaved families, industry, occupational health and safety managers, grief counsellors, and safety training organisations. With sales around Australia, the first edition had sold out within a few months.

Late in 1998, UMN agreed that a new organisation, Industrial Deaths Support and Advocacy Inc. should publish the second edition of *Till Death Us Do Part*.

A new phase - industry sponsorship

The Urban Ministry Network entered into three vital sponsorships to support its Partnerships in Grieving Program. The Program provides support to families, workers and companies bereaved by work-related deaths, and aims to reduce work-related deaths by raising awareness of, and commitment to occupational health and safety in the work-place. The first agreements were with the Victorian WorkCover Authority, Leighton Holdings Ltd., and solicitors Ryan, Carlisle, Thomas. In addition to the financial support of these organisations, the Network was able to learn from their expertise on the issues of work-related deaths and support for bereaved families, workmates and management. The end of 1998 saw UMN's work significantly enriched by these relationships.

In 1999, the Urban Ministry Network has received support from the Department of Family and Community Services under its Business and Community Partnerships Program. This will facilitate research into employers' responses to a work-related death in their company. The project will also provide training in grief support for volunteers able to support those affected by a work-related death. These volunteers

will then be able to receive further training to spread the safety message to employers and unions.

What services do the Partnerships in Grieving Program offer?

- Support groups and networks for bereaved families and work mates.
- The opportunity to write down the story of what happened following the loved one's death.
- Training for volunteers who wish to be involved in safety campaigns in work places.
- Individual counselling and support as well as referral to other services where appropriate.
- Memorial services for workers who have died.
- Writing the name of the deceased in the Victorian Trades Hall Council Memorial Book.
- A bi-monthly newsletter.

These services are planned and supported by a Committee that includes bereaved families, a grief counsellor and a social researcher.

Work-related suicide

Recently, the impacts of work-related suicide have come to the attention of the Network. A reference group and mailing list have been set up to support this project. This work is in its early stages.

How can lawyers be involved?

- Spread the word about the Partnerships in Grieving Program and the services available to those bereaved by a work-related death.
- Ask for copies of our brochure to give to bereaved families, workers and companies.
- Contact the Director, John Bottomley, to share your experiences and advice.
- Join our mailing list for our Partnerships in Grieving Program Newsletter and the work-related suicide project.
- Contribute to the cost of publications, support group meetings, or training of volunteers.
- Encourage people who may have experienced loss and grief, and who may make a contribution through this program, to contact UMN. 