

Young widows

2 women tell their stories

By Julie Brown
staff writer

Penny Klein was 12 when she met her future husband, Bruce. Neither ever dated others. "I'd been with him 18 years and 3 months when he died. We were just so close. We could just anticipate each other's moves."

Like any couple, they had their share of problems. But they were always able to work those problems out and were never separated during their marriage, which lasted 12 years, 3 months and 13 days.

"Bruce and I had spent a lot of time together. We had a lot of friends; we kept very active."

WHEN ELAINE Ray-Connell, 37, tells senior citizens she's a widow, they're generally surprised. Ray-Connell, a registered nurse, is seniors health education coordinator for the Catherine McAuley Health Center in Ann Arbor. She also recently received a new assignment to work on women's health education. As part of her work, Ray-Connell presents programs on widowhood and grieving.

Ray-Connell doesn't know many other people in her age group who are widowed.

"So we're in an odd category," she found little material on the subject of young widows and widowers in doing the research for her presentations.

YOUNG WIDOWS and widowers face different issues and problems than older people do, Ray-Connell said.

An older widow, for example, may have a grown son around to help her with her business affairs. A young widow, on the other hand, may have a small son to raise.

If Ray-Connell's husband had died when she was 70, she wouldn't have to worry about getting her son through college. She wouldn't, at that age, have to think about rebuilding a whole new life.

Early widowhood interrupts a marriage at a different point in the life cycle, she said. Ray-Connell thinks about such issues as whether she will remain and what effect marrying or not marrying will have on her son; an older widow wouldn't have those concerns.

Klein, a Plymouth Township resident, has been a widow for more than four years. Her husband died on Father's Day, June 19, 1983.

"It was very sudden and very unexpected," Klein, now 34, said of her husband's death from cardiac arrest shortly after his 33rd birthday.

When her husband died, Klein was rubbing his back, trying to help him relax.

"And we were praying, praying together that he'd get better."

Ray-Connell, an Ann Arbor resident, has a 4-year-old son. It's been about two years since her husband died. He had a brain tumor and was sick for about a year before he died.

That illness meant Ray-Connell had time to think about her loss; having that time can be both good and bad, she said.

She watched her husband's condition deteriorate. "There's some feeling of relief when a spouse's suffering has ended, an illness also gives a spouse time to prepare for that loss and to grieve."

KLEIN AND her husband had two sons, who are



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— Penny Klein

now 12 and 14. She works at Medical Staff Resources in Plymouth Township.

"I guess the main thing I miss is the companionship. Even if you don't talk, just to have someone in the room who cares about you."

When Klein takes her sons to such places as Cedar Point, she sees older couples together. It makes her sad to realize she won't have that opportunity.

The loss of many of her friends after Bruce's death was difficult for Klein.

"Nobody plays matchmaker. As a matter of fact, you lose all of your married friends. I lost all of Bruce's and my married friends."

Ray-Connell didn't face the problem of people playing premature matchmaker after her husband's death.

"That probably does happen, but I can't say it happened to me." Some people may assume a young widow or widower wants to date immediately or to remarry; people are different, however, and that's often not the case.

Klein still gets together with some of her female friends who are married; she's not often included in events planned for couples.

"That is a very painful thing, especially when you've been friends with people for 25 or 30 years. That's true with family also." Klein's heard the same thing from other people she knows who are widowed or divorced.

Ray-Connell lost touch with a number of her married friends after her husband died. There's probably only one couple left now that she still sees, and she doesn't see them as often.

"You end up really losing your whole network, almost. I know that happens for divorced couples too."

KLEIN'S NOW keeping busy with her job. Her work includes being the marketing director for Medical Staff Resources; she also does hiring and testing for nurses and aides.

Klein's also planning a move out of the Plymouth Township home her family has lived in for a number of years. She'll stay in the general area.

"Finally, I couldn't take it any more," Klein said of her decision to move. She'd changed everything in the house, including adding on a room so she wouldn't have to sleep in the room where Bruce died.

"That didn't help."

At the time of her husband's death, Klein was working full time. Just a few days before her husband died, Klein had a sitter.

"I hired a sitter because we expected Bruce to go

back to work by the end of that week that he died." As he got sicker, the sitter also ended up taking care of Bruce.

