

# Amy's Story



By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

Not a day goes by that we don't hear about a tragedy on the evening news or in the morning headlines. *Teenager dies from drug overdose. Family dies in home fire. Young soldier killed overseas.* For many of us, we sympathize, say a quick prayer, finish our coffee, and wash the dishes.

Life goes on ...

But that's not so easy when it's your teenager, your family, your son.

And for Amy Gill, it wasn't easy at all because it was her husband.

"One minute he was getting some testing done and the next minute I was told Dan had died," she said.

Dan and Amy met at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska. Although he was a few years younger, Amy fell in love with this "gentle and sweet guy." Nicknamed "the lumberjack" by Amy's friends because he was tall and solid, Dan was planning to go into church work, hoping to work with children and youth. They dated and were married two years later on New Year's Eve 1994. The newlyweds

returned to Seward so Dan could finish his degree, and two years later they moved to Phoenix for Dan's first position as a youth leader. Amy gave birth to their son, Aidan, in January 1997.

"We were struggling financially — aren't all new church workers? — and were tired all the time with a new baby, but we were happy and life was good. Aidan was a cute and happy baby who adored his father, and Dan loved him fiercely."

Less than two years later, her life changed forever.

Healthy and enjoying his ministry work, Dan returned from a youth trip to Lake Havasu, northwest of Phoenix. Amy remembers the day well. "When he came home, he was having a difficult time breathing." She rushed Dan to the hospital where he was admitted into intensive care. After several days and numerous tests, the doctors diagnosed pneumonia that was further complicated by asthma, which Dan suffered from as a child.

Recalling this painful time, Amy continues, "After 10 days in the hospital, Dan was released. We went to bed knowing that Dan was weak, but believing that this episode was over and we were moving on." However, during the night, Dan collapsed and was rushed to the hospital again. The next day, Amy heard the words no wife wants to hear: *Your husband is dead.*

Shocked and unbelieving, Amy rushed to Dan's side. She remembers crying so loudly that the nurses had to quiet her because she was disturbing the other patients in the IC unit. "I kept begging him to come back, telling him that we still needed him."



The cause of death? An undetected stomach ulcer.

The effect? Amy, mother of a 21-month-old son, married for four short years, was now a widow.

As many who have grieved may understand, the first days and weeks and months were the worst. Amy shares her thoughts: "My baby no longer had a father, the loneliness, the realization that the life we had planned — growing old together — and the person I was were gone. I was no longer someone's wife. I was a single mom."

The simple things would never be the same. "Dan and I always enjoyed grocery shopping together." Now, Amy had trouble just buying milk and eggs.

Even sleeping through the night was painful. "I hated sleeping alone; it felt so empty." Some nights Amy's sister would come over just to lie next to her. Aidan, not even two years old, would crawl in bed with Amy and wipe her tears, wondering why mommy was always so sad.

**LUTHERAN WOMAN'S QUARTERLY (USPS 322-660)** is published quarterly — spring, summer, fall and winter — by the Lutheran Women's Missionary League of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993.

**Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO. Canada #R129889093.**

**POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to LUTHERAN WOMAN'S QUARTERLY, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993. Annual subscription rates: 10 copies or more to one address, \$4.00 per year; individual subscriptions, \$5.50 per year. Single issues available for \$1.50 plus postage. Call Office. (Available in Braille, large print, or on cassette tapes free from Lutheran Blind Mission, 7550 Watson Rd., St. Louis, MO 63119; 1-888-215-2455)



Sadly, Amy remembers how she stopped going to church. “Every time I turned around there was something that reminded me of the man I had lost, the dreams, the future. I was truly an empty shell.”

Sundays also held a painful memory because Dan died on a Sunday. “For a year, I’d wake up on Sundays and think ‘this is the day Dan died.’”

She recalls crying out to God, but “I didn’t ‘feel’ Him near me.” She would try to pray but didn’t know what to pray. “I felt alone.” Then a friend reminded her of Romans 8:26: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*

“Although I was angry at God for allowing this to happen, I was still able to ask the Holy Spirit to understand — to pray what I could not — and I just left it at that.”

For many months, friends and family surrounded her with emotional and financial support. Their church family stepped in to help along with faraway friends. Amy’s college friend left her

own husband on Thanksgiving to spend it with Amy since it was her first without Dan. “We spent the day painting my bedroom! I definitely was not in a thankful frame of mind that holiday.”

