



Grief *in* Progress

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A listener's note: Some episodes of this podcast include discussion of death and other traumatic experiences. Please use discretion when listening and take good care of yourself.

Grief in Progress Podcast – Season 2, Episode 3: A Family's Mutual Aid Response to Tragedy

Narrator

According to the 2022 Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model, almost 8 percent of all children in the United States will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. That's about 5.6 million children who are grieving a significant loss.

Laurel Van Auken remembers what life was like before she lost her mom at age eight.

Laurel Van Auken

I have two older siblings, Michelle and Chris, and then my middle brother's also older than me, Ben.

Our relationship growing up was your typical big house relationship. We hated each other. We loved each other.

I was the baby, so naturally I got most of my mother's attention and I was my dad's only girl. Chris and Michelle were from a previous relationship that my mom had had. So, I was definitely the spoiled one of the group. But me and Ben, we got along. We didn't really have any issues. Your typical sibling rivalry always happened.

Narrator

Laurel and her siblings were also part of a large extended family. Her mom Gail was one of seven kids.

Laurel Van Auken I mean, growing up, it was like, I remember all the time asking, "When am I going to see my cousins? When's the next family party? When do we get to go to the hotel party? When's the canoe trip?" Most of my cousins lived within 15, 20 minutes of each other. So, we would see them at least a dozen times a year between holidays, random parties. We did Super Bowl all the time. We did Halloween a couple of times. The staple parties though were always our hotel party and our canoe trip. That was towards the end of the year, and that was always the funnest, funnest time.

Narrator Carole Chisholm, Laurel's aunt, explains the idea behind the Webber Family's "hotel party."

Carole Chisholm We decided that, as the moms, that it would be fun for us to get away and get a hotel and take all the kids. And we found this great hotel that had rooms right around the pool. So, we put as many people as we could in a room. We were all young families, not a lot of money. So, how many adults could sleep in the beds, and the kids brought sleeping bags and slept on the floor. And we would check in Friday right after school, usually in the February or March weekend. Guaranteed snowstorm. Other people would be, "You're driving somewhere for a hotel? There's a snowstorm." And we would get to the hotel and unload food and pool toys and games for in the evening, all this stuff, we brought so much stuff into these hotel rooms.

Laurel Van Auken That's true. (Laughs.)

Carole Chisholm And just played all weekend. So, the moms could sit and gab and sit in the hot tub. And the kids, all these cousins who were like brothers and sisters basically, they had groups.

The great-grandmothers will come for Saturday afternoon and sit in a chair around the pool and just watch the kids swim and catch up with each other. So, it's maybe four or five generations.

Laurel Van Auken At least. Yeah. I would say at least four generations.

Narrator And when it came to the annual lake get-together, Carole's sister Gail was the first one in the boat, rain or shine.

Carole Chisholm

Gail loved the canoeing trip.

She was our diehard. So, when you go for a weekend, you never know what the weather's going to be.

But Gail with the weather would be the one who would force us to go. I remember many Sunday mornings looking like it's going to rain, or it was raining.

And we're out like, "Mm, it's kind of chilly. How about if we just break camp now and pass on Sunday?" And she's like, "I'm going, I don't care about the rest of you. I'm going. I'm taking my family on the river." And so, the rest of us would be like, "Well, I guess we have to go. We can't let her go alone." And almost every time, by the time we dipped our paddles in, the sun would come out, and we would say, "Gail, what is your magic?" Right? None of us wanted to go. And if we were going home right now, we'd be very sad that we missed this day. That was her spirit.

Laurel Van Auken

Every time. Every time.

She was the epitome of fun on that weekend. She was a jokester. There was one year where she put crawdads in Eric's tent, your son. That was pretty fun. Starting water fights. She loved to be a prankster, jokester. And even my sister can contest to that. She was obviously the target for multiple of her things. She TPed them one year. TPed all the tents with toilet paper.

Narrator

Gail's spirit and reputation for fun carried over into the many roles she played in her community of Hamilton, Michigan. At different times, she worked as an elementary school paraprofessional, a photographer, and trained as a paramedic. Gail tutored her husband Rick when he entered the fire academy and decided to join him as a first responder with the Overisel Township Fire Department.

