

How can you capture in a document, in words, the impact of the loss of a loved one on your life? How can you possibly encapsulate into words and sentences the impact that death will have on your life for years to come? How do you render the small and large nuances, the everyday and the momentous impact? How?

I had the honor of knowing Donna Kennie for only four and a half short years. I met her when I started dating her 35-year-old son and we quickly and instantly became two peas in a pod. From nearly day one, I felt like she was my second Mom; our connection so profound. I affectionally nicknamed her Mamma K. She took me into her family as if I had always been there. She embraced me, welcomed me, and celebrated me as part of her family. I never had that before. I had never bonded with a family in such a way that they became as ingrained and close to me as my own. It was a gift straight from the heavens that warmed me and healed me. I felt whole in this family, I felt a part of things, and I felt like I was one of them. For me, Mamma K was more than just Scott's Mom or my mother-in-law; she was my Mom.

And she had that affect on all who knew her. That was her spirit and nature. Ask anyone who knew her, she was contagious, authentic, warm, generous, open, and just a ball of laughter and light. She was spirited and loved life and living. From her friends and coworkers at the hospital, we were told again and again how she would light up the life of the patients; cancer patients in the most dire and heartbreaking situations. She would cook for them, she would joke with them, and she would lift up their spirits and warm their hearts; just like she did within her own circle of family and friends. She was a treasure to anyone who knew her.

The impact of her death on me has been an intense emotional trauma that I am still sorting through and likely will for years to come. I remember the day it happened like it was just yesterday. I will never forget Scott's voice that day, high strung and tense unlike I had ever heard before. I will never forget the look in his face, white, sheer devastation and pure trauma.

"Mom and Jordan were in a car accident...Mom's dead!"

I nearly fainted. I nearly passed out. We collapse into each other's arms and screamed, completely unaware of the other campers around us. I remember the pain searing through my gut and flooding through my body. Having lost my father in a car accident when I was 16, it was also traumatic in the sense that I felt like I was reliving the experience of his death and the shock of it all over again. I remember screaming out "noooo...not again...not again..." as Scott held me in his arms crying with me. That day changed our lives forever. We will never be the same.

With only a week off from work, I returned a zombie. I cried all the time and everywhere; going up the elevator; walking the halls; sitting at my desk; in meetings; in the bathroom; at the printer; everywhere. A communications officer for the federal government, I had an extremely busy and demanding summer and fall workload with major priority files involving multiple levels of senior management. These tasks required my absolutely best efforts and I simply didn't have it to give. For six to eight months, I made unacceptable mistakes, forgot pertinent details, was unable to concentrate, was unable to do my job adequately, and wasn't able to give my employer what they required of me. I had to admit fault at committee meetings when mistakes I had made were pointed out. People were frustrated and fed up with me. For me, I didn't understand how these people could expect me to just continue on like nothing had happened when my families' life had been ripped apart. Yet, I was expected to perform at my top level. I felt overwhelmed, lost, and defeated. I was in a fog, unable to concentrate or to function at my normal level of productivity and quality. I feel like that my poor performance during that time has had a negative impact on how management views me for promotions.

I know she wasn't my birth mother and I had only known her for a short time but I grieved for her (and am still grieving for her) so deeply and felt such an emotional trauma and devastation from her loss that it still strikes me with overwhelming emotions at any time. It has quite literally broken my heart.

It took me nearly 15 years and hundreds of hours of therapy to get over the death of my father; before I could open up, trust, and love. For years I lived with a debilitating and paralyzing fear of abandonment convinced everyone I loved was going to die in a car accident. And for me, the death of Mamma K was like reliving a nightmare everyone assured me would never, ever happen again. When she was killed in a car accident just like my Dad, I felt like all the work, all the effort to heal, was torn away, ripped from beneath my feet, and I was left back where I started, a shivering 16-year-old girl, the terror starting all over again.

Since her death, I am more terrified than ever to be in a vehicle. I am literally white knuckled anytime I am in a vehicle. I am convinced I am going die in an accident. I am convinced that everyone I love is going to be stolen from me in a car wreck. I am convinced that it's some sort of curse following me. Her death has left me raw, broken, and beaten down. I have lost my faith and trust in life. I am terrified to let go, to love, and to open up. My fear of abandonment chokes me off from experiencing the true joy of my life. I am now guarded and uneasy in life.

To watch my husband go through the death of a parent in a car wreck by an impaired driver has been one of the deepest devastation I've ever felt. This is not something I ever wanted us to have in common. It kills me, breaks my heart, and leaves me gasping for breath. When I look at the picture of him crouching at the wreckage of her car, staring at the spot where she would have died, I feel a sense of all encompassing pain. It BREAKS my heart to watch the man I love MOST in this world go through this; knowing "this" was 100% preventable.

