**Losing wives, raising kids: UNC support group helps widowed dads**

**CHAPEL HILL, N.C. —** An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 men lose their wives to cancer each year in the U.S., leaving them widowed and taking care of their children alone, often with few places to turn for help. A program at the UNC Cancer Hospital is the first of its kind in the nation to reach out to the grieving fathers.

Dr. Don Rosenstein, director of the UNC Comprehensive Cancer Support Program, started the [Single Fathers Due to Cancer](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/home.do) support group with his team two years ago after recognizing the challenges and lack of resources for single fathers whose wives had died.

“We discovered that this was remarkably unaddressed in cancer centers, so we decided to start a support group,” Rosenstein said. “We meet with the fathers once a month. We ask a couple of the undergraduates from UNC to babysit their kids so that they can come for the sessions and they don’t have to worry about child care.”

Some of the men have been part of the support group since the beginning and shared their stories in a short film, "[If I Should Not Return](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/short.do)," on the [website UNC started](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/home.do) to reach out to fathers just like them.

“These guys are kind of getting through a very difficult time in their life a little easier because of the help from each other,” Rosenstein said. “Anyone who tells you that guys don’t talk about their feelings needs to be a fly on the wall at this group.”

**Wake Forest widower: ‘She was the light of my life’**

Russ Tatum joined the group after losing his 43-year-old wife, Kelley, to gall bladder cancer six months after her diagnosis. The Wake Forest couple was married 15 years and has two sons, 14-year-old Austin and 9-year-old Kyle.

“She’s the greatest woman, the greatest person I’ve ever known in my life. I was fortunate to have had her,” Tatum said. “She was a light in my life. I’d come home and be happy to see her.”  Family and friends tried to be there after Kelley died, Tatum said, “but there’s no camaraderie like someone who’s been where you’ve been.” Besides mourning the deaths of their wives, the men also get support in dealing with unfamiliar tasks.

“Cooking, cleaning, school work – it’s just a load and, yeah, it’s a lot of what we talk about,” Tatum said. “Very close friends of Kelley’s are fascinated with how I’m doing. I hear it quite often, ‘I can’t believe you still doing well.’ I’m happy with where we are.”

Being part of the “men’s club,” as Tatum calls it, has also helped him find comfort in dealing with difficult situations, such as what to do with his wife’s belongings.

“I haven’t gotten rid of my wife’s clothes. They’re still in there, and you smell them every once in a while,” he said. “You just start to wonder, ‘Is everything OK with me?’ But when we share in the group, a lot of guys are doing some of the same things, and you’re like, ‘Oh, I guess it’s OK.’”

Tatum says he doesn’t plan to marry again and prefers to be called a “sole parent,” not a “single parent.” He also says the difficult experience of losing his wife has brought him closer to his children.

“Oh, absolutely, we are very tight now,” he said. “My youngest is always on my hand and, (when) we walk anywhere, he’s got my hand. We sit down, he’s in my lap. Yeah, we’re very close.”

**Raleigh widower: ‘She was very vivacious’**

Fellow support group member Bruce Ham also had to learn to deal with new challenges after losing Lisa, his wife of 16 years, to a rare form of colon cancer. The 39-year-old wife and mother of three was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and died within six months, leaving Ham to care for their daughters, 15-year-old Bailey, 12-year-old Lucy and 10-year-old Annie T.

Ham recalled the incredible shock of learning that his wife had cancer and said he can still picture her sitting in a chair by the back door the day she was diagnosed.

“I didn’t even take her to get her colonoscopy. Her mother took her, and (we) had no idea it would be anything serious,” he said. “It was an incredible, quick, fast, awful journey to go through.”

The couple met while working at a YMCA in downtown Raleigh and married in 1993.

“Lisa was the kind of woman who filled the room. She was very vivacious. She never met a stranger. She talked a whole lot,” Ham said, smiling. “She knew everybody in town. She would talk on the phone for hours at a time and, you know, when she died, there were 1,300 people at her funeral.”

Ham says he always considered himself a good father, often coming home from work and doing “dad stuff,” such as tickling his daughters on the floor and tucking them into bed. After losing his wife, he struggled with the mom stuff.

“Lisa was the one that knew the family schedule. She knew the dinner schedule. She planned out the summer schedule. She knew the homework. I didn’t even know how to log on to the school website,” he said. “She really was the glue that kept the house together.”

“When she died, I was prepared to support my kids as I always had with a lot of love and comfort, but I was not prepared logistically to deal with the details of the house,” Ham added. “It was incredibly overwhelming, and it still is to some extent, although I’m kind of getting my stride.”

Ham says he thinks his wife would be “proud and shocked” at how well he and the girls have done since she died.

“I think she’d also be proud that we’re laughing again. We’re listening to music. We’re dancing. We’re crazy,” he said, adding that he now knows how to braid hair.

“I don’t go a day without thinking about her,” Ham said. “It’s not as painful as it was. A lot of times it’s laughter, thinking about the fun things and the happy times, but I think about her every day.”

**RESOURCES FOR WIDOWED FATHERS:**

* [Single Fathers Due to Cancer support group](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/home.do)
* [Common experiences of single fatherhood](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/experiences.do)
* [Helping your child through grief](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/help_child.do)
* [National Widowers Organization](http://www.nationalwidowers.org/)
* ["If I Should Not Return" – short film on single fathers (watch below):](http://www.singlefathersduetocancer.org/short.do)