Laurel Van Auken

She was on the department. And again, just jumped right in. Just feet first, just 100%. She actually started the fire safety programs throughout the elementary schools. So, her and my dad teamed up and they started to teach fire prevention, brought in the smoke trailer for kids to go through. She had all sorts of activities for them. It was once a month. She dedicated her time to that. That was her niche. That was her. That is what she loved to do.

Narrator

Gail and Rick loved being volunteer firefighters and knew the risks involved. The couple had an agreement not to respond to emergencies in the same vehicle. They made an exception early in the morning of November 2, 2000. When they couldn't reach a fellow firefighter, Gail jumped in the tanker truck that Rick was driving to a turkey farm fire. A pickup truck struck the tanker at an intersection, causing it to roll over. Firefighters from other departments came upon the accident and rushed to free the couple from the tanker. Both Rick and Gail went to the hospital by ambulance. Rick survived. Gail did not. Carole's sister Jean was the first to hear about the accident.

Carole Chisholm

At 3:00 in the morning, I got a call from Jean that Gail was in an accident, and I'm at the house and I don't think she's alive. But she didn't have a lot of information at that time.

I had three young children at that time, and my husband, and I just got up on my own and drove out to Laurel's house. So, it's probably like 4 o'clock in the morning when I got there.

Rick was hurt in the accident too and was at the hospital. So, we're around your dining room table at 4:00 in the morning, and very slowly getting information. We knew there was an accident with a firetruck, we knew Gail passed away at that time, and Rick was taken to the hospital for... His face was very injured, his ear and the side of his face.

Laurel Van Auken

He had head trauma.

Carole Chisholm

And then I don't think we got a lot of information. All of us gathered at the house, as usual. All my sisters were there. Husbands started to come. You and Ben woke up thinking you were going to school that day, and all of the families sitting around the table, right? And somebody had to drive down to the university that Michelle was at, Western Michigan University, and pick her up and bring her back. Michelle was the one who told you and Ben, I think.

Laurel Van Auken

My vision of that morning is pretty much that. I remember I heard voices coming from downstairs and I was a little confused, because my first train of thought was, what family party am I missing? Is this a weekend? Do I not get to go to school?

So, my thought process is off. And I remember coming down the stairs and seeing specifically my Aunt Jean was sitting down with this little TV with the news playing. And I see everybody, Aunt Carol, Aunt Marge, Aunt Mary Jo, everybody is there. And it takes me a second, but I finally get that something's wrong. I see eyes are bloodshot and swollen, and tears. And my Aunt Jean pulls me onto her lap, gives me a hug like I've never been hugged before.

I mean, I was only eight years old. So, to feel that was, what's wrong? Our plates still had our vitamins on it. My mom was very structured. So, she had our plates set out on the kitchen table with our vitamins on them, our clothes picked out. She had it all ready to go. So, I didn't understand why I was getting told to go back to bed.

And then my Aunt Jean did tell me that "your mom is gone." And the last thing I remember is running up the stairs . . .

. . . my memory at that point is kind of black. I don't really have a lot after that, up until the actual funeral.

Then there's tidbits. It's kind of hard to decipher what memories are mine and what memories were told to me. But when Michelle got home, Ben, my brother, was still sleeping. And my sister ended up being the one that told Ben.

For my sister to step into that role was very hard for her. I think that triggered that motion where she has to step up. These are my little brother and sister and I have to do this. I have to step up, and I have to be the one to tell them.

Carole Chisholm

Us being the adults and knowing these kids are going to wake up this morning and their world is changed forever. And do you go wake up sleeping babies, basically, and say, "Hey, got some news. Your mom died."

Or knowing when they wake up, that's what they're going to hear. Really, really tough decision. Nobody wanted to tell that information.

Laurel Van Auken No.

Carole Chisholm Nobody wanted to see your little faces. Nobody wanted to believe that was real.

We were all in shock, right? And it's Gail and Rick's home, it's Gail and Rick's children. But neither of them were there to do any part of what needed to happen that morning. And it is really wonderful how close our family is that we could all just be there and just support each other. I think that was helpful for me and my sisters, and my younger brother to just all be together.

Narrator Carole and her siblings worked together to support Gail's children, especially since Rick was recovering from his own injuries.

Laurel Van Auken I knew my dad was out of sorts. He was in the hospital for a while. So having him come home was a big deal.

