

*Always Loved  
Never Forgotten*

*Written by Meagan Clanahan*

*Photography by Jason Lehecka*

Katy parents find solace and hope in the local chapter of The Compassionate Friends after enduring the devastating loss of a child

Robin Conner, Susan Archer, and Veronica Malhiot have embraced the help and guidance given through The Compassionate Friends



Overwhelming grief. Gut-wrenching pain. Feelings of complete isolation. Parents who lose a child of any age often experience these emotions and more. The Katy chapter of the national organization, The Compassionate Friends (TCF) understands the grief process and are here to support families with friendship, comfort, and love.

Meeting once a month, this group of parents, grandparents, and siblings are welcome to share their devastating losses with others who have experienced their same grief. Each gathering offers a large group setting for the initial welcome and then breaks into several small groups based on a participant's specific bereavement. "We encourage people to just talk," says chapter President Melinda Ginter. "They just want to release their emotions, talk about their child, and honor their memory." That is a huge component of TCF's meetings. "Everyone has permission to say what's in their heart," Ginter continues. "In the beginning, you just want to talk to other parents, to know you will make it through this, to know you are not crazy, and that other people have experienced the same feelings as you."

### The Before and After

Susan Archer is one such mother who is in the initial stages of the grief process. She lost her 26-year-old son, Matthew Moore, to an accidental overdose in December of 2011. To Archer, her life is divided in the "before and after" since Matthew's death. At TCF, she found other parents who understood that division in time. Upon attending her first meeting a few months following her son's death, she found immense comfort in being able to talk about Matthew, to hear the other parents' stories, and to know that she wasn't alone in her walk. "The Compassionate Friends is a refuge for me to be open and honest," says Archer. "I love you" were his last words to me, and I am forever thankful for that."

### Living Life

After losing her son Tyler, Veronica Malhiot felt lost and alone. Even with the help of her friends and family, she knew she needed something more to help her through her grieving process. After speaking to Melinda, she knew TCF was exactly what she needed. "There are so many emotions that I didn't know even existed, and I really thought I was losing my mind," shares Malhiot. She attended her first meeting four months after Tyler's passing, and immediately she felt the love and support from the group. While the pain is still there and may never go away, Malhiot continues to live each day one day at a time. She honors her son's memory by trying to live a better life and continues to honor



Rhonda Vonas remembers her 17-year-old daughter Amanda by creating a quilt with childhood items of hers

his memory however she can. "Grieving for your child never goes away," says Malhiot. "I see people and life differently than I did before."

### A Supportive Family

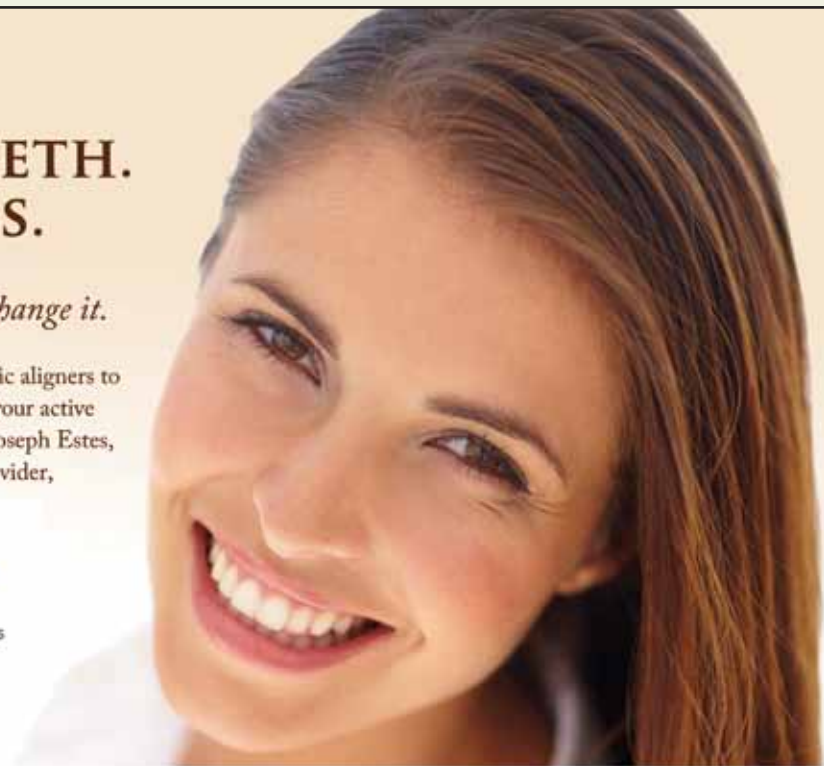
As the Katy chapter has grown over the past 15 years, it is obvious that the common grief of losing a child regardless of age, race, ethnicity, or religious background unites them all.

Rhonda Vonas discovered that uniqueness after losing her precious 17-year-old daughter Amanda to suicide in 2002. She found that her bereavement process required special care and attention from a small group within TCF, given the stigma that oftentimes surrounds death by suicide. Vonas now co-leads her own small group during the regular meeting time, where they "share their profound grief, but also remember and rejoice through the happy times." According to Vonas, "You can let your grief be all consuming, or you can reach out to others and not hide from the world." Vonas honors Amanda's memory with distinctive tributes, including special donations, scholarship funds, and a treasured quilt created with items of her childhood. Amanda's life carries on through the donation of her organs to others, including a kidney recipient that their family still hears from on a regular basis.

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*"I think I am a better person today. God has given me this gift of writing. My faith has been increased, and I feel happiness again. The Compassionate Friends saved my life."*

- Robin Conner

Three years after her son was murdered in a robbery Conner's daughter also passed away in a car accident

### Healing Through Action

Robin Conner first came to Katy TCF when her 28-year-old son Christopher was murdered during a robbery in 2005. After being embraced by their community during that tragedy, just three short years later, her daughter Dawn was killed in a car accident. As they had when she dealt with the loss of one child, TCF rallied around her and held her close. "Everyone was there for me," says Conner.

Conner knows firsthand that the grief process of losing a child drastically differs from that of losing a spouse or another close relative. Shortly after Dawn's tragic death, Conner lost her husband Steve to a short-lived battle with cancer. Through all of her experiences, she found the best way to heal was to continue to reach out and support her peers at TCF. For the past four years, each month she has written inspirational note cards to the parents of each child lost on their anniversary and birthdays, sometimes numbering as many as 20. "I have healed through action. The grief process has changed me," Conner reflects. "I think I am a better person today. God has given me this gift of writing. My faith has been increased, and I feel happiness again. The Compassionate Friends saved my life."



Archer is grateful that the last words her son said to her were, "I love you"



Malhiot planted a tree and placed a plaque in memory of her son, Tyler, in Rennie Park

### Walking Together Through Grief

The Compassionate Friends organization pledges that no parent will ever walk alone through their grief. While they meet officially monthly, many of the members interact organically between their gatherings via email, phone calls, and dinners. Whenever someone just needs to verbalize their emotions, TCF has established a “phone-a-friend” system where they can reach out to someone who understands their unique journey. As with any support group, attendance at meetings is somewhat transient as people discover their own path to healing, but hundreds of people stay connected to TCF through their informative monthly newsletter and emails throughout the year. As they say to every new friend who visits, “We’re so sorry you are here with us, but we are so glad you chose to join us tonight.”  
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MEAGAN CLANAHAN is a Katy wife and mom to two twin toddlers.

Editor’s Note: We would like to thank the families in The Compassionate Friends story for sharing their loved ones with our readers. For more information on meeting times or to make a donation, visit [compassionatefriends-katy.org](http://compassionatefriends-katy.org).

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