

AIDS TRAGEDY

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Can't tear it apart

tic. "Might be tomorrow," her father-in-law says. "Might be next winter."

Few families have been so severely tested. Not many would have survived so courageously.

"It didn't split the family, split the husband and wife, didn't split the child — stop us from loving the child. ... We didn't withdraw and hide in the sand," Betty Plankinton says.

The struggle has been immense. There have been hospital visits, doctors to consult, insurance companies to convince, test results to retrieve, medication to pick up and administer ... loved ones to bury.

Only love for her family has gotten her through, Betty Plankinton says.

"That's something death cannot destroy."

AIDS victims need such support, her husband insists.

"They simply don't have enough energy to keep tracking down their own health care, own business," he says.

Sarah needed additional help. She found it in Kim Pohlman, Pierce elementary's school counselor. The relationship started with Sarah's child-like questions about her "HIB." Pohlman sought out the answers, and the two talked — again and again, week after week.

The relationship soon changed. The two became friends, then like family. They ate together at school, went out on weekends for pizza and movies. They went swimming together in the summer.

"I was her favorite. ... She was just my little shadow," Pohlman says.

But Ray and Betty Plankinton carried the biggest load.

In December of 1993, Betty Plankinton cut back her hours at Columbus Community Hospital so she could devote more time to her family. Eventually, she took a leave of absence, spending her days in Pierce caring for Rick and Laura and Sarah.

Her husband, a math teacher at Platte Community College, took the weekend shift, heading north after classes concluded on Fridays. In his free time, Ray Plankinton cross-stitched Ron's AIDS quilt.

The Plankinton's daughter, Zoann, played her part, tutoring Sarah so she could stay up on her classes.

The family made an agreement that Rick's family could live in Pierce until Sarah could no longer attend school. But when Rick died, the Plankintons moved Laura to their home in Columbus.

One bright spot stands out for the family. In the summer of 1993, Sarah received a wish from the Make-A-Wish Foundation, a trip to Disney

World in Orlando.

Rick and Laura could go with Sarah, then Sarah chose Pohlman as the fourth for the group. Ray and Betty paid their own way.

The trip was magic for Sarah — Disney, Epcot Center, MGM Studios, parades, swimming, Sea World, staying in a gingerbread house, wheelchair races with dad, snacks, drinks, fun. Sarah went at top speed and wore the rest of the family out.

"The day didn't start early enough or last long enough," Pohlman says.

The break, however, lasted only four days and four nights.

Mostly, the stricken family has had wonderful support from their communities. But not always. AIDS, the family discovered, carries certain connotations.

"We feel like this disease is something we have to hide," Rick told the Columbus Telegram. "This disease is associated with something evil. Well, it's not evil. We are not being punished for something we did. We didn't do anything to deserve this."

Ron was turned down for jobs because he had AIDS. A few of Rick's co-workers held AIDS against him. Students at Sarah's school gossiped. Kim Pohlman helped enormously.

"Whether you think you know what's going on or not," she told some students. "I don't want you talking about it."

Looking back, Ray and Betty Plankinton say few things angered them — except the medical community.

The problem with some doctors, the parents say, is that they feel AIDS patients are hopeless and don't deserve complete medical attention.

"It's unbelievable to see the problems," Ray Plankinton says. "The doctors don't want to treat them. The doctors want to give up."

The Plankintons find it difficult to rationalize what happened.

"We're a pretty ordinary family who've been through a pretty unordinary problem," Ray says.

They find it almost impossible to describe their sense of loss.

"There's no real way you can describe it to someone. There's a definite emptiness," he says, turning his thoughts to his sons' childhood, their successes, the good times of the family.

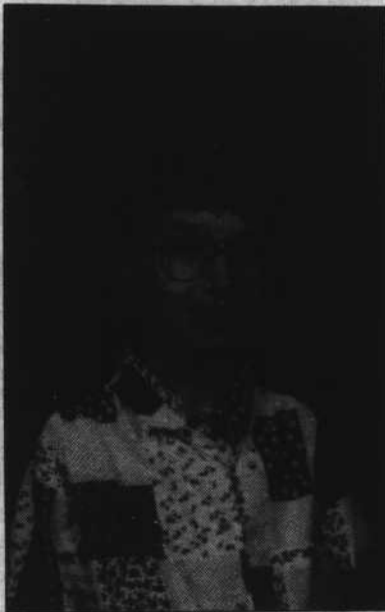
His wife tries to put it in perspective.

"There's a saying," Betty says. "When you lose your parents, you lose the past. When you lose your husband, you lose the present. When you lose your children, you lose the future."

"There's a lot to it."



Sarah and her "brother," Caesar.



From left: Sarah was getting thinner by age 10. Later in that school year, she was looking stronger. A few months before she died, her face turned puffy.