

Joy of Christmas hard to muster up for some

Holidays can amplify grief triggered by lost loved ones

BY KELLIE HUDSON
SPECIAL TO
THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

The signs are everywhere, aren't they?

Santa at the mall. Colourful lights hanging from your neighbour's house. Bing Crosby crooning on the radio. The holiday season is here and for many of us, it is a time to rejoice — if not for spiritual reasons, for the parties, the gifts, the family-time, the three or four days off work.

Debra Johnsen understands all of this and normally, the 53-year-old Thunder Bay woman would be looking forward to Christmas.

But not this year.

Johnsen's mom died of cancer a year ago, Dec. 24, surrounded by loving family. A family still reeling from the loss.

"So many things changed so quickly. It's only now, a year later, that we are able to truly feel all of those emotions," Johnsen says quietly.

"We are just realizing how important she was to us."

Especially now, as Christmas approaches.

Her mom, Jean Brillinger — who loved life, loved to laugh and played a mean game of Yahtzee — absolutely loved going to church, attending the annual Prelude to Christmas concert and cooking the turkey.

"Mom was the turkey-maker, no matter whose house we were at," Johnsen recalls. "Mom was very active at the Oliver Road Community Centre and literally cooked



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Debra Johnsen stands in front of a Christmas tree at Hospice Northwest, holding the angel ornament she bought in memory of her mother, Jean Brillinger, who died last year on Dec. 24. Still grappling with the loss and dreading the Christmas season, Johnsen says the delicate glass-blown ornament is a way to honour her mom and the legacy she left behind.

thousands of turkeys in her lifetime. Her gravy was perfect!"

Because her mom died Christmas Eve, Johnsen says there were no celebrations last year. No tree. No lights. No Christmas dinner. Just take-out. Chinese food she thinks, but she can't quite remember. It's all a blur.

This year, she still doesn't know how to prepare or celebrate.

"I kind of want to ignore it. I don't want it to come," she says. "I have a feeling Christmas will be different from here on. There will always be a void."

Johnsen is not alone in her attitude towards Christmas. So why is this time of year so difficult for people who have lost loved ones? High expectations, says Kathleen Buso of Hospice Northwest, a non-profit charity that provides compassionate support to individuals and their caregivers as they face the challenges of living with a life-limiting illness.

"Christmas is a time for love and sharing with family," Buso explains. "It's a time when family comes together to focus on traditional ways that have often been passed down for generations."

When the family becomes incomplete due to a death, those traditions can trigger a new intensity of grief for the ones left behind.

"It's supposed to be one of the most special and happiest times of the year, and yet it can be one of the saddest times of the year if you've lost someone you love," Buso says.

She offers some advice for Johnsen, and others like her dread-

"Grief is the transition from loving in presence to loving in absence."

Kathleen Buso
Hospice Northwest

ing this time of year. Don't expect too much of yourself. Surround yourself with people who understand your pain and aren't afraid of your emotions. Eliminate as much stress as you can from your holiday preparations, and, because it is such an emotionally and physically draining time, get enough rest. Recognize that you might feel guilt, anxiety and depression, all of which are normal.

"And remember to cherish the memories of your loved one," Buso adds. "Grief is the transition from loving in presence to loving in absence."

To assist in that transition, Hospice Northwest is introducing something new this year, in addition to its grief and bereavement counselling and support services.

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

This keepsake, called a Wings of Remembrance ornament, acts as a memorial to help people deal with grief during the holiday season. They can be personalized in the memory of a loved one.

B2 ENTERTAINMENT

Tuesday, December 1, 2009

THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

Keepsakes help keep people's memory alive

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They are called Wings of Remembrance ornaments — delicate, hand-blown glass memorial keepsakes. At \$25 each, they come in three styles: an angel, butterfly or dove and can be personalized in memory of a loved one. All proceeds go to providing hospice palliative care, volunteer visiting and grief and bereavement support services throughout the District of Thunder Bay.

"The Wings of Remembrance ornaments are a tangible way for people to include the memory of their loved ones in their Christmas celebrations," Buso says.

"They can symbolize the spiritual presence of the person who has died, and perhaps provide a focus for sharing memories with family and friends."

Barb Philip has already ordered four angels for

her family, in memory of her mother Dorothy Morrison, who died in June. Of Scottish heritage, Philip says traditions are important to her family — decorating the tree on Christmas Eve after a dinner of sausage rolls, big family sleepovers and taddy scones for Boxing Day brunch.

"I know this Christmas will be difficult, but we will go on with our traditions because that's what my mom would want us to do," Philip says, her voice breaking.

She envisions gently taking the angel out of its satin case and hanging it on the tree. She wants it to be the last decoration to go up.

"Then we'll take the time to talk about mom, to remember her. It will start a new tradition in her honour. She'd like that," Philip says.

"We will hang our angel, sing our songs and raise a glass in her memory and know that she is with us still."

Johnsen still doesn't know what her Christmas will look like this year, or whether there will even be a tree to hang anything on.

But she's ordered an ornament in memory of her mother too. She can't say it will become a new tradition, but somehow, it just feels right.

"As we get closer, I see that we must find ways to celebrate — to make Christmas a time of joy and reflection again," Johnsen says. "This ornament will be just one way to help honour mom and the legacy she has left behind."

For more information on the Wings of Remembrance Ornaments, call Hospice Northwest at 626-5570. The public is also invited to attend a Service of Light Memorial at 7 p.m. on Dec. 10 at St. Paul's Anglican Church, 898 Ridgeway Street East, where the ornaments will be on display and available for purchase.

Kellie Hudson is a Thunder Bay-based communications consultant.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

One of three Wings of Remembrance ornaments available at Hospice Northwest, to help people keep the memories of their loved ones alive during the holiday season.

MOVIE GUIDE

Movie Directory Key:
RWCBC (Rate Watchers Copying) ★ (Parental Advisory) RWCBC (Rate Watchers Copying) ★ (Parental Advisory) RWCBC (Rate Watchers Copying) ★ (Parental Advisory)
DVS (Distributive Video Circulation) (Since Times Table 11/20/09 Only)

SilverCity Thunder Bay 850 May Street
(807)628-8445

OLD DOGS (PG) ★ 7:00 9:20

NINJA ASSASSIN (R) ★ RWCBC 7:40 10:15

FANTASTIC MR. FOX (PG) ★ 7:15 9:45

PLANET 51 (PG) 7:20 9:30

THE TWILIGHT SAGA: NEW MOON (PG-13) ★ 6:40 7:10 8:00 9:40 10:20

THE BLIND SIDE (PG-13) 6:50 9:50

2012 (PG-13) 6:30 7:50 10:00

DISNEY'S A CHRISTMAS CAROL 3D (PG) 7:30 10:05