

Lynette Spruiell, *St. Vincent Perinatal Bereavement Program*

Leading Mothers Through Their Times of Sorrow

BY GABRIEL KILEY

Mr. Kiley is managing editor, Health Progress, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

CELEBRATING
OUR COLLEAGUES
WHO CONTINUE
THE MISSION

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Two women devastated by the loss of their babies have something else in common: their lives have been touched by Lynette Spruiell.

Tami Hill and her husband had trouble getting pregnant as they tried for a second child. With the help of a fertility clinic, the couple learned they would be having twins, a boy and a girl. However, six months into a challenging pregnancy, Hill went into labor and underwent an emergency Caesarean section in May 2004. Her twins Perry and Jacquelyn died just hours into their brief lives.

Wendy Floriani was 38 weeks along with her second child and entered the hospital for a scheduled Caesarean section in November 2006. Then, as doctors and nurses prepared for the surgery, they discovered the baby's heartbeat had stopped. Her son Samuel Cooper had died.

In the ensuing hours, days, weeks and months, a constant in these women's lives was

Spruiell, coordinator of the Perinatal Bereavement Program headquartered at St. Vincent Infirmary Medical Center. Spruiell was there nearly every step of the way. She became more than just another face at the hospital; she became a friend and loyal supporter.

"I've never seen a more compassionate and patient person in my life," Hill said of Spruiell. "You are in such a numb state that you need someone to walk you through all this stuff."

Whether it was helping with funeral arrangements, collecting mementoes or being a shoulder to cry on, these two women said Spruiell was a reliable presence for them in their time of profound grief.

"All of the little things she did meant so much to me," Floriani said.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

The perinatal bereavement program is part of the St. Vincent Center for Women & Children located inside the hospital, which is part of the St. Vincent Health System. The program is available to anyone who experiences a loss from the time of conception through 28 days of life after birth, as well as to couples dealing with concerns in subsequent pregnancies. (See pg. 72 for a list of some of the services offered by this program.)

Spruiell leads an interdisciplinary team of chaplains, nurses, social workers and management, many of which are certified by RTS Bereavement Services, a nationally recognized program that trains professionals to assist families experiencing the loss of a baby.

St. Vincent officials cite the following components of the program that qualify it as a national model: the presence of a full-time coordinator; a year of follow-up care at no charge; provision for a burial service for early losses from the time of conception to 20 weeks gestation; and the recently expanded physical space for the program. This past fall, the hospital hosted a RTS training conference and showcased its program to visitors from across the country.

"Having this service available at more hospitals, particularly Catholic hospitals, is important," said Peter Banko, president and CEO, St. Vincent



Lynette Spruiell and Wendy Floriani (left and center) discuss photographs shared by Tami Hill. Floriani and Hill received assistance through the St. Vincent Perinatal Bereavement Program after the loss of their babies.

Racing Community Tears Up Track, Opens Pocketbooks to Help Perinatal Bereavement Program

Car aficionados usually become attached to their automobiles. Lynette Spruiell's fondness for a certain drag racing vehicle is a little more personal.

The story started May 24, 2007, when Donnie and Hollie Faulkner experienced the loss of their baby Eric Blake to stillbirth. Spruiell worked closely with the Faulkners during their difficult time through the St. Vincent Perinatal Bereavement Program.

The couple, which sells the popular Oakley sunglasses as part of a traveling store on the National Hot Rod Association circuit, wanted to return the favor to the program. The Faulkners sent 500 letters to friends in the racing community, seeking donations totaling \$20,000.

As word spread and donations started arriving, driver Mike Ashley and two Oakley representatives decided to build a tribute car in honor of Eric Blake. Chip Foose of The Learning Channel's show "Overhaulin'" designed the 2007 Dodge Charger R/T, which features streaks of blue and gold and Eric Blake's footprints on the car's body.

Ashley took the car to Indianapolis for the 2007 U.S. Nationals that September, where he captured first place. Intended for just one event, the car then toured the country — including a two-day stop at St. Vincent — before going to the Barrett-Jackson Silent Car Auction in January 2008. Spruiell attended the race and the auction, and even met some celebrities — the famous singer Alice Cooper, for instance, and boxing legend Muhammad Ali. The car sold for \$130,000.



Spruiell stands next to the tribute car at the Barrett-Jackson auction in January 2008.

"(The race and the auction) were such incredible experiences, but it was difficult to say goodbye to that car," Spruiell said.

What started as a modest fundraising effort resulted in more than \$300,000 collected for the bereavement program. Armed with a "tremendous responsibility," Spruiell and others agreed to spend some of the funds to expand its physical space. The program relocated from nearby St. Vincent Doctors Hospital to an expanded space at the Infirmiry Medical Center in March 2008. The space includes the Eric Blake Faulkner Quiet Room.

The official grand-opening celebration took place in July, and, shortly thereafter, the Faulkners welcomed their second child, Emma Jacquelyn, to the

world. The baby is doing well.

Sadly, heartbreak struck the Faulkner family again just a few days before Christmas 2008. Hollie died from a blood clot that eventually reached her brain. Spruiell said she remembers Hollie as a generous person.

"Hollie would be so pleased to know that we're carrying on Eric's ministry, which was her ministry," Spruiell said.

