

The Intelligencer

Sometimes, daddies die

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"Come on kids. Come in here. Mommy needs to talk to you." She led the boy and the girl into the bedroom, closed the door and faced them. "You know how sometimes when you have a toy, and it breaks, and Daddy fixes it?"

They nodded.

"Well, you know how once in a while you have a toy that is broken so badly that Daddy can't fix it?"

They nodded.

"Well, you know that Daddy's been very sick, and the doctors just couldn't fix him." And that is how Ellen **Lindeman** told 3-year-old Luke and 5-year-old Taylor that their daddy was dead.

What she didn't tell them - what no suddenly widowed father or mother tells his or her very small children - was what her husband's death meant practically and financially. She didn't tell them, for example, how worried she was about paying the bills without **Ted's** paycheck.

Ellen understood instinctively that her children didn't need to know that.

"He's dead?" Taylor demanded, stunned.

"Yeah."

"But who's gonna be my daddy?"

"I told her Daddy's in heaven, and he'll watch over us from there," Ellen recalled recently, in the living room of their Warwick home, which her husband repainted and decorated with crown molding.

Ted Lindeman died on Jan. 9, 2004, three months after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He was 33.

It was hard enough getting out of bed each morning after **Ted** died. Some days, Ellen thought grief would simply overwhelm her. Yet, she had other, practical concerns, too, from money to transportation and schedules for the kids.

She has made it through the 16 months since her husband's death with the financial and physical support of family, friends and even strangers. Now, she wants to do the same for other young widows.

Lindeman, now 37, is starting a foundation to raise money to pay expenses for women who, shockingly, suddenly, find themselves in the same precarious situation she did. She hopes to raise enough to be able to give each person up to \$3,000 a month for three months.

Her first beneficiaries are Nichole Kemmerer and Sandy Karle.

Kemmerer, 29, lives in Northeast Philadelphia and has an 18-month-old daughter and 4-year-old son. Her husband, **Lindeman** said, was killed by a passing train as he was crossing the tracks to retrieve a friend's lost dog.

The Karle family of Lower Southampton suffered a double tragedy.

Sandy's husband, Mark, died on March 10, 2003, after battling lung cancer. He was 43 and left behind children Jen, Laurie and Beth, along with brothers in Chalfont and Warrington.

Then, three months ago, the Karles' home burned down in a fire started by a space heater. The family lost just about everything - including photos and mementos of Mark.

Ellen **Lindeman** met Kemmerer and Karle at Safe Harbor, a bereavement support center for children.

Affiliated with Abington Memorial Hospital and run out of offices in Willow Grove, Safe Harbor gives children who have lost someone - mom, dad, a sibling - a place to express the anger, sadness, guilt and fear that come with losing someone dear.

"Children feel grief intensely, even more intensely than adults sometimes think," said Donna Young, one of the facilitators at the center, which now attracts 160 children to its evening programs.

The children break into age groups and start each session with circle time, where they talk about the person they lost and how they're feeling that day, Young said. Later, activities ranging from coloring and drawing to playing in sand tables and beating on bongo drums give the children creative and energetic outlets to express themselves.

Recently, the Safe Harbor facilitators gave the children disposable cameras and asked them to take photos of things that made them happy.

Luke **Lindeman** took pictures of cotton candy, his sneakers and his Spiderman toys.

Taylor **Lindeman** took pictures of her friends at school and her stuffed animals.

And with each day, they work through their feelings a little more.

"Safe Harbor has been a godsend," said Ellen, who meets with the other parents while their children participate in the programs next door. "It really has helped us all so much."

Starting this foundation to help other young widows with practical concerns just seemed the next logical step in healing, Ellen said.

And she won't be doing it alone.

The same women - all mothers of Taylor's classmates at school - who helped organize a benefit for the Lindemans last year are helping Ellen organize this year's benefit for the Kemmerers and Karles.

One of them is Lana Forbes.

Lana didn't know the Lindemans while **Ted** was alive. But when a short note came home from school last year saying that the father of one of her daughter's classmates had died, Lana was nearly struck dumb.

"I just couldn't get my head around it," said Lana, 35. "I kept asking if he was older or sick. We all married around the same time; we had kids the same age. It was so surreal. Here we were, all putzing around our yards and going to Home Depot. This could be any one of us in a moment."

Even for Ellen, **Ted's** quick death was surreal. She never imagined herself as a widow; even after **Ted** was diagnosed, everyone thought he would beat the cancer. In the end, it was just too aggressive.

Despite her grief, though, Ellen says she still considers herself blessed.

"In the 10 short years I had **Ted** in my life, I had it all," she said, "and I know a lot of people never had that in their lifetime."

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