It breaks my heart that Jordan, my step-son, has been forever changed by this experience much like I was by a similar loss at his age. He has lost that glorious innocence and sense of immortality that teenagers are supposed to have. His fun-filled teenager years have been stolen from him as he's been forced to deal with a physical and emotional trauma no one, let alone a 16-year-old boy, should ever have to deal with; one that will remain with him for years to come wreaking havoc throughout his life in ways none of us can even begin to imagine. He has been forced to see and deal with sights and gruesome images of his grandmother; sights that most people only see in the movies; sights he will beg God to forget. How does someone every really recover from that? I am at a loss. I am speechless.

It has been crushing to watch my husband, his two sisters and two aunts, and all the grandchildren suffer through the grief, loss, and anger while also dealing with the grueling tasks of handling Mamma K's estate, cleaning out her apartment, counselling, and worse yet; undertaking the countless hours and emotional turmoil of the court case, something that has seemed never-ending and completely unfair. The financial and emotional toll Mamma K's death has taken on this family will never be compensated.

I have watched Scott for the last 20 months reach for the phone to call his mother a thousand times only to feel his devastation as he realizes she's gone, again. I have watched him "want" for her presence at all our life-changing events.

- **Our wedding:** She had been saving her pennies to take a trip to the Dominican Republic with us to attend our wedding and instead was there represented by a photo in a frame and a small urn of her ashes. I walked down the aisle and looked for her but she wasn't there. Instead of a photo of Scott, myself, and Mamma K, we have a picture of Scott and myself holding a cold photo frame. I missed her laughter, her smile, her warm hug, her pride and her love. Our day was tarnished. Our day was lacking something that no flower, no dress, no other person, and no money could replace or make up for.

- **Our new home:** When we bought our new home and celebrated our first Christmas in it, we missed her presence and her joy. Where was Mamma K with her warm hugs? The joy of the occasion diminished and empty.

These are just two major events among the hundred little ones in the last 20 months where we've yearned for her; where we pleaded with God for just one more day. And there will be a million more in the years to come. Now the pureness of joy is gone; all major and minor events and celebrations will be tarnished. Now when there is joy and pleasure, it is always coupled equally with pain and longing; always something missing; always something not quite right; and always something lacking. Weddings, graduations, births, grandchildren, great grandchildren, retirements, traveling, falling in love, falling out of love...all things she will never be a part of...and all things we will miss having her with us for! The impact on each and every one of our lives is beyond imagination and it is never-ending. **We will suffer and pay for this crime for the rest of our lives!**

The loss of Mamma K has absolutely encroached on every single aspect of our life, it has devastated us, emotionally crippled us, and it has left us reeling for the last two years as we have tried to put our lives back together. But her death will reverberate through our lives forever. It will always be there. It will always haunt us.

- "It would have been her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday this year...my god how we would have celebrated! Maybe dinner out, maybe a show...it would have been fun!!!"
- "She would have retired this year...she could have done all that traveling she was planning on doing, she would have seen the world, she would have spent more time with her family, children, grandchildren, and her friends...my God I wish she was here..."
- "Can you believe it? She would have been 70 this year....I wonder if she would have been ready to move into that granny suite we were going to build for her. It would have been so amazing to have her with us every single day..."
- "Another Christmas without Mamma K, it just doesn't seem right."
- "It's the 20 year anniversary of her death...the things she's missed...the things we've missed with her..."

And the most devastating impact is yet to come. From my experience with my Dad's death, as time goes on, the unthinkable loss goes to yet an even deeper level of turmoil when you start to forget...a little bit of a time...one fading memory at a time. The loss no one warns you about or talks about. Honestly though, you couldn't even prepare yourself if they did. The anguish and pain to come when the memories of Mamma K become less vibrant; when they aren't as crisp or real anymore; when the sound of her voice, the tone and pronunciation, fades away and you can't hear it quite as well; the sound of her laughter, gone; and the twinkle in her eye loses its sparkle within your mind's eye. You know the stories and memories but for whatever reason you quite picture them anymore, you can't sense her, you can't picture her and you start to lose her all over again. The memories you had of her are ripped away from you in a slow and painful loss, one memory at a time, bit by bit by the passage of time and the permanence of her death tears through your soul all over again.

The death of Donna Kennie will reverberate through our lives forever. It will always be there. It will always haunt us. We haven't even begun to experience the full "impact" of her death – it's unimaginable and it's tragic and worse than that, it was senseless and preventable.

Grief – it's a five letter word that can't even come close to describing the emotional turmoil I've gone through, let alone what this family has had to go through. I am simply not the same person I was before her death...and I never will be.