

Marilyn Koenig: Mother and Survivor
By David Davis

All Marilyn Koenig wanted to be was a mom. And, for most of her adult life, she got to live out her dream. Born and raised in North Dakota, Koenig was married at 18. She and husband then moved west to California to start a family. They landed in Los Angeles before moving north to Sacramento, the capital of the state.

The kids came early and often. And, as the mother of four girls and three boys, Koenig reveled in the duties of motherhood: making lunches, arranging for sleepovers, shopping for school clothes, going to the doctor for check-ups, and keeping everyone in line.

“I was never career oriented,” she says. “I just wanted to be a mom.”

But that chapter of her life was abruptly shattered on the night of April 4, 1977, when her second child (and oldest son) Steven completed suicide by shooting himself. A senior in high school, he was just 18 years old.

According to Marilyn, Steven’s suicide was a shock to the entire family. He was, she says, “kind of a nerd,” someone who loved to bowl and to tinker with an old Packard. He planned to become a criminologist, and had begun to take college courses while still in high school. He was set to attend Cal State Sacramento that fall.

“When he died, we had five teenagers in the house,” she says, “and Steve was the one I never worried about. The other kids I was wondering what they were going to do next. But Steven was a straight kid—he thought smoking cigarettes was stupid—and the kind of kid parents love because he wanted to get good grades.

“There were no danger signs,” continued Marilyn, shaking her head as we spoke in the lobby of Sheraton Colony Square Hotel during the AAS Convention in Atlanta. “Steven never said anything: he was a quiet kid who never whined. In retrospect, I think he was suffering from the beginnings of depression and didn’t recognize it—and of course we didn’t either.”

But although Steve didn’t say anything to his family, Marilyn says that he carefully planned his suicide. He signed over the pink slip to his car to a girl he’d dated; he shot himself outside the car so as not to mess up the interior. He left seven different notes.

“If Steven hadn’t left those notes, I don’t think any of us would have believed it was a suicide,” says Marilyn. “We would’ve thought he was murdered.”

Marilyn says she was “devastated” about the suicide. “I remember when the sun was rising that Monday morning [after Steven’s death] and thinking, if only he would have waited and seen the sun come up,” she says. “Maybe it would’ve made a difference. The other thought I had that morning was, Steven was so smart. I thought smart people could figure things out. It just didn’t make sense to me because I didn’t know anything about suicide. I didn’t know smart people killed themselves.”

In 1977, she recalls, few people spoke openly about suicide. “I had never encountered suicide before,” she says, “because nobody talked about it then. