

Arlene Priest: Make Marc Proud

From the 20 exceptional women are 'angels among us' series
by DARRELL EHRLICK of the Billings Gazette Aug 27, 2017



Exceptional Women 2017 -Arlene Priest

Arlene Priest is a lot of things -- a passionate believer in Compassionate Friends, an advocate, an accountant, and possibly the biggest Billings Senior High fan you'll ever meet.

Her most important role is Marc Priest's mother.

Marc died on Aug. 31, 1981 -- a talented college student who came down with what was originally believed to be the flu but turned into a month-long battle and eventual death from encephalitis.

Priest, a single mother, was devastated to lose her only child.

For several years the pain of the loss nearly incapacitated her.

"I would crawl into bed, pull up the covers at night and pray to God not to let me wake up because the grief is so bad," Priest said. "It takes all you have to survive a child's death. I thought it would kill me."

At 90, the pain and grief hasn't killed her, but the experience has helped her comfort and support countless other parents who have endured the same hell of losing a child. Priest is largely credited for building the Compassionate Friends group in Billings and several others around the state. The group supports parents who are grieving the loss of a child.

She doesn't remember how she got started in the group. It was sometime in 1982. Priest describes her grief as all-consuming. She had been invited to a group that was meeting at what was then Billings Deaconess Hospital (now Billings Clinic).

The leaders of the group would ask for help.

"No one would raise their hand," Priest said. "When you grieve a child, it takes all your energy just to make it."

At one of those early meetings, the couple leading the meetings brought a box of supplies -- it was all the materials Compassionate Friends had. They put the box on the table and announced to the group they didn't have the energy or time to keep the support group going.

Then, they walked out.

Priest remembers the rest of the group looking around -- stunned, wondering what to do. Even though she describes herself as a "behind-the-scenes" worker, she volunteered, and the group continued. One of the first things she did was start a newsletter to offer support and organization. She worked during the day at her job and typed the newsletters at midnight.

Following Marc's death, Priest kept in contact with his college girlfriend. It was while they were sharing "Marc stories" that Priest learned her son told his girlfriend, "You know, I am proud of my mom."

"It was there that I said, 'I'm going to do something to make Marc proud of me again,'" Priest said.

Since then, she started other Compassionate Friends chapters, called hundreds of parents, went to conferences and continues to send birthday cards to parents on their child's birthday, letting them know they haven't been forgotten.

"It's usually the family and friends who don't want to talk with the parents about the children because they're worried they'll upset them and they'll start crying. Well, we're crying anyway," Priest said. "What people don't understand is that hearing their child's name is like music to a parent's ears."

And so she's tried to support parents and advocate awareness. Compassionate Friends put up a brick walk at Rose Park in Billings with names of children. It planted two blue spruce trees so that they could be decorated for Christmas. An angel statute was placed there so that parents could have a place to remember their children.

"Many parents have their children cremated so they don't have a place to go to, like a cemetery. This and the bricks gives them a place to go to," Priest said.

She credits her work to Marc, who she said never really left her life. She still remembers the last interaction she had with him. A typical kiss on the top of her head as the six-foot, three-inch Marc bent down to say goodnight and an "I love you."

For her work with Compassionate Friends, she has received the one of the 2017 Exceptional Women Awards.

And she has most definitely given Marc something to be proud of again. And again.