

Debbie's Stories

Moe Liss

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Preface

My daughter Debra Liss passed away on August 19, 1996, ten days beyond her thirty-seventh birthday, in Haifa, Israel. I was there at her side, on that most painful day of my life. Although the final cause of her death was lung cancer—she had been diagnosed four months earlier with that dreaded disease—Debbie had suffered first with lupus and then scleroderma for 16 years.

These years since her passing have been a struggle for me; there have been times when I really didn't want to go on living—times when the pain was so great, I felt there had to be another way. If it weren't for my wife Pearl, my three other children, Brenda, Jeff and Jaime, granddaughters Ronit and Shai, sister Rose and brother-in-law Murray and my other close friends and relatives, I don't know how I could have gotten to this point to write *Debbie's Stories*.

This book probably would never have come to be if it weren't for a phone call I received from Doris, a member of one of the lupus rap groups that my wife Pearl and I facilitate. It was a Saturday morning—I remember that morning very well—when the phone rang. Doris said “Good morning, Moe, I really enjoyed the story that you told about Debbie at our last meeting. [I have been telling Debbie's Stories to anyone who would listen since she passed away]. I hope this doesn't offend you, but have you ever thought about writing a book of Debbie's stories? You know how much I love to hear you tell the stories, and I know everyone in the group feels the same way. I think there might be many people out there who would enjoy reading Debbie's stories.” Wow—I said. I never thought about that—and that really is food for thought—thank you so much for calling! She hung up, I hung up and I turned to Pearl and said, “you won't believe this.” I retold the phone conversation with Doris. Pearl thought it would be a great project; it might even be good therapy for me, and it might also help other people. She wasn't sure I *could* work on such a project; would it be too painful? It would bring back both painful and beautiful memories, and could I really follow through? At that moment I didn't know. It was just a thought and for a while I didn't seriously pursue it.

It was about one month after the phone call that I mentioned it at the lupus group, with thanks to Doris of course; and received a tremendous amount of support from the folks attending. I then began thinking seriously about writing this book.

So: I first want to thank Doris for the idea. I especially want to thank my loving, beautiful, supportive, caring wife, Pearl for everything she has given me, not only over these seven years since Debbie's passing, but also all the years that we have been together. Thanks to my children, grandchildren, family and friends for their support, and especially to the people of The Compassionate Friends, to whom this book is dedicated.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to The Compassionate Friends, an international organization of parents who have lost children. Specifically, the Wyckoff, New Jersey Chapter of The Compassionate Friends, and all the beautiful and wonderful people I have met over these years at our Tuesday meetings.

In November 1996, Pearl, who had been doing research on groups and organizations that might help me to cope with this great loss and might ease some of the pain that we were both suffering, came upon a group called The Compassionate Friends. She thought it might fit the bill as a group we both could relate to. We had no idea what the meetings were about or what to expect.

I will never forget my first meeting—the fourth Tuesday in November 1996.

We walked into a very large hall at the Christian Health Care Center in Wyckoff, New Jersey. Ann Marie greeted us warmly. She took our personal information and made every effort to comfort us. What struck me first was that in this very large room there were circles of chairs, maybe seven or eight circles, each consisting of eight to ten chairs. We got there early—about 7:10 PM. The meeting doesn't officially start till about 7:30 to 7:45 PM. As we filled out the information cards and talked with Ann Marie, we were amazed by the number of people who began entering that hall and filling up each of the circles. *My God, I can't believe that these are all parents who lost children!* There must have been 70 or 80 that first evening. Pearl and I sat down at one of the circles, where Ann Marie was the facilitator. She introduced herself and said a few words about who The Compassionate Friends were and indicated that each one of us, if we chose to, could share a little bit about who we were and why we came, and that there was no pressure to talk, if we did not want to. When it came to us, Pearl deferred to me and I said, "My name is Moe; this is my wife Pearl; our daughter Debbie passed away from lung cancer three months ago and that is why we are here."

As those in the group proceeded to introduce themselves and tell why they were there, it was difficult to absorb the stories that we heard. Each story about the death of a child, regardless of their age or the circumstances that caused their death, brought even more pain to both Pearl and me.

