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Healing the bereaved

Chaplain lends hand at Medical Examiner's Office

By Pauline Repard
STAFF WRITER

October 26, 2008

Joe Davis found a calling amid death and grief.

As volunteer chaplain for the county Medical Examiner's Office, Davis took on the emotional and spiritual health of its staff eight years ago. Then he expanded his services to aid the families of those who die suddenly or under suspicious circumstances.

"Over the years, I saw so many unaddressed needs of the families," Davis said. "They would ask, as we were leaving their homes: 'What do I do? Where do I go?'"

To meet some of those needs, Davis developed a comprehensive bereavement program that provides grief counseling, financial aid, volunteer chaplains from several religions and a booklet on stages of grieving that also offers practical advice.



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune
"I don't focus on a particular faith. I fill whatever the requirement is," said Joe Davis, volunteer chaplain for the county Medical Examiner's Office and an associate pastor at Horizon Christian Fellowship.

Mira Mesa resident Joana Boyer found some comfort through Davis' services.

Her 16-year-old daughter, Amanda, suffering from depression and bulimia, hanged herself in her bedroom in March 2006. The tragedy shattered Boyer and her 12-year-old daughter.

"I'd never had a death close to me in my family. It was all new and overwhelming," said Boyer, 44. "That's where Chaplain Joe came in with all his services, and the volunteer grief counselor came out that day to go through all the things you need to do, and the listening and loving and true caring they showed."

Boyer, a single mother with limited money, was given counseling for her younger daughter, and a clergy volunteer helped with the funeral. Davis phoned her daily for a time.

PROFILE

- Name:** Joe Davis
- Age:** 52
- Residence:** Santee
- Family:** wife, Bobbie; son, Billy
- Education:** Horizon Bible Institute; certified trauma services specialist
- Church:** associate pastor, Horizon Christian Fellowship, Clairemont
- Years with Medical Examiner's Office:** 8
- Other ministries:** chaplain, San Diego

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Davis founded the nonprofit Dunamai Ministries in 2003 to publish the booklet that offers advice on counseling, helping children through a family death, and a funeral checklist of people to notify and documents to collect. Dunamai donations also pay for cremations when families qualify as low-income.

The Center for Grief Care and Education, run by the nonprofit San Diego Hospice, offers up to three free counseling sessions to families who deal with the Medical Examiner's Office. About 180 families took advantage of the service between July 2007 and June of this year, Davis said.

Immersing himself in other people's grief and tragedy "has not shaken my faith at all," Davis said. "A lot of times, I don't have an answer for people who need (it). I don't need to answer for God. A lot of times, in the midst of pain, he's working for a greater purpose."

■ Pauline Repard: (619) 293-1893; pauline.repard@uniontrib.com

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