Carole Chisholm Your dad still struggles with this. He was driving the vehicle and he took a lot of that on very personally to him. And like you're saying, accidents happen. We talk about the other vehicle that hit the fire truck. If that guy would've knelt down and tied his shoe, and been two seconds later, right? It was an accident.

But your dad came home injured. His wife was dead. He was an instant widow. He felt responsible for the accident. Your dad was just not able to be available to his family for quite a while.

Laurel Van Auken Yeah.

Carole Chisholm Understandably.

Laurel Van Auken Yeah. The trauma hit him very hard, emotionally, mentally, and physically. Even to this day, there's still some things we don't talk about, just because it hits a trigger for him.

Narrator Grief Specialist Jenny Woodall has this to say.

Jenny Woodall

I think ideally, you want to support the surviving parent, to continue to parent and take care of themselves while they're taking care of the children, with the knowledge that they don't have to do that alone. They don't have to figure everything out. They do have people who they can rely on to help shoulder that.

Narrator

Laurel's older sister Michelle left school and moved home to help care for her younger brother and sister. These circumstances were painfully familiar to Carole.

Carole Chisholm

I was 20 when my mom died. So, Gail was 16, Jean was 14, Marge was 12, and Gary was four years old. And my older sister was 22, and married and pregnant when my mom died. And my dad went into a depression, too.

So here we were, all these kids without a mom, and a dad who checked out. And so, to go through this again was just like ... Children shouldn't grow up without their parents. There's these little kids that need to have help with homework, and baths, and pack their lunch, and all those things they need. And here we have another generation where this isn't happening for these eight and nine-year-old kids. So, we tried to respect Rick very much in terms like, Rick, what do you want? We did a lot of talking with him.

He as well was very comfortable with all of our kids and spent the night at anybody's house. Any family party ended up with who was going home with who. So, nobody ever went back to their own house after a family party. So, Rick was, I think, comfortable with that, too. So very willing.

Yes, the kids can get off the bus at Aunt Jean's and they can spend the weekend at Aunt Jean's. They can come up to Aunt Carol and Uncle Brian's for the weekend. They can be at Aunt Marge and Uncle Pat's for the weekend. But trying to respect Rick with that as the father, and also hoping he would get better, and would step up and be able to parent his children again.

Laurel Van Auken

He did what he needed to do. He was a good dad.

But there were still a lot of things that he laxed on. Ben and I didn't have responsibilities anymore. We could go do whatever we wanted. And my sister kind of knew that was happening. And she stepped into that surrogate mother role and was, no, you need to clean up after yourself. You need to take care of your laundry. Basic life skills. I can literally applaud her for it. Without her coming home and teaching those things, I probably wouldn't know how to run a dishwasher.

Carole Chisholm

And I think that's part of the complication, too, is that Michelle was picking up that role, I know I picked up that role, and you're not the mom. And just that dynamic, just like you're not my mom and you can't replace my mom. And we're like, "I lost my mom, too." I don't want to be the mom, but you're a little kid, and you can't go to school stinking with dirty hair in the same clothes four days in a row.

I don't want to be your mom, but somebody has to be in charge here. So, all that grief just gets more complicated with just the layers and layers of loss that the 10-year-old's dealing with and the 20-year-old's dealing with. We lost our mom, right?

Laurel Van Auken

So there... Just like how... And Carole, your family went through all of that. You guys had to step up and take care of each other. I think she felt that was her role to take, too. And it's awful that we have that trauma. I hate that we have that generational similarity there, but I think it's brought us so much closer as a family.

I think we all appreciate life a lot more and respect life a lot more. And we know how to take care of each other when bad things happen. It's a skill we don't want, but we have.

Narrator

One of the ways in which Gail's family has celebrated her life is by attending events hosted by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Carole Chisholm

The National Fallen Firefighters does the Memorial celebration every fall, October out in Maryland. So, somebody from that Foundation reached out to, probably Rick and let us know that the family was invited to attend that. We felt very honored to be invited to that. We knew Gail's life would be celebrated at that event. And as our family does, probably 20 or 25 of us made that trek out to Maryland, from Michigan to Maryland. And we were so impressed with how organized that was, how much Gail was honored, how everybody in our family was cared about and tended to. There were events for Ben and Laurel to go as little kids. There were groups, that us as siblings attended. There was a group that Rick went as a spouse.