That was the first of many Compassionate Friends meetings both Pearl and I have participated in. We have become close to a number of people and they to us. I am saying this from the heart, that if it wasn't for those meetings, especially the people, and the love and support from my wife Pearl, I don't know how I could have made it. I therefore dedicate this book to all The Compassionate Friends in the Wyckoff, New Jersey Support Group and all The Compassionate Friends throughout the world. We share each other's pain and this book is dedicated to each one of you. If reading *Debbie's Stories* gives you a moment of laughter, a moment where you shed a tear, a moment where you may compare some of the stories to stories of your children; if it touches you in any way, if it helps you get through another day; then writing *Debbie's Stories* will have fulfilled my promise. The promise of keeping her always alive inside of me and through her, touching each and every one of you. I love telling "Debbie Stories," and I hope you will be enriched by reading them.

Introduction

This book is not a biography of my daughter Debbie, although the stories are biographical in nature, in that they describe many of the moments of her beautiful life. Some of them are very humorous; a few might be a little embarrassing—but I have her permission. I speak to her just about every day. If some happen to touch a note of embarrassment to some of her friends, I also have permission from these friends to tell these stories. Some are serious and some sad, maybe a tear or two will be shed; that is all part of her life.

The stories are told in the first person. I, her father, will tell many of them. There are stories told by my wife Pearl, Debbie's brother Jeff, her Aunt Rose and Uncle Murray, and by Debbie's close friends Eileen, Toni, Ethel and David. In the chapter heading of each story, credit is given to the person telling the story. If no one's name is shown, then I am the teller. *Debbie's Stories* is a joint composition by the people who loved her and whom she loved, the people that touched her life and that she touched in return, the impact she made on our lives—just a little bit about Debbie, our beautiful Debbie.

Debbie's First Love

This story begins in the early sixties, when Debbie's Grandpa and Bubba purchased a bungalow in the small town of Livingston Manor, New York, in the Catskill Mountains. They bought it so their children and grandchildren would have a place to go on weekends, vacations and holidays. It was a really cute, small cottage with a kitchenette and a couple of bedrooms. A little swimming pool, more like a swimming hole, a "social hall" with a ping-pong table and a horse-shoe pitch, and about twelve other units made up this bungalow colony. It was called Ram's Bungalows, after the owner's name. My sister and brother-in-law and their twin sons, Barry and Michael, as well as my family, would use the bungalow throughout the summer months. Of course, when Debbie's Grandpa and Bubba were there, it was even more special because then we would all receive very special treatment, including the best home-cooked meals in the country. One of the highlights of going to the bungalow was blueberry picking with Grandpa; he loved to pick blueberries and those blueberries would eventually become blueberry pie, cake, or muffins, since Bubba was a wonderful baker as well as a cook. Bubba created great pastries out of those blueberries.

Down the road from the Bungalow Colony was a small farm, called Lena's Farm, which had dairy cows, chickens and other animals. Every now and then we would walk down the hill to show our children the animals. The children loved animals, we enjoyed the hike and they were nice neighbors. One day in 1966, I believe while the rest of us were picking blueberries Debbie walked down to the farm. At this point, Debbie was not really a blueberry picker, she was more inclined "to do her own thing," while Brenda, Jeff, Grandpa, Bubba and I were doing our blueberry picking. On her way to Lena's Farm, Debbie meets a little boy named Freddie, who was about her age or a year older. These two youngsters, Debbie and Freddie, really hit it off. I don't know what they talked about, but I know that when Debbie came back that afternoon, all she talked about was meeting this young boy and how she wanted to play with him. For most

of that summer, whenever we went to the Bungalow, Debbie would spend time with Freddie. In fact, she even mentioned the “L” word, and this was the first time we heard the word from her—“you know I really love him.” Toward the end of the summer the two planned a big date. They wanted to go to the movies; there was a movie theatre in the town of Roscoe, very near Livingston Manor. (There is also a famous diner, called Roscoe’s Diner—which is still famous today.) Their plans included going to the movies and then going out for ice cream. That was Debbie’s first date. I remember taking the two to the movies and after the movies going to Roscoe’s Diner, where they had ice cream. The two of them couldn’t keep their eyes off one another. We can consider it a first date . . . first love? Well, we can say for sure that at age 7, Debbie began to notice that there was such a thing as the opposite sex. I know throughout her life Debbie was interested in romance, she was a true romantic. I sincerely believe that one of the major disappointments in Debbie’s life was that, even though she had many relationships, she never married or had a family. I am certain that was very painful to her.

