

"We talk about Ted every day," says Ellen, at home with Taylor and Luke. "They love to hear stories about what he was like when he was young."

In the summer of 2003, Ellen Lindeman, 35, had it all: a loving husband, Ted; two children; a part-time job as a massage therapist and esthetician at a day spa; and a home in the quiet suburban town of Warminster, Pennsylvania. "The four of us loved being together," Ellen recalls. "Our idea of a fun weekend was playing card games with the kids and kicking a soccer ball around the yard." Then, during a family vacation to Italy in September, Ted, 33, suddenly had trouble eating pasta. "He said it felt like the food was getting stuck in his throat," Ellen says. "It continued for the rest of the trip, and while it wasn't painful—just uncomfortable—it took more and more effort for Ted to swallow."

An endoscopy revealed a large tumor at the base of Ted's esophagus, which was later found to be stage 3 esophageal cancer—a rare form of the disease that quickly spread throughout his body despite aggressive radiation and chemotherapy treatments. In early January the doctor informed Ellen that her husband had just days to live. He encouraged her to tell Ted so that he could say goodbye to his family. "At first I was very reluctant to follow the doctor's advice. After all, how do you look the love of your life in the eye and say, 'You are going to die,'" Ellen recalls. "But the doctor said Ted deserved to know."



the kindness of strangers

At 35, Ellen Lindeman suddenly found herself a widow with two children to support. Friends and neighbors came together to help her get through her grief, and now she's doing the same for others.

by Cynthia Hanson

Ted promptly wrote a letter to their daughter, Taylor, and son, Luke, then 5 and 3, in which he expressed his love and promised to watch over them from heaven. Ted's final conversation with Ellen was equally emotional: "He asked me who would escort Taylor down the aisle on her wedding day and who would teach Luke how to ride a bike," she says. For the next three days Ellen kept a vigil at his bedside. He passed away on January 9, 2004—just 11 weeks after being diagnosed. "I was overwhelmed at the thought of being a single parent and running the household all by myself," says Ellen, now 40. "I really didn't know how I'd survive without him."

Her early weeks alone were excruciating. "It was hard just to get through the day," she says. "My entire body ached, I felt sick to my stomach, and I didn't sleep for more than 20 minutes at a time because I kept worrying about how I'd make ends

After Ted's death, Ellen's early weeks alone were excruciating. "My body ached, I felt sick to my stomach, and I didn't sleep for more than 20 minutes at a time because I kept worrying about how I'd make ends meet," she says.

meet." Although Ted had a modest life insurance policy, the company wouldn't send her the money until it verified that his cancer wasn't a pre-existing condition—a process that took six long months. First Ellen lived off the couple's \$7,800 savings account, but that was depleted in a matter of weeks. Then she returned to work to support herself and her children.

In the midst of her hardship, Ellen received an unexpected offer from the mom of one of Taylor's kindergarten classmates. Lana Forbes asked if she

could organize a fundraiser on the Lindeman family's behalf. "Even though I didn't know Ellen very well, I couldn't stop thinking about what she was going through and how it could happen to any young mother," says Lana, 38, a mom of three. Initially, Ellen declined. But with her credit card bills mounting, she soon changed her mind.

That June Lana hosted a dinner benefit and silent auction and raised \$12,500—money that kept Ellen afloat while she waited for the life insurance check. "I couldn't believe that total

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strangers would care so much and be so generous," says Ellen. "And it was such a relief to stop worrying about money."

The support and sympathy she received from her friends and neighbors was also very much needed. One woman pitched in with child care. Another volunteered to arrive at the house every Monday at 6:15 A.M. so Ellen could head out in time to meet an early-morning client. (Four years later the woman still helps out for free.) "If it weren't for the kindness of my neighbors, I would have had to move to be closer to my family," Ellen says. "As difficult as my life had become, I knew there was really a lot to be grateful for."

