

Cindy Kaplan and Judy Kelly

By Luke Schmaltz, VOICES Newsletter Editor

“Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear.”

– William Shakespeare

Recently, Cindy Kaplan and Judy Kelly were in Plymouth Harbor leading their peer group from The Sun Will Rise Foundation on an excursion of remembrance. Every bereaved person in attendance carried a smooth river rock – symbolizing a loved one lost to substance use. They were on a paddlewheel boat preparing to memorialize the deceased by calling out their names and relinquishing the stones to a tranquil resting place beneath the waves.

As night was falling across the harbor, the ceremony commenced. Seemingly from out of nowhere, a surprise procession of brightly decorated boats, yachts, and ferries began crossing the harbor in proximity to their boat. It was an unplanned moment of beauty and grace, with the illuminated watercraft floating by as if to pay respect to those being memorialized. This sublime, bittersweet evening is one that attendees of this peer grief field trip won't soon forget.

Outings like these, hosted by Kaplan and Kelly, are known for such powerful moments, as they engender connection and healing among people profoundly affected by SUD.

Both are quick to point out that their endeavors, especially the trip to Plymouth Bay, could not have been accomplished without the encouragement, guidance and generosity of Robyn Houston-Bean of The Sun Will Rise Foundation. “Robyn’s leadership is key in all of this,” Kaplan says.

Long-Distance Loss

On November 30th, 2019, Cindy Kaplan lost her son Jonathan to a fentanyl overdose.

He was in California at the time, and Kaplan had to fly there from the East Coast to handle the situation. The following period of grief was worsened by the fact that there was no information about how Jonathan died until three months later. “I called it a heroin overdose and it wasn’t,” she says. “I was so confused, and it took three months to be able to say, ‘No, he died of counterfeit pills.’”

The uncanny circumstances were further magnified by the pandemic. “His birthday is March 17th, St. Patrick’s Day,” Kaplan begins. “That was the day the COVID lockdown happened, and it would have been his 30th.”

It was during the early months of the lockdown when Kaplan began the daily practice that would eventually evolve into peer grief field trips. “I got COVID right after he died. There was a whole host of us that were sick. When I got better [after] about a month, I didn’t know what to do because I was alone. So, I decided that I was going to do an exercise every day that I could – and that was climbing Blue Hill – because it was something I had been doing before,” she explains.

A Breakthrough Moment

One day on her climb up Blue Hill, Kaplan was compelled by an impulse to yell out her son’s name. After looking around to make sure she was alone so people wouldn’t think she was crazy, she called out at the top of her lungs “Jonathan!” three times to the sky. “It was really good,” she explains. “It was a way to yell meaningfully and to believe that he could hear me yelling for him. And I would talk to him, because there was no one else around. Then, I would go to the grief group [and] that was a savior during COVID,” she says.

Cindy Kaplan recounts the story of when she first met Judy Kelly, “Judy’s son passed three-and-a-half months after Jon,” she begins. “She came into the [Zoom] meeting very early afterward and I posted a chat note asking, ‘Does anyone want to come with me?’” Judy accepted the offer to meet at Blue Hill which was the beginning of a very special friendship. “Judy and I met [in person],” she continues, “And it was like we’d known each other forever. She loved to hike so it was perfect, and we’ve been friends ever since.”

Two years after their initial meeting, as COVID was finally receding, Kaplan and Kelly organized their first grief field trip to Blue Hill. “Judy and I were just going to do it ourselves, but then Robyn Houston-Bean wanted to be the sponsor and it was amazing,” she says. “We had about 35 people from everywhere. We didn’t even know some of them. We all walked as a group, respecting each other’s speed and pace, we all stopped, and we yelled up as a group – all of our children’s names. I would say, ‘Jonathan’ and then everyone would say, ‘Jonathan,’ and then the next person would say their child’s name and it went on for a long time. It was very spiritual, very emotional, and very wonderful.”

Lifelong Struggle

It is a fall afternoon in 2022, and Judy Kelly is about to begin her shift at the Hanover Library. Her workplace is just a stone’s throw from the cemetery where her son, Geoffrey, was recently buried.

On March 28th, 2020, Geoffrey passed away from an overdose after many years of struggle with SUD. “He was dysfunctional,” she begins. “The disease completely took over his life. He lived from treatment center to treatment center, detox to detox,” she says. Kelly had Geoffrey committed to involuntary treatment numerous times – to no avail.

Kelly explains that one way she has always found relief from stress and grief was to be in nature, so her first in-person excursion with Kaplan was therapeutic. “The first walk I made with Cindy at Blue Hill reservation felt comfortable and cathartic,” she begins. “I felt I knew Cindy already because of the many Sun Will Rise grief support sessions we both attended together and where we had connected during the pandemic.”

Kelly continues, “Cindy and I were able to share easily because of the similar losses of our two sons. We spoke of our sadness, yearning, and ways we were finding to cope with our devastating losses. Being able to spend time together outdoors with the trees, birds, and sky along with the exertion of the uphill climb made for a natural and free flow of our emotions and thoughts,” she says.

Calling Out Together

The day was bittersweet, as Geoffrey used to be employed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation and had spent his summers working at Blue Hill, “I often wonder if Geoffrey walked the paths I walk,” she says. “I had wanted to experience the calling of Geoffrey’s name to the sky as I had heard Cindy explain she did this each day for her son Jonathan as she climbed Blue Hill. Our call of their names at the top of the hill was indeed powerful and emotionally releasing. We were able to share with each other without time constraints or judgment and with an abundance of compassion. Now we continue our walks and call our son’s names each time we walk together, and I continue to find a small relief and release.”

Kelly explains how a number of additional activities and practices help her to cope with the grief of losing Geoffrey. “I meditate every morning, do yoga, go to the beach, and walk in nature,” she explains. Kelly is also involved with Hope Floats, a bereavement and educational center, and Hope for Boston’s Homeless. With the latter, she helps collect and distribute backpacks, coats, scarves, and other essential items to people living on the streets. “I have a collection site at work,” she says. “It is important to have an activity that is uplifting rather than spending all of your time in isolation.”

Kelly maintains some refreshing observations about how grief is dealt with in Western culture. “We are caught up always wanting to feel better, and it’s OK to be sad,” she says. “Grief and death are hidden in our society [which] doesn’t allow us the time to grieve. Grief and sadness are normal human emotions.”

Kelly offers a few parting sentiments about her son and how losing him has affected her worldview. “A mother’s wish is always for their child’s happiness, and it continues to be my wish for Geoffrey even when he no longer inhabits this physical world,” she begins. “Our continuing love for those who we have lost is something that will never end and to recognize the need to speak of and honor these people who have succumbed to the disease of addiction is so important to me.”