Today, inside Spruiell's office is a lighted display tower featuring mementos from the U.S. Nationals and the auction and, of course, several photographs of the Faulkner family. The story is another example of the bond between Spruiell and her patients.

"I've been blessed and given the opportunity to do this work," Spruiell said.

Health System, which operates four hospitals and several other facilities in central Arkansas.

Today, the need to address perinatal loss within health care is vital since it is more commonplace than most people think, Spruiell said. She reports that more than 1 million families experience a miscarriage, stillbirth or newborn death every year.

She said as organized medicine, hospital care and obstetrics developed in the mid-20th century, the medical community became depersonalized, and one of the consequences was the lack of attention to women who lost a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth.

"It became known in the perinatal community as 'silent sorrow,'" she said.

Since Spruiell started the St. Vincent Perinatal Bereavement Program in 2000, more than 2,800 patients have used its services. Officials say the program's success is due in large part to Spruiell's efforts.

"She's *the* program," Banko said. "It's her life passion."

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

The continually expanding program, which helps more than 400 patients annually, is available at no charge to anyone who has experienced a loss. It is funded through grants and donations.

"When the program began, there seemed to be an immediate connection within the community



“I was fortunate that God put people in my path who could show me the way. That’s why we call our support program ‘Journey.’”

— Lynette Spruiell, coordinator of the Perinatal Bereavement Program

that there was a real need,” said Sonya Schmidt Murphy, president of the St. Vincent Foundation. More than \$360,000 has been raised for the program since its inception, most of which came through the Eric Blake Faulkner Fund at St. Vincent Foundation (see sidebar on pg. 71).

Some of the money from the Faulkner Fund was used to pay for the construction of the new physical space inside St. Vincent Infirmery Medical Center. The new location includes the Eric Blake Faulkner Quiet Room for parents, a care room for staff and family, a staff resource room and an office. The new facility, which is directly connected to the hospital’s labor and delivery area, opened in March 2008.

The quiet room includes an original oil painting titled “Heaven’s Gate” by Laurie Snow Hein and a stained-glass window created by local artist Betty Hariston. Hein is the illustrator for *Mommy, Please Don’t Cry ... There Are No Tears in Heaven*, by Linda DeYmaz, a local author who wrote the book for mothers after she lost a newborn child. The book is given to mothers in the St. Vincent program.

The program also made headlines in 2007 when Spruiell collaborated with a couple who lost a child to stillbirth at St. Vincent to advocate for a change in a state law. They successfully lobbied Arkansas legislators to pass a bill that now allows a woman who delivers a stillborn baby after 20 weeks gestation to receive a birth certificate. Previously, the parent(s) would receive just a fetal death certificate.

Spruiell’s network of hospital, community and family support, as well as the publicity generated by the program, continues to be the driver behind the program’s continued financial support.

“This program reaches the inner core of families and people,” Schmidt Murphy said.

DESCRIBING THE ‘JOURNEY’

Formerly a labor and delivery nurse at Doctors

Hospital in Little Rock for several years, Spruiell joined St. Vincent in 1998 when the hospital was purchased by the health system. Following a series of ensuing professional challenges and personal losses, Spruiell said a friend, who is a bereavement coordinator in Tulsa, Okla., recommended that she consider the same profession.

“With all the difficulties throughout certain points in my life, I needed to have some answers,” Spruiell said. “I was fortunate that God put people in my path who could show me the way. That’s why we call our support program ‘Journey.’”

During this period of self-discovery, Spruiell said she learned of the need for greater attention for parents who experience a loss of a baby. Hospital officials supported her interest. She eventually became the program coordinator and quickly put her stamp on the program.

“Every day I was looking at the smallest of God’s creations and able to see his glory in my hands. I had not had that connection with God,” Spruiell said. “I felt I was placed in a position of trust and utmost confidence. I took that very seriously. That’s when the passion set in.”

Spruiell said the mothers in the program have educated her in many aspects of life.

“(These women) have taught me everything I know about courage, and survival and giving and compassion,” she said. “Really, they are the best mentors.”

SHARING PRAISE

Terrance Zuerlein, MD, neonatologist and medical director for the intensive care nursery, said Spruiell’s proactive approach following a baby’s death is a major strength of the program.

“Proaction in these situations was the big ‘ah ha’ moment for this hospital,” he said.

Peter Noonan, vice president of mission integration for St. Vincent Health System, described the program as “consistent with Catholic social and moral teaching in terms of respect for life.”

“Lynette has helped educate the administration as to why this program is so important and so unique and why our organization should be so supportive of it,” Noonan said.

Still, the program’s biggest advocates continue to be the mothers such as Tami Hill and Wendy Floriani.

“I can’t believe more hospitals do not have the program that St. Vincent has,” Floriani said. “Every hospital in the country should have someone like Lynette.” ■



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St. Vincent Perinatal Bereavement Program

Some of the services provided by the program include:

- Individual funeral and memorial service planning for stillbirth and neonatal death through parents’ choice of funeral home
- Photographs, memory box, certificates of birth, baptism and/or blessing
- “Journey” monthly support group
- Follow-up care for at least one year
- Referrals for complicated grief, coordinated with patient’s obstetrician
- Annual memorial service with candle lighting and naming ceremonies

For more information, visit www.stvincenthealth.com/pregnancyloss.