

# Kar-Kate Parenteau

Luke Schmaltz, VOICES Editor

“Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

The loss of a loved one is a life-changing event, and the ensuing grief can be as complex, vivid, and distinct as the individual going through it. Today, growing numbers of people are participating in grief support groups rather than suffering alone in silence. This movement has revealed the need for peer support which is designed specifically for bereaved spouses.

Recently, peer group facilitator Kar-Kate Parenteau came to the realization that adults who are grieving the loss of their spouses to substance use disorder (SUD) are facing a distinct set of challenges. After her husband died of a fentanyl overdose in 2017, she began seeking support through a variety of meetings. “I started going to grief groups through The Sun Will Rise Foundation,” she begins. “I tried my share of different grief groups; some were specific to SUD, and some were just around general loss, but I was never able to find one that covered both topics for partners. I was always searching for this niche group, but I never found it.”

## *Nurturing an Idea*

“So this year, I went to one of The Sun Will Rise Foundation’s general group meetings and I talked to the founder, Robyn Houston-Bean. I told her I had been searching for these specific meetings [because] I feel there are just so many nuances to losing a partner and I wish I had an outlet for that. And she was great. She said, ‘We are always expanding, we just started a new group for just men, and we would love to eventually have a group for spouses.’ So, that’s how that seed was planted,” she explains.

After a couple months of meetings, Parenteau expressed to Houston-Bean that she would like to be more involved in the organization. Houston-Bean had always wanted to offer a spouse/partner support group but had yet to find the right person to help her facilitate it. That is, until Parenteau came along. “I wanted to give, and I wanted to help others,” she explains. This sentiment was met with encouragement and support from Houston-Bean and the two began collaborating on how the idea could work. “She had a lot of faith in me, which was great,” Parenteau explains. “So, I went through the group facilitator training program provided by SADOD.”

Once her training was complete, Parenteau had to take a leap of faith to realize her vision. “I never knew if I was ready, [so] I had to just start, even though I had a lot of reservations at first,” she explains. “What if I don’t know how to answer something? What if I’m not a good facilitator? There were so many doubts that I had, but I [couldn’t] answer all of those until I actually started doing something. I didn’t know how it would go,” she says.

## *Hands-On Education*

As it turns out, taking action was the keystone to Parenteau’s success. “As I held each meeting, I was learning,” she attests. “I had no idea what to expect from my first meeting, I was so nervous,” she laughs.

For Parenteau, the experience also brought into sharp focus the difference between attending a meeting and running one. “It’s so different being a participant versus being a facilitator,” she explains. “You have a completely different role. Yes, I’m involved but there are differences. It’s still very fresh. So far, I’ve had [hosted] six meetings.”

As she continues her journey into this uncharted niche of peer grief support, Parenteau explains how thankful she is for the support she receives from community allies. Every other Saturday, SADOD offers additional support in a meeting attended by Franklin Cook and Glen and Tanya Lord as well as by Houston-Bean. Parenteau explains, “[We] are able to talk about what is going on in [our] group, anything else [we] want to discuss, and we also spend time learning about facilitating. It’s almost like more training for us,” she says. “It also provides a space where the peer facilitators are able to get things off their chest because, as a facilitator, you don’t want to take up everybody else’s time talking about your grief unless it comes organically. I’m able to get a lot of encouragement and listen to other facilitators who have been doing it longer.”

## *Carving Out a Niche*

In pursuing her vision, Parenteau is able to create a space where grieving people are able to accurately discuss the subtleties of losing a life partner to SUD. “There are differences to losing a significant other versus a child or a mother,” she says. “We are able to talk about that in our group and relate to each other. “The relationship with a partner is symbiotic; you grow together and rely on each other for so many things throughout the day. The loss is complex, and oftentimes it can feel like half of you is missing. There’s an absence in your life that is unlike other losses.”

Issues such as sleeping alone, cooking and eating alone, dating again, loving again and even little things like who is going to take out the trash could be discussed among people in unique yet relatable situations. “Something that is great about our group is that people don’t feel alone anymore,” she says. “Everyone who joins my group is like, ‘It’s so great that I have this space where people know what I’m going through.’”

## *Take Time for Yourself*

As she helps her bereaved peers work through their grief, Parenteau realizes the importance of self-care. “Something I learned after my husband died is to always make time for myself and my grief. I always try to make it a priority to take care of myself because no one else is going to,” she says. “When I started doing the meetings as a group facilitator, I was afraid I was going to lose an outlet. But what I found was that when I do these meetings, it is mutually beneficial. Hearing these other women and men talk about their experiences and being able to relate to them is comforting. I didn’t get that before and now I don’t feel as alone.

“Not only am I helping other people, but I feel I have a purpose in this world,” Parenteau continues. “Four years ago, I was searching for this group, and I didn’t have it, but now people are searching for this group, and it is available, and I am able to provide a resource. It feels good to help others and to know I can make a difference, even in the smallest of ways,” she says.

“In our group,” Parenteau continues, “We openly talk about our challenges and fears, but we take time to remember our loved ones too. At the end of each meeting, I like to give an opportunity for people to share about their person; how they met, what they loved about them, describe their personalities, their favorite memory, a funny story...we often laugh and cry as we remember together. We’re able to get to know each other more and reflect on the beautiful and positive things that their loved one brought into their world. It allows us to shift focus from pain back to love, and I think that’s special.”

Kar-Kate Parenteau’s spouse peer support group is offered through The Sun Will Rise Foundation. Meetings are held virtually via Zoom every second and fourth Tuesday of the month. All grieving the loss of a spouse or significant other to substance use are welcome. SADOD celebrates the work of Parenteau and others like her on their Peer Grief Helper Profiles page.