



Retired
Senior
Volunteer
Program

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Volunteering Helps Oklahoma City Senior with Grief After Wife's Death

When Linus Affolder, 89, lost his wife, Carolyn, of 47 years in 2013, he said the grief was like going through a dark tunnel.

"I could be sitting on the patio and break down. Things would just trigger the tears," the Oklahoma City resident explained. "I wanted her back. She was my foundation and strength; my right-hand person."

Carolyn had been sick with leukemia for many years and as the disease progressed, the couple traveled to Houston's MD Anderson Cancer Center almost every weekend for treatments. During those years, the Affolders had to step away from all of the volunteer activities they did individually and as a couple to concentrate on Carolyn's health.

The loss was overwhelming when Carolyn died, Linus said, and he tried to manage the grief and loneliness on his own for as long as he could.

"A lady from church who had lost a son told me about a grief program at Christ the King Catholic Church that helped her, and so I started going. It was a four-month program and we met on Thursdays and learned about the phases of grief and shared our stories with one another. One of the things that stood out for me was the suggestion that getting back to volunteering could help in my grieving."

So, Linus picked up where he left off years ago as a volunteer with Britvil Food Pantry in north Oklahoma City, an opportunity he found through the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Central Oklahoma, a program that matches seniors 55 and older with volunteer opportunities in the community.

“That was the starting point for me to get back out and be around people,” he said. “It revitalized me because I have people that I look forward to seeing and a weekly obligation to help others.”

There are no components of our life that grief doesn't affect, said RSVP of Central Oklahoma board member and Licensed Professional Counselor Marla Mercer-Cole, who has a private counseling practice and leads grief groups through Mercer Adams Funeral Service.

“Grief affects us emotionally, physically, and spiritually,” she said. “There is a huge paradigm shift when we lose a loved one, especially a spouse. It leaves you shaken. You don't feel of much value any longer and don't know what your purpose is moving forward. I encourage the people in the groups that I lead that although we will always miss that person, we do begin to adapt physically and emotionally.”

She said that volunteering often helps with that process and has on many occasions referred her senior clients or members of her grief groups to contact RSVP of Central Oklahoma or other organizations to find out about volunteer opportunities.

“We have the capacity to be enlarged as humans to have compassion and empathy because of what we've been through,” she said. “Doing something altruistically for someone helps others but also gives you a break from the heaviness of grief. It helps with connections and making friends and reminds us that if we are still here, we have a purpose.”

She also encourages grievers to surround themselves with positivity and look for things for which to be grateful. Research shows that gratitude changes brain chemistry and complaining and negativity does, too, she said.

And last, read as much as you can about grief because knowledge is power, and if you are ready, join a grief group.

“Some people who are grieving worry that something is wrong with them until they are in a grief group and hear others who share some of the same things you are going through,” she said.

Today, Linus is involved with several volunteer opportunities each week and joins friends at three church-sponsored senior luncheons each month.

“Pushing myself is what I have to do,” he explains, “but I feel a difference when I get out with people and my friend base is enlarging.”

To learn more about ways to volunteer in your community, call the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) of Central Oklahoma, at 405.605.3110 or visit rsvpokc.org.