RAY-CONNELL'S 4-year-old son still talks about his dad.

"He talks about it still; he asks questions." In some ways, his dad's death may have been easier for him at age 2 than it would have been at 6, 8 or 10, Ray-Connell said.

Young widows and widowers end up with children asking questions about such subjects as where we all go after death. Answering questions about such awesome concepts isn't an easy task.

"My oldest son would wake up in the middle of the night," said Klein. He'd asked her what would happen if she too were to die.

Klein told her sons it wasn't likely that she too would die. The boys also wondered why it had to be their father who died rather than someone else.

"And they were very, very close to their father," Klein and her sons have remained close to Bruce's parents. She and the boys don't celebrate Mother's Day or Father's Day. Instead, they may go out to dinner and to a show or out for a ride.

"We go out to the cemetery a lot."

NOW THAT it's been a little more than four years, Klein's adjusting to her new life.

"I'm finally getting back to a more normal state of mind." She still deals with feelings of depression, loneliness, fear, pain and worry.

Klein avoids bars and singles-type events. A church she attends occasionally in Ann Arbor is considering organizing a singles group; she also belongs to a ski club that includes some singles.

Klein goes to individual and group therapy sessions. She also reads her Bible and books by inspirational writers.

Photos of her children that Klein keeps around remind her of just what it is she's got to live for.

"I am more than thankful to have my two sons. The main thing I live for is, 'God let me live to see my children raised and married.'"

"They have a lot of their dad's traits," she added. "They remind me a lot of their father."

OTHER RELATIONSHIPS, whether they're with friends, children, grandchildren or a new mate, can also contribute to happiness.

There's a phrase Ray-Connell is particularly fond of: "One is a whole number." It's not a fraction; widows and widowers shouldn't feel they're incomplete people.

"Don't give up" is what she'd tell other widows and widowers. "Life is to be lived by us as we are here now. This is the only chance we have to create and interact and be alive."

"Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died," Klein said. Friends and family members should realize the person has died and shouldn't resort to using euphemisms such as "passed away."

"He died, period. People have every phrase in the world to refer to death except for death."

Offers to baby-sit are much appreciated, she said, as are invitations to lunch or dinner.

"As hard as it may be, listen, because that really helps the person."

Organizations offer support

Following is a list of some of the organizations for widows and widowers in metropolitan Detroit area:

Family Life Offices
Archdiocese of Detroit
305 Michigan Ave.
Detroit 48226
237-5892
(Groups for divorced and separated, bereaved parents and widowed groups)

Greater Detroit Section (98)
National Council of Jewish Women
16400 W. 12 Mile
Southfield 48075
557-9504
(Single-parent program)

Henry Ford Community College
Center for New Directions — Focus on Women
5101 Evergreen
Dearborn 48128
271-2750, Ext. 330
(operates Focus on Widowhood program)

Oakland Operation Friendship
Single Parent Program — (SPACE
(Room to Grow)
111 Hendrie
Royal Oak 48067
342-6711
(Widowed to Widowed program)

Schoolcraft College
Widowed In Service (WISER)
18600 Haggerty
Livonia 48152
591-6400, Ext. 431
(for widows and widowers)

Bethany Plymouth/Canton
St. Kenneth Catholic Church
Haggerty south of Five Mile
Plymouth 48170
981-1365 or 422-8625
(support group for divorced, widowed and separated)

New Start
Single Point Ministries
Ward Presbyterian Church
Six Mile at Farmington Road
Livonia
422-1254
(for widows and widowers all ages, all denominations)

Parents Without Partners —
Birmingham-Bloomfield
32312 W. Wayburn
Farmington Hills
553-5599

Parents Without Partners —
Garden City-Dearborn Heights
291-5221, 388-2645 or 291-9640

Parents Without Partners —
Livonia-Redford
427-3316

Parents Without Partners —
Novi-Northville
236 Bernstadt
Novi 48150
624-5540

Parents Without Partners —
Redford
1081 5th
Wyandotte
284-5200

Parents Without Partners —
Plymouth-Canton
455-2554

Parents Without Partners —
Wayne-Westland
453-2419

MOT starts biggest year ever

By Shirlee Rose Iden
staff writer

If you thought you saw a phantom at the opera last weekend, don't fret. That was probably the ghost of Giuseppe Verdi celebrating his birthday and the opening of "Falstaff" at the Michigan Opera Theatre.

