

# Widows Coming Together

by Rachel Blythe Kodanaz

As a widow, could you ever imagine attending a conference surrounding yourself with people who are embarking on similar journeys? Others who can truly understand the complexities of being a widow and have earned the right to ask ‘the question’ in the first minute of conversation – how did it happen? It is not impossible.

I was privileged to be a presenter at an amazing conference for widows this past summer in San Diego, CA. As a national speaker, I am always intrigued by the demographics of attendees at a conference, but this group struck me differently, as I was one of them – a widow. I was amazed at the love and friendship that was formed in 48 hours, but most importantly the hope that was shared amongst the attendees. Where else could you share your story over and over again and each time you shared it you had someone holding on to every detail – asking all the right questions?

It was a weekend of self-discovery, forging new friendships and discovering that there are others that are walking in similar shoes and are surviving the loss of their spouse. We did not choose to be widowed, yet our loss left us with the responsibility of figuring out what to do next in our lives and the lives of our children. Not an easy task for those who had their futures taken from them. Having the opportunity to look into so many people’s eyes and know they ‘get it’ and can relate to your good days and bad days is truly priceless.

When I first heard about the conference, I was trying to picture the demographics of the attendees. Would it be widows who were newly bereaved or who have been widowed for years? Would it be people looking for a social setting and new connections or looking for a magic wand to help them through their grief? What I found when I arrived was that the group encompassed a variety of different widows looking for friendships, avenues to learn more about their grief and to be in a safe environment to ‘talk’ where they were not judged by others who did not understand. I was amazed at the ages of the



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women attending; so many of us had been widowed before the age of 40. While our experiences of the loss of our spouses might be different, the outcome is the same. We are widowed.

Michele Neff Hernandez and her committee orchestrated the perfect weekend. A combination of educational sessions, a symphony concert by the ocean, a formal dinner, a 5km run, a bookstore containing grief literature and an avenue to create connections to each other. The attendees had the opportunity to spend a weekend in a safe environment, surrounded by those who cared, letting down their guard and truly connecting to others that understood the daily struggles of being widowed.

As event director, Michele shared, “My favorite part of the weekend was watching each person slowly begin to stand up tall. Upon first entering the hotel, mentioning our purpose was almost embarrassing, but by the end of the weekend, what started as a meek inquiry about where to find other widows became a unique pride in standing side-by-side with other people who are fighting the war against despair. Our green lanyards became the sign of hope, instead of the mark of the dreaded ‘W.’ We banded together, we lifted each other up and we allowed each other the freedom to be momentarily happy. The weight of grief was lightened by sharing the load. We discovered that unimaginable and impossible are not the same thing. We may not be able to imagine a tomorrow filled with joy right now, but surrounded by people who understood the journey of widowhood created a hope for the future many had not felt since the death of their husbands. It was magical.”

It *was* magical – I met many women who will be a part of my life forever, after just one weekend of sharing. While each story had its own sadness and devastation, details of the loss and when it occurred slowly gave way to finding strength to move forward with the love and support of each other. The smiles and laughter were plentiful over the weekend and encouraged us all that WE WILL persevere through the hardship and find ourselves once again.

When I returned from the weekend of caring, understanding and connections I realized how important it is in your own grief journey to surround yourself with people who understand your hardship, want to hear your story and will be there for you even if you just met them the day before. Our journeys may differ, but our broken hearts and dreams are similar, and finding that one friend to share your pain with can make all the difference in the world. Who else could understand checking the “Widow” box on government forms, determining when is the appropriate time to take off your wedding ring or cleaning out your closets, except fellow widows?

Hats off to *The Soaring Spirit Loss Foundation* for bringing us all together, for providing hope for those who are mourning the loss of their spouse and for providing a safe environment, allowing us to ask questions and get answers from those who are walking the walk.

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## Rachel RECOMMENDS:

Find hope by attending. . .  
**Camp Widow 2010.**

*“Celebrating all we have accomplished as we look forward to what we have yet to become.”*

Anyone who has experienced the loss of a spouse, no matter how long ago, is invited to attend Camp Widow, August 8-10, 2010 at the Marriott Hotel & Marina in San Diego, CA. This event will be an inspiring weekend intended to help us celebrate all we have accomplished as we look to the future with hope and purpose. Death is not reduced to tragedy alone if we can find a way to rise from the ashes. Join us as we honor the loved ones we have lost by learning how to fly once more. For conference information visit [www.sslf.org](http://www.sslf.org)



Rachel Blythe Kodanaz entered the grief world in 1992 when her husband suddenly passed away leaving her with a two-year-old daughter. She spent several years trying to find her path through grief and as part of her recovery became active in supporting

others who were suffering a loss. Currently, Rachel is the Executive Director of HeartLight Grief and Loss Center located in Denver, Colorado. She facilitates numerous groups including a Baby Boomer Widow Support Group (5 years), multi-day workshops, keynote addresses and training classes. In addition, her experience in large corporations led her to develop and publish material to support the workplace when dealing with a grieving employee or workgroup, with emphasis in educating managers and co-workers. Rachel presents to corporations, communities, not-for-profit organizations, funeral directors, and conferences. Rachel has published numerous articles and participated in a grief segment on Good Morning America.  
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