In the fall of 2004 Ellen's gratitude to the community motivated her to return the favor. She asked Lana to help her organize another dinner benefit. Only this time it would be for other young parents who'd recently lost a spouse—even though she didn't have anyone in particular in mind. Ellen's mission was



Helping other widows and widowers "was something positive that could come out of my losing Ted," Ellen says.

twofold—to provide widows and widowers with a financial cushion, as well as emotional support, during those first tough months. "I knew I could talk about my experience, walk them

through the mountain of paperwork that follows a death and direct them to organizations that could help them," Ellen says. "It was something positive

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that could come out of my losing Ted.”

In May 2005 the Ted Lindeman Outreach Fund Dinner—a dinner-dance and silent auction that was held in Jamison, Pennsylvania—welcomed 200 guests and raised \$23,000. Then, working with a local bereavement group, Ellen learned of two women who had recently been widowed and gave each of them a \$9,000 grant. “It felt wonderful to help them get back on their feet,” she says. “And I was proud of my community for being so generous.”

The following year Ellen founded the Ted Lindeman Outreach Foundation (tedlindemanoutreachfoundation.com) and made the dinner an annual event. So far the nonprofit group has raised

a local newspaper story about the annual benefit dinner. “After I became a widow, I needed help paying my mortgage,” says Kim. “Just talking to Ellen made me feel better. She knew exactly what I was going through, both emotionally and financially, and assured me I could get through it. And when the grant money came in, I was so relieved I could have cried.”

For Ellen and her team of 20 volunteers, the foundation is a year-round labor of love. And it’s become a family project, as Taylor, now 10, and Luke, 8, help their mother stuff envelopes and distribute flyers. “I’ve explained to them that people helped us when their dad died—and that now it’s our turn to help,”

The foundation has given Ellen’s kids a way to honor their father and keep his memory alive. And it’s brought her a circle of friends she can lean on when she’s feeling alone and sad. “It’s shown me the good side of people,” she says.

\$90,000 and helped seven families in the Philadelphia suburbs.

Murry Kornfeind, an insurance adjuster in Jamison, credits Ellen with helping him after his wife lost her eight-year battle with Huntington’s disease in 2006. “The Lindeman foundation paid for part of the funeral expenses,” says Murry, “but her support didn’t end there.” Ellen called periodically to see how Murry was doing. She also bought Christmas presents for his daughter, Elise, now 11, and had foundation volunteers deliver hot meals to his home for three months. “It’s truly comforting to know there are big-hearted people like Ellen in the world,” he says.

Kim Barnard of nearby Hatboro, Pennsylvania, whose husband died of a sudden heart attack in 2007, is also grateful she had Ellen to turn to. The mother of an 11-year-old daughter, Karlie, Kim contacted Ellen after reading

says Ellen. Last year Taylor’s Brownie troop donated \$75 to the foundation from the proceeds of a cookie sale; this year, Taylor plans to speak at the dinner.

Though her own pain has lessened over the years, Ellen still feels a huge void in her life. “The kids and I talk about Ted every day,” she says. “Taylor and Luke love to hear stories about what he was like when he was young.” But Ellen credits the foundation with helping them heal emotionally. “It’s difficult for young children to see a parent die. They don’t want to be different from their classmates, and it can be embarrassing to talk about their loss,” she says. “But now they have a way to honor their father and also keep his memory alive in their hearts.” The foundation has helped Ellen too, by bringing others into her life whom she can lean on when she’s feeling alone and sad. “It’s shown me the good side of people,” she says. “And it’s made me stronger.” ●

when tragedy strikes

If someone you know suffers the loss of a spouse, here’s what you can do:

Watch what you say. Some comments could make a grieving spouse or child feel worse, cautions Rob Sheesley, director of the Center for Grieving Children, Teens and Families in Philadelphia. Don’t say, “She’s not suffering anymore,” “God needed him,” “You’ll get married again” or “Your daddy’s at peace.” Instead, acknowledge their loss by saying, “This must be a difficult time” or “My heart goes out to you.”

Offer specific ways you could help. Make concrete suggestions, such as cleaning the house, watching the kids or going grocery shopping. Then let your friend choose.

Stay in touch. While the pain of losing a loved one doesn’t end with the funeral, the flurry of attention from family, friends and neighbors often does. Bereavement counselors and experts agree that the important thing is to be there for your friend over the long haul to help her cope with feelings of loss and loneliness.