Verdi, whose birthday falls Oct. 10, and MOT have a lot to celebrate as the opera theater launches its biggest season ever, says John P. Finck of the MOT press office.

"We'd like to think that not only Verdi was looking over the production, but maybe Christopher Columbus looked down on us on the eve of the anniversary of his important discovery."

Finck said MOT already has plans to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America in 1492. "There are operas of discovery that we can decide about staging for the occasion."

Right now, his hands are full coordinating the 1987-88 season.

"WE'RE REALLY taking off," said Finck.

"Falstaff," a comic opera, is based on Shakespeare's "The Merry Wives of Windsor" and features Ronald Hedlund, Lawrence Cooper, Marianna Christos with conductor Mark Filist and director Lou Gal-tiero. Performances continue Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at the Fisher Theatre.

Next stop on the MOT schedule is 16th century Spain as imagined by Miguel de Cervantes. Music lovers will journey back in time with every-

The Michigan Opera Theatre is planning up to 61 main-stage performances of six full-scale productions of grand opera, operetta and musical theater for its 17th anniversary season.

man's hero Don Quixote in his "Man of La Mancha" quest to "Dream the Impossible Dream."

Richard Fredricks, baritone star of the Metropolitan Opera, will sing Don Quixote, said Finck. "He's performed all over the U.S. and Europe, in both opera and musical theater, and he's been on the 'Tonight Show' and 'Merv Griffin.'"

Chris Cullen, Broadway and TV actress, will debut as Aldonza/Dulcinea. The production will be directed and choreographed by Broadway veteran Ted Forlow in a four-week run from Oct. 23 to Nov. 14.

Imported from Toronto, the Broadway operetta classic "Kismet" will run for three weeks from Nov. 20 to Dec. 6. Beverly Lambert of the NYC Opera and Broadway will sing nostalgic favorites including "Baubles, Bangles, and Beads."

"My Beloved" and "Stranger in Paradise."

AN ARABIAN fantasy, the musi-

cal will be directed and choreographed by Ted Pappas with Broadway actor David Chaney as Hoffa, the Poet.

For next spring, MOT's agenda is for grand opera to be sung at the Masonic Temple beginning with three performances of "Il Trovatore" April 30 to May 7. Leona Mitchell of the Met will sing the role of Leonora while acclaimed Italian tenor Giuseppe Giacomini will do Manrico.

Celebrated American baritone James Dietrich will sing Count di Luna while Livia Budai, Hungarian-born mezzo-soprano, will play the greedy, Azucena. Budai has been applauded in the world's leading opera houses including the Budapest State Opera, the San Francisco Opera, the Covent Garden. She makes her Met debut this season as Azucena with Dame Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti.

"Die Fledermaus" one of the world's most beloved operas, by

Johann Strauss, is not completely cast as yet, but will feature Andre Jobin, Evelyn De La Rosa and Marilyn Mims in performances May 14-21.

The closing opera of spring will be Giacomo Puccini's romantic drama "La Boheme" to be sung in Italian with English subtitles. Three performances are scheduled for Saturday, May 23, Wednesday, June 1 and Saturday, June 4.

Houston Grand Opera music director John DeMaio and Roman Terleckyj will be part of the creative team, and Russian tenor Vyacheslav Al. Polonsky, a veteran of the Bolshoi who recently made his debut with the Met, will be part of the "La Boheme" cast.

IT ALL ADDS up to 61 main-stage performances of six full-scale productions of grand opera, operetta, and musical theater, many hours of musical pleasure for area audiences, and a gala 17th anniversary season.

And the finale: a glittering benefit concert featuring opera luminary Luciano Pavarotti with full symphony orchestra at Joe Louis Arena on June 12, sponsored by the Ford Motor Co., representing the largest such grant ever made to the Michigan Opera Theatre.

Ranking within the top 10 major opera companies in the country, MOT, founded by Dr. David Dichiara, has been hailed for its innovative presentations and touring performances.

Surmounting earlier struggles, today MOT boasts a deficit-free operating budget for the past five years.



Dr. David Dichiara is the general director and founder of the Michigan Opera Theatre.