

Aileen Lovejoy

By Kerry J. Bickford, Newsletter Editor

To say that it was a leap of faith for Aileen Lovejoy to become a peer grief support group facilitator would be an understatement. Following the death of her only son in 2013, Aileen first attended a group at the church where Francis had attended nursery school. She soon realized that this group was not meeting her needs, and she eventually left.

At about the same time she met another mother (Deb Dowd-Foley, whom you will meet in a future issue) who had also lost a son to overdose, and, together they decided they would start their own specialized peer grief support group. Coincidentally, this was the same church where Francis had received First Communion and Confirmation – Our Lady of Angels in Worcester. Their first H.A.L.O. (Help After Loss by Overdose) group meeting was held in December 2015 and continues to meet at this same location.

Aileen, like so many peer grief support facilitators, is inspired to help others and witness their stories in an effort “to honor Francis’s memory.” In her words, “my mission is to get involved and advocate” for others who have been affected by a death by overdose.

She has told her story many times in public, although, laughs Aileen, it is generally the “Reader’s Digest version.” We know only too well what she means, as anyone who has lived through losing a beloved one to an overdose has experienced unspeakable times which are often difficult to remember, never mind repeat.

Yet, her experience continues to motivate Aileen to help survivors — many of whom are haunted by guilt and shame — by providing a safe and caring space with others who can relate to the emotional distress of grief. Like many other peer support groups, in H.A.L.O. loved ones are invited to celebrate the joyful memories as well as to mourn their losses. In doing so we affirm their humanity and honor their memory.

As hard as it is to lose our loved ones, there are often gifts within the tragedy. In Aileen’s case, one of these gifts came in the form of a beautiful granddaughter, Francis’s daughter, two years before his death. Aileen feels especially blessed by this for several reasons, including that Francis was her only child, and he was told he would never have children.

Her granddaughter, now 9, is “the spitting image” of Francis, which along with her name, Faith, are the most precious blessings. .

In a world filled with so much uncertainty and pain, we have great faith in people like Aileen, who will continue to reach into the darkness to draw others toward the light.