

## FIRSTS

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Newly bereaved parents have so many firsts with which we have to cope.

I remember having to attend my first teachers' meeting in August after Rhonda died in July. I felt I was wearing a sign that read, "Yes, my daughter died just four weeks ago." It seemed surreal to be attending a normal meeting when my world was NOT normal. It was SO difficult to hold myself together.

That first day back in the classroom was so VERY painful. I was teaching fourth grade at the time and fortunately had a great friend and teacher next door who had endured the death of her young son many years previously. She took my class for a few minutes that first morning and explained to them what had happened to Rhonda during the summer and how difficult it would be for me. She told them there would be times I might have to leave the room for a few minutes and she and other teachers would "cover for me" until I was composed and could return to the classroom. She explained how it was normal and good for me to cry and they SHOULD talk about Rhonda and ask questions as that would be better than to avoid the conversation. This was such a wonderful gesture that I will always appreciate.

The anticipation of Rhonda's 16th birthday, the first after her death, in September was worse than the actual day. A good friend, Jason, brought us flowers on what would have been her special birthday. We will forever be grateful to him for such a thoughtful gesture and wonderful visit full of memories.

The first time we had to go grocery shopping was so painful as I just meandered towards the pasta aisle and her favorite vegetables. Why should I be eating when Rhonda will never enjoy her favorite foods again? Guilt for living when my only child had died overwhelmed me and I had to leave without purchasing the items I needed.

I remember the first time we felt we had to have our pictures taken together for our church directory without Rhonda. That was so INTENSELY painful. This was prior to the digital or computer age where people are inserting their child's photo into the picture or wearing photo buttons and necklaces that are popular today.

That first Christmas holiday and several years later we just could not bring ourselves to celebrate with Rodney's family or mine as their families were intact and joyful and ours would NEVER be the same again. We fled to Florida to spend time with my aunt and uncle and bask in the sunshine, away from all the winter celebrations in the north.

I remember not being able to attend a bridal or baby shower, baptism or wedding for several years. I could only focus on the fact that Rhonda would never get married nor have children. I sent gifts with notes inside explaining that I was happy for their joyful event but I did not want to ruin their happiness with my sadness and crying. It was just

too difficult to separate someone else's joy when our lives were so full of sadness and things we would never have the opportunity to celebrate again.

The memories of those first couple years of marking time by the number of hours, days, weeks and months it had been since Rhonda's death We no longer do that but we DO still mark time by what happened before she died and what happened after she died. I think we will do this as long as we live on this earth.

Those first vacations were anticipated, after Rhonda's death, with a different sense of expectation. I KNEW I would never see Rhonda again nor would I have that same relationship we treasured on earth but I dared to hope that I would "find her or that wonderful love we shared." REALISTICALLY I knew this would not happen but *subconsciously* we cannot always control our thoughts, wishes and feelings. We would return home with depression as the joy, finding what we longed for the most (Rhonda) was not there. That eventually subsided after a few years so know you are not going crazy if you've had this experience.

There are many firsts but years later we ARE able to do most everything without great pain that we could not do at first. There are still times when there is a loneliness when we observe families intact but for the most part, we have found a new joy and take Rhonda's love and memories with us daily. We have learned that when people speak of their children and grandchildren that we either ESCAPE after too much of their conversation, tactfully change the subject or talk about Rhonda and the things we have done and are doing in her memory. I sometimes have told people I will listen to them talk about their children IF they are willing to listen to some of our 'old' stories and how we are commemorating her life now. We often remind parents to enjoy the time they have with their families as not everyone is so fortunate.