We were so impressed that we decided we were going to continue to do this as much as we could.

Narrator

Here's Director of Family Programs Bev Donlon.

Bev Donlon

When I first started with the Foundation, the Memorial Weekend was really the only opportunity that the families had to gather, to be together.

We have so many opportunities now to connect those families face to face.

And it's all about the time that they have together with somebody who's experienced and walked that path that they've walked it. It's a miracle of the healing that it can really do.

Carole Chisholm

We went to a retreat in Chicago. We just had a very great time at that. Just felt very cared for and with the emphasis that it was a place we could go talk with other people who lost somebody in their family in particular. These were all firefighters that passed away.

We've just been very impressed with the foundation and all that they've offered in terms of support, information, genuine caring.

Laurel Van Auken

Like you had said that, all the adult cousins or younger cousins, they all went in one group, all youth siblings went in another. No one was left behind, and I respect that and appreciate that because the Foundation has always been beautiful like that. When we went to the Chicago Wellness, I was one of the younger people that was there. To this day, my sister still talks to one of the women that she met there. You don't lose these connections. They do a great job at mingling and setting these people up with the right people. I love the Foundation and what they continue to do for children for all aspects of life. I mean, every walk of life you can think of. They've either got a program for a conference for it, or some sort of outreach program. They have their hand on everything and it's awesome.

Bev Donlon

We offer many ways to connect families and provide opportunities for them to talk with somebody else who has lost a firefighter.

We host a wellness conference, camp for children, retreats based on relationships, and there's a spouses' and life partners' retreat, siblings' retreat, the young adults' retreat, and now the men's retreat.

It's hard to put it into words, but when you're at one of those events and you see a new family member come in, and how quickly the other family members just come in and take that person under their wing, and before you know it, they're right in there.

They get them laughing again, smiling again, getting happy. It's not all about sadness. There is that. The emotions are running high, but...

Putting these families together is so therapeutic for them. And I don't think the outside world realizes that, what those connections mean, what that can do for somebody's healing process.

Narrator

Laurel, her sister Michelle, and their older brother Chris have a new appreciation for the Foundation because they are now working in the fire service.

Laurel Van Auken

I grew up around firetrucks. I grew up in the fire station. There were a couple of calls that I went on that I probably shouldn't have gone on as a child, and honestly though it triggered a passion. There was just something there, that I wanted to be like my dad. He was the first person I would see ... There was a wildfire in one of our woods and seeing him get in his gear, riding on the back of our Jeep and watching him pull the booster line, putting out fire, it was a beautiful thing for me. I wanted to have that in my life one way or another.

And I applied at Saugatuck Township Fire District and the hiring process was just easy. It clicked for me. That is what I want to do with the rest of my life. And my sister followed suit a couple years later, she joined Overisel Fire Department, which is the department my parents were on. And then my oldest brother Chris, actually joined Ganges Township. We're all within ... I mean, it's called mutual aid response. So as a department, we would be able to respond to the same calls. Whenever I got to see my brother and my sister on a call, it was ... No. But it was, it was pretty awesome to be able to say that I get to carry that on. (Laurel cries and her Aunt Carole quietly consoles her.)

It's an amazing thing that we're able to keep that legacy going and keep her memory alive in that aspect. She was a doer and she did what she could for her community. And I'm honored that I get to do that with my sister and my brother too.

I've tried to live in her light. I've tried to do my own thing. I've tried to be independent, but through all the stories that I've heard and even the not so good stories, even the ones where I know she's a rebel, and she was a very independent person, she had her own pizzazz about her, I definitely tried to ask that question. What would mom do? I didn't get to know her like my sister did, or my brother did. So having them kind of teach me what she did for the community and then who she was, has given me pretty good foot stones for what I need to be like as a human being, just a decent human being.

Narrator

Carole wrote about one of those special canoeing trips in an essay entitled “Gail’s Rock.” You can find the essay online in an issue of the Foundation’s newsletter, The Journey.

Narrator

On the next episode of Grief in Progress, we'll introduce you to Jessica Seaburg, a woman who found sisterhood and other opportunities to serve when she started volunteering with the Foundation.

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