Amy’s family “smothered us in love and support,” as did Dan’s family. “They had also lost someone, and we were able to grieve together.”

Candidly, Amy shares where she was emotionally. “I was no Job. I was not loyal to God or thankful in all circumstances. I was bitter and hurt and felt betrayed by God that He would take a wonderful 24-year-old man (working in a church, no less!) away from his wife and baby.”

As she ponders those times, she admits to behaving “like a spoiled brat.” She says, “Instead of treating God like a wonderful father and running to Him for comfort, I blamed Him and turned my back to Him.”

As the weeks grew into months, Amy’s loneliness was almost tangible. She was surrounded by supportive family and friends, but while their lives were moving forward, Amy could barely make it to tomorrow.

Being with other people was often difficult. “A lot of people were on pins and needles around me. I think I emotionally drained people. I was so full of hurt and grief, but I didn’t know how to express it or release it.”

Coming to grips with the reality of Dan’s death took a long time. “I’d have to remind myself often that he was not coming home, that I couldn’t share with him that cute thing Aidan said that day, that there was no one who knew those funny personal jokes we had.”

Even now, Amy weeps gently as she reflects on those painful days.

“It took me a year to clean out the closet and get rid of all of his clothes. My dad and I restored an antique chest, and I saved some of Dan’s things in that, as well as cards and letters of condolence, for Aidan. But I felt like I was reducing what had been the love of my life to a box.”

A turning point for Amy came one morning as she was driving to her parents’ home. She remembers telling God that she was “through with Him, and it was up to Him if He wanted to keep me.”

To express her feelings, Amy uses a wonderful analogy. As a young child, she used to let a loose tooth hang in her mouth, dangling by a thread of skin. “That day, I felt like I was that loose tooth! The faith I had was the skin just barely hanging onto the tooth. I told God that *I was that tooth*, and He understood and forgave me. God held onto me tightly and didn’t let me fall.”

From that day on, Amy returned to church, a new church where she was “anonymous and could cry without the knowing looks of pity.”

Amy is quick to point out that she played no part in her return to God. “If it were up to me, I would not be a Christian today. I would also not be a very happy person!” She explains that her experience is “all about God and His work through the Holy Spirit and what He can do with a weak and broken down sinner.” Being reminded of all Jesus went through for her, and the forgiveness and life she has through Him, is what rebuilt and strengthened her faith.



Now, almost ten years later, Amy’s life is different. “I have a wonderful husband, Andy, and two beautiful boys,” Aidan, eleven years old, who “daily reminds me of his father,” and Isaiah who is nearly three years old. She is quick to point out that God has blessed her with a new love and a new home.

Those who don’t know Amy well — and don’t know her painful past — might believe she’s always had a beautiful life. But her grief is still there. “For some of us who have had significant losses, grief is forever a part of our lives.”

Daily, she remembers Dan, but most of the time, the grief is “fleeting.” Other times, something simple will trigger a memory and the sadness returns.

Still, Amy sees God’s purpose even in her grief. “The day my husband died often comes back to me, and the grief can bury me in sadness if I allow it. But grief is much more to me than just sadness. It has brought me much closer to God and to others. When I was going through the worst times, I would drive to work in tears and think accusingly, ‘None of these people on the highway have any idea what I’m going through.’”

Today, however, Amy’s focus has shifted. “Now I wonder, ‘What are

those around me going through that I should consider their feelings and their actions before I judge?’ Grief has made me more of a whole person than I’d like to admit.”

Amy can clearly see God’s plan in her life. “Before Dan died I wasn’t strong; I wasn’t in the Word, and my tired prayers at the end of the day were a brief ‘thank you’ before I fell asleep.”

Today, she is more focused on being in the Word daily. “My favorite Bible verse is Philippians 4:4–8 especially the part about the ‘peace of God, which transcends all understanding.’ The thought of that peace is always a tremendous comfort to me.”

Busy as a stay-at-home mom and an LWML volunteer, Amy doesn’t have much quiet time to reflect on her pain. Sharing her story with the *Quarterly* has opened some memories for her — some painful ones. “I think a lot of my pain, I made myself. A lot of people go through so much worse. It really did take me a long time to open up the wounds and let them heal properly.”

“I’m good now. God blesses me so much every day, yet I still take Him for granted! I’m still a sinner but much more empathetic and a lot less pathetic.”

Life, indeed, goes on for Amy ... as does the peace of God that continues to guard her heart and mind in Christ Jesus.