Debbie's Eighth Birthday

Birthdays were really important for all of our children. Celebrating them as a milestone in their life, sharing with friends and family, were very, very important. When Debbie turned 8 she wanted to have a special birthday party. As an avid baseball fan and even more, an avid Met fan, Debbie wanted to have her birthday celebrated at Shea Stadium. The order was given for her Daddy to make arrangements to have dinner at the Diamond Club, which was a very exclusive restaurant. To dine there, you need some kind of membership, be a season ticket holder or guest of some sport celebrity to obtain entrance. The other order was that she would like to take a picture with her favorite Met, who at that time was Ron Swoboda. That was a tall order, but for Debbie, Daddy could always create miracles and that was what Daddies were there for. That was the order I received the summer of 1967, for her eighth birthday, on August 9.

During that period of my life, I was coordinating Federal Programs in Education for the Paterson Board of Education. The summer of 1967 would go down as one of the most violent summers in our nation's history. A summer of civil rights demonstrations, counter demonstrations and actual street battles in many of our major urban centers. I had designed and developed, for the City of Paterson, a summer program to involve over 3000 students and 200 to 300 teachers who were hired to work with our youngsters, not only to involve them in productive activities of a social, educational and recreational nature, but to make certain that the streets of Paterson were kept cool. One of the members of my staff that summer was a fellow by the name of Frank Bannister. Frank told me he was an ex-ballplayer who worked in the Mets minor league system and eventually became a bull pen catcher for the Mets. He mentioned he had these great connections with the Mets and if I ever needed Mets tickets, he would take care of me. I went to Frank and told him of my daughter Debbie's desire for her eighth Birthday. She wanted to have dinner in the Diamond Club, have a picture taken with her favorite, Ron Swoboda and, of course, then to have special box seats to view the game. Frank said,

“That’s fine, I’ll take care of it.” I was a little skeptical. “You will,” I said, and he said, “Yeah. August ninth, it’s a home game. I will have everything arranged in your name and you will be my guests. Just take all your kids and go to the entrance to the Diamond Club. Your name will be on the list, you will go up to the Diamond Club and then after dinner you will go on the field to have pictures taken not only with Debbie and her favorite player but, what about your other children?” I said that Brenda liked Cleon Jones and Jeff liked Ed Kranepool. He said, “I will make sure that those players are out on the field and I will have a photographer waiting to take their picture.” To tell you the truth, I didn’t fully believe that Frank Banister could arrange all these things. But he swore to me that he would do that. Just get your kids and family to Shea Stadium on the ninth of August and this will be arranged. I thought, well, this is worth a shot. I went home and told Debbie, your wish has been fulfilled.

August 9, 1967, arrived, and we headed for Shea Stadium. We were pretty dressed up for Debbie’s Birthday, dinner at the Diamond Club and pictures on the field of Shea Stadium. Sure enough, when I got to the gate, our name was on the list. We proceeded up to the Diamond Club, a very beautiful restaurant overlooking the field. We sat down to a wonderful dinner and a birthday cake with candles that had been ordered in Debbie’s honor. We sang Happy Birthday and she was thrilled. Then I said to the waiter, “I understand that we have an arrangement to go on the field and take pictures.” Sure enough, there was an escort for us to go down the elevator to the entrance to the field. This was unbelievable for the kids since they had never been on the field of a major league ballpark. Within a moment or two, three Met players came out of the dugout—Ron Swoboda, Cleon Jones and Ed Kranepool, exactly as requested. The players introduced themselves to me and to my children and signed their autograph books. Then, lo and behold, an official Met photographer came out and said, O.K. now I’m ready to take the photo. On the following page you will see the photograph taken of Brenda, Debbie and Jeff, each with their favorite ballplayer. Who says miracles never happen? One happened that day.

I will always be indebted to Frank Bannister for making Debbie’s Eighth Birthday such a memorable occasion. I know my children never forgot that day. The photo that you are viewing now was taken from Debbie’s home after she passed away; it is now in my home and forever will be a beautiful memory of that wonderful, wonderful day.



Debbie, Jeff, and Brenda with Mets ballplayers