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### Defeating taboo of death and grief is Chester group's goal

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CHESTER – George Salamy will never forget his wife, Barbara, but after her death, he has learned to move on with his own life, in large part because of the free support he got from an area grief support group.

Anne Elizabeth Siminoff feared she would drown in grief she suffered after her husband, Bruce, died. Like Salamy, Siminoff also discovered the strength to carry on, also because of help she got from the same group.

Salamy of Chester and Siminoff of Mendham came to grips with their grief after seeking help from the non-profit organization known as "Interregnum." Siminoff is on the group's board of trustees.

Another Mendham woman, Donna Stone, has also gotten very involved with Interregnum. Stone had lost her cousin, Ralph Stokes, to non-Hodgkins lymphoma in 2003. Two years later, she attended a businesswomen's meeting in Parsippany and met Interregnum founder, Judith Pedersen. Stone began to volunteer for the group and is now a member of the board of trustees.

"It was eureka for me," Stone said.

Stone said all of her relatives live out of the area and she is not religious so it was hard to find support after her cousin died. She began to experience her grief but had to deal with it alone.

"I didn't realize how much grieving I was having and there was no one to talk to," Stone said. "If I had something like Interregnum it would have made a huge difference in my life."

Employers, friends, relatives and others may place artificial bounds on the length of grieving but people do not follow a rule book and must learn to cope and move on in their own pace. Such limits plus cultural bounds on seeking help and admitting grief add to the difficulties faced by survivors, according to grief recovery experts.

"Dealing with death is the last taboo," Stone said.

Siminoff and Salamy attended a series of group support meetings, offered by Interregnum. The organization also offers professional education and reaches out to people who have lost loved ones.

Salamy and Siminoff said they had sought out the organization after finding a dearth of services for grief-stricken spouses, family members or friends.

#### Gap In Services

Mrs. Salamy died in September 2006 at the Carol G. Simon Cancer Center at Morristown Memorial Hospital, after a long bout with cancer. Mr. Salamy said the medical care was exceptional but that the hospital had



The non-profit organization, Interregnum, offers free counseling for people grieving the loss of a loved one. From left, are Interregnum Board of Trustees member Donna Stone, Interregnum founder Judith Pedersen and Interregnum communications director, Bari Adelman. Photo by Phil Garber

little in the way of counseling for him.

Within six months, Mr. Salamy was ready to try to face his grief and he learned about Interregnum through a friend.

"It was perfect timing for me," he said. "I was just trying to get my head on around moving on. The loss has never gone away but the bottom line is my wife is not coming back. Once you get to that reality, you have to decide what you'll do now."

He went to six Interregnum sessions and talked along with the other 10 group members, mostly whose spouses had died of cancer.

"A lot of people who lose a close one don't want to move on. The bereavement process works if you let it happen," he said.

The support has evidently helped because Mr. Salamy will be getting married on Aug. 28 to Linda Gehshan.

Mr. Siminoff died of brain cancer on Jan. 12, 2008. Mrs. Siminoff, a registered nurse, learned of a grief support group offered at the Church of the Assumption in Morristown. Mrs. Siminoff is Jewish and said she did not feel comfortable at the Catholic-based program.

A friend at the church told Mrs. Siminoff about Interregnum and she signed up for the program.

"When a spouse dies, you're lost. You don't sleep well, you can't concentrate," she said. "When the shock wears off, then comes the horrible pain."

At Interregnum, Mrs. Siminoff said she shared her feelings with other care-givers who had lost someone. A mother in her early 30s with a young baby was trying to survive the death of her mother. At first, the woman could only sob but she soon expressed her emotions and has begun to move ahead.

"Interregnum gives you tools to go forward when you're ready to move forward," Mrs. Siminoff said.

She said she felt "tremendous guilt" that she had not done enough to care for her husband or notice his cancer symptoms earlier. She learned that her guilt was stopping her from resuming her life.

"I realized that no matter what I would do, it wouldn't matter because he's gone," she said.

Stone said grieving can create an overwhelming sense of isolation and that talking with others, led by a professional counselor, can be a great help.

"In the groups, as people interact, facades and masks drop," Stone said. "What makes it work most likely is a whole lot of love. That purity is the essence of what being human is all about."

The word "interregnum" means transition and Pedersen said she chose it from the poem of the same name by Helen Duke Fikes. The poem reads:

"The span between life and death

Can be as quick and sudden

As a puff of wind that blows out a candle.

But the candle does not suffer when darkness comes.

It is the person left in the dark room

Who gropes and stumbles."

A former corporate executive from Montville, Pedersen created Interregnum in 2005.

Her partner was 50 when he died of a heart attack in 1994. Pedersen said she sought support from family and friends and within four years, she met and married her husband, Michael.

In 1998, she was living in Binghamton, N.Y., and read of the need for hospice volunteers with an organization, "Our Lady of Lourdes Hospice." It was an epiphany for Pedersen and she got more and more involved in

hospice and grief counseling. She eventually began working for the organization and earned a master's degree in social work.

Her husband's job was relocated to Morris County in 2005 and he suggested she start her own grief counseling program. The result was Interregnum, which offers services in Morris, Essex and Bergen counties. Pedersen said she wants to expand statewide.

Interregnum's "Moving Forward" support group meets monthly and is led by facilitators with masters degrees in social work or related degrees.

During the 90-minute sessions, participants learn to identify their loss and its complications. They then work to validate and share feelings in the group.

Another aspect of Interregnum trains nurses, social workers and other professionals and community members. The training is offered at a fee and qualifies as continuing education credits.

"Hearts of Hope," a third aspect of Interregnum, involves creation of keepsake hearts that are made by volunteers with senior centers, Rotary clubs, Scout groups and other organizations. The hearts are distributed along with a personal message to hospitals, cancer centers, military services and others in bereavement. To date, about 20,000 of the hearts have been provided, Pedersen said.

Hospice care began in England in the 1960s and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described the grieving process in her groundbreaking 1969 book, "On Death and Dying."

But Pedersen said that after the death and hospice services end, grief recovery services often remain ad hoc or just unavailable.

"When someone dies in a hospital, there are undefined, unstructured and unpredictable services," Pedersen said. "Often a family has to be its own advocate as they often see hospice as giving up."

The U.S. Department of Labor allows workers who lose a spouse to take four bereavement days while those who lose another immediate family member are allotted three days leave. Religions also do not leave much time for grieving. In Judaism, for instance, the traditional grieving period of Shiva lasts a week while in the Catholic church, anniversary masses are held and grieving should take no more than a year.

It is part of a "culturally engrained" attitude that people should be able to deal with their grief, on their own and quickly, Pedersen said.

"Colleagues are afraid to say the wrong thing so a lot of the time they say nothing," Pedersen said.

Bari Adelman of Montville, communications director for Interregnum, said Interregnum is "bringing grief out of the closet."