

# Deaths of loved ones strengthen family bonds

*Acceptance of passing includes making relatives realize amends are important*

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final, rattling breaths.

But acceptance was not easy, Sue Tierney said. Accepting death tried her family of five. It tried members' love for each other, their faith and their patience — with themselves and with God.

The most difficult death to accept was the first, she said. It was that of her father-in-law, Richard Tierney.

Richard died in September 1990. He started treatment for esophageal cancer in March 1989, and learned there was no possible recovery a month before he died.

"We suspected it for months," Sue said. "We could see him going downhill."

His body withered under the heat of cancer and chemotherapy, and his spirit slackened. That August, when the doctor confirmed that Richard's time left had shriveled with his body, Sue's husband, Tom, had to tell his father.

A certain death sentence of four to eight weeks passed from the son to his dying father, who said, "Well, I know you'll miss me, but I know life won't stop because I'm gone."

"He was just skin and bones," his son said, and perhaps death had already claimed him.

The battle against disease then seemed futile to the family, but the doctor suggested more treatments. Tom decided to discontinue his father's cancer treatments because they could have sickened him further.

He continued to take hours off work to care for his father. Near the end, he took the place of hospital nurses in giving his father pain suppositories, even though his father's moans from pain when he was moved haunted him and his wife.

"It was devastating to talk to someone who was actually going to die," Sue said.

Four weeks after the doctor's solemn declaration, Richard Tierney was gone.

## Fighting Regret

The process of dying is undignified, Sue said, but her husband has a calling for making it better. He has a true gift for taking care of the sick, but a gift Tom denied.

"It was just one of those things you have to do," he said. "It wasn't a pleasant experience. 'If I had to do it all over again I would.'"

Tom made many sacrifices so his father would not suffer his final months alone. An understanding work supervisor allowed him to take time off to drive his father to chemotherapy treatments, and he worked odd hours to make up for the lost work time.

"(Tom) is a by-the-book kind of guy," Sue said, and he cared for his father as he thought a dutiful son should.

Except for daughters Lindsey and Katie, the Tierney family was in the room with Richard at an Omaha hospital when he died. The devotion left little room for regret — for those who could attend.

Katie, then in seventh grade, chose not to



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TIERNEY FAMILY

**KATIE TIERNEY, then 11, impresses her grandfather Paul Mackin with a catfish longer than her shin. "He was always hunting or fishing," said Katie, who now attends the University of Nebraska at Omaha.**

accompany her family to the hospital for Grandpa Tierney's last day.

"She was always the apple of his eye," Sue said.

It would have been hard for the seventh grader to choose to take a last glance over the withered man that she dearly loved, she said.

"I knew cancer wasn't good, but I didn't know what the heck it did to you," Katie, now 18, said.

Still, she said she regrets the lost moment. The chance for a final good-bye is not retrievable, she said. "I wish I could."

Although Tom was with his father for that last goodbye, he said he wished he had spent more time with his father in those last days, even the final four or five days when he had slipped into a coma.

The care Tom did give his dying father left little room for regret. He made sacrifices of time and spirit that many working men could not make today.

"I had more freedom than I do now," he said. "In a lot of companies now, you're doing more. Employees are doing more."

The sacrifices Tom made for his father were not shared by his sisters, he said. They didn't have the flexibility he did to attend to their father. His wife said he remains bitter that they left him "out to dry."

Sue said time Tom spent with his father couldn't ease his bitterness towards his siblings. And the time he devoted could not calm his pain in losing him.

Neither of Sue's parents had died by the time Richard died, and Tom did not open up himself to talk about his pain. Tom often wanted to be left alone, and his wife said she felt helpless to ease her husband's sorrow.

"He would say, 'Well you just don't know what it feels like,'" she said, and the words slashed through her. "He thought I could never be in his shoes."

"And then I was. I was in his shoes and didn't like it."

## The fight relived

Sue's father, Paul Mackin, was diagnosed with cancer in May 1996. The family had changed since Katie and Jeff had started college in Nebraska, and Mackin lived hours from the family in Greeley.

He underwent surgery to remove a baseball-sized tumor in his side that month.

"We all thought he would be OK," Sue said. "The doctor said he was fine."

The doctor said if Paul left the hospital after surgery, and rested in his cabin near Greeley, he would recover from the cancer. Sue asked the doctor if he was "leveling with her." He swore he was telling the truth.

Seven different doctors refused to tell the family Paul was dying, Sue said. The doctor who first said Paul would recover after surgery was Paul's main care giver, and the other doctors seemed to protect him, she said.

"They teased us," Katie said.

Sue urged her father to change doctors, but he would not. As a result, Paul never was advised to get chemotherapy treatment. He never was advised to get his affairs in order. He never was told the truth.

His health failed more rapidly toward the end of the summer, but for the most part, he remained an avid outdoorsman who loved fishing and hunting. The biggest changes occurred right before September, a month before he died.

Two weeks before Paul died, he could no longer make decisions for himself, and Sue chose to have another doctor run medical tests. The test results were conclusive, the new doctor told Paul in a room with his daughters, wife and son-in-law.

"He nodded, but he couldn't believe it," Sue said of her father. "There was just a silence. Dad was real good about it, but, you know he wanted to cry."

