

10 YEARS IN THE MAKING-THE STORY OF STEPHY'S PLACE

Stephy's Place Center for Grief and Loss opened our doors in September 2015 hosting one support group. Now ten years later, we have grown to have over 50 separate peer support groups for loss of a spouse, loss of a child, loss of a parent, loss of a sibling, and loss due to suicide or divorce. All our groups have always been free of charge. These small groups of 10-12 people are facilitated by trained, compassionate people who have attended one of our groups and are just a little further along the bumpy road of grief.

Our hope and mission is to offer free peer support to companion one another as we navigate the rollercoaster of emotions and struggles after loss.

The story of Stephy's Place unfortunately began on one of the most tragic days in American history, September 11, 2001. In the horrid aftermath, family members were invited to join a support group which began to meet every Tuesday morning. These devastated souls who lost children, husbands, wives, sisters and brothers met every Tuesday which got them to the next Tuesday which got them to the next Tuesday. The group met weekly for several years, then more sporadically, but it never really ended as bonds and friendships were formed that were unmatched anywhere else. This was a time of horror and heartbreak, but also of healing and hope forged in weekly gatherings.

Just a few weeks before 9-11, Sheila Martello had just moved to Rumson, NJ with her husband Jimmy and two young sons. Like so many others, her beloved Jimmy never came home. The support group pulled Sheila into an instant community of love and healing which helped her to function and continue to raise her two boys. She began a foundation in her husband Jimmy's memory and fundraised to help families in need or in grief.

Years later, Sheila met a young mother of three named Stephy who was dying from cancer. Sheila's foundation in Jimmy's memory sent Stephy and her family on their last vacation. Sheila became very fond of Stephy, who was not afraid to die, but was fearful of how her family and children would cope and survive in their grief after her loss. Sheila shared a long-time dream with Stephy, a dream that manifested after her brother-in-law died. Sheila sadly observed that her sister hadn't received the same support that she received after Jimmy died. She didn't think it was fair that everyone couldn't be supported as she was in her loss, and so her dream was to create a center for loss, a *place* to provide group support just as she had experienced. She promised Stephy that if she ever opened such a place, she would name it after her.

Fourteen years after 9-11, with a collaborative effort of other members of that original support group, a phoenix would rise from the ashes of that national tragedy and *Stephy's Place* was born.

You can be a part of the healing that flows from Stephy's Place, as we are a charity/501c3 and all donations are tax deductible. The generous support of our donors is what keeps our doors open and our lights on. For more information on Stephy's Place please visit www.stephysplace.org

Kevin J. Keelen

Stephy's Place Reflection – April 2025