The family would have about 10 days to prepare for Paul's October death.

Sue felt numb. She knew the painful death that claimed Richard Tierney would claim her father, but she could not grieve like she had before with her father-in-law's death.

"Honest to God, we were numb with my dad," she said. "My heart just ached and bled that I didn't feel as strongly with my dad as I did with Tom's."

With Richard's death, the family was devastated, said Katie and Sue. Now, they just wondered who would be the next to die.

The new doctor would not say the first doc-



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TIERNEY FAMILY

**RICHARD TIERNEY cuddles his grandchildren Jeff, 4, Katie, 2, and their cousin Amy, 1. The Tierney family said Richard, who died in 1990, never allowed cancer to consume his loving spirit.**

tor had lied, but Sue felt deceived.

"I felt so stupid afterwards," she said. "Every time I would think of it, I would cry."

Her father should have been able to choose whether he wanted chemotherapy treatments, and should have been told his condition was fatal, she said. He should have had the luxury of spending his last months reconciling and talking with his family.

"It's like (the doctor) robbed me of that time with my dad," Sue said.

With her father, that time was important. Sue spent her high school years ignored and hurt by his alcoholism. Later, in the years before his death, she said the family still "walked on eggshells" around him, wondering when he would be angry next. They watched his escape into his room, "his layer" he called it, when his family arrived.

In the months before he died, Paul tried to make amends with his family.

He had always favored Jeff, Tom and Sue's son and oldest of the family. Jeff said he remembered Paul as a man of many talents — a cook, hunter, fisher and gardener — and an important light in his life.

But he began to talk to his granddaughters more, whom he had never openly adored, and asked questions about their school days and boyfriends.

The time he had left was not enough time to repair all his damaged relationships, but Sue knew her relationship with him had grown stronger before his death.

The strongest evidence of its strength came after he slipped into a coma, she said.

She often sat by him during that time, kissed his forehead and rubbed his frail hand. One day, she kissed and rubbed his forehead, and he moaned from the pain of a bed sore.

Sue leaned forward to comfort him in a whisper, "I love you, Dad."

He had not spoken for three or four days, but his lips parted to mumble, "I love you."

## End zone

The October weekend he died, his whole family had gathered at his cabin to keep him company. A friend who was a priest had helped Paul decide to remain in his home until his death, and Paul laid on his own bed in the room that was always his escape.

The family was not sure Paul, then 76, would die that weekend. His lungs had begun to fill with fluid, which made him rattle when he breathed, but his nurse said he had strength left in him.

The family decided to travel to Greeley anyway because they wanted to make sure he was not alone when he died.

Katie said she remembers the Notre Dame football game on the television that Saturday, when she was drying her hair in the bathroom of the cabin.

The family had been taking turns that day sitting with Paul in his room, but everyone then gathered upstairs to watch the football game.

Sue had just left his room, and had turned his television on to the Notre Dame game.

While in the bathroom, Katie heard the family start yelling and stomping upstairs. Her heart dropped, and she raced up the stairs, asking what had happened to her grandpa.

Notre Dame had just scored a touchdown, they said. At the same time, her grandpa had just drawn his last breath.

"I know it sounds silly, but I think he went when Notre Dame scored," Katie said. "It seemed like the perfect time."

Paul had always rooted for Notre Dame, she said, and had always loved the comfort of being alone in his room.

Sue said the family walked into his room after he died.

"We just sobbed and sobbed and sobbed, it seemed like endlessly," she said.

Katie held and stroked her grandfather's hand. She was not scared of his death, she said, and she was not afraid to touch the body he had just left.

The coroners came to take Paul, and they carried him out of his cabin in a body bag just as the church bells started ringing for 6 p.m. Mass. All of his neighbors could see him being carried out.

Paul would not have liked that, Sue said.

## Moving on

Sue has yet to hear an apology from the doctor that misled her and her father. Her mother received a condolence letter from the doctor, but he did not explain why he told the family a dying man would be just fine.

Paul often asked Sue for the doctor's update on his condition. She told him what the doctor said — that he would live.

"I think dad thought I was lying to him," Sue said through tears of worry.

After her father's death, she became angry that God did not give her the insight to see through the doctor's cruel facade. She later went to confession to tell her priest, "I'm still angry."

Katie said she once wanted to punch the doctor. She does not think about the doctor everyday, but she knows her mom once did. Sue plans to make the doctor feel guilty if she sees him again.

Now, about six months later, Sue said she is no longer angry. She is upset, however, that she knew so much less about doctors and cancer while her father lived.

"Hindsight is a good teacher," she said.

She wishes she had known how to get the knowledge she needed to fight and understand her father's cancer, and wishes she had known not to trust his doctor.

She has now researched his sarcoma-type cancer and knows her father's chances of survival were always slim.

She wishes she had known how important the old stories are — the stories that often bore the grandchildren — and how important each visit with a family member can be.

"I wish we could have heard more fish stories," she said. She now listens intently to her mother's tales.

But she always knew the importance of family support, she said. She said her family often seems dysfunctional "with a capital D." But it is priceless in times of need.

Family can make a small man feel like he's dying with the love and support of a whole state. And, Sue said, the family that helps each other weather the pain of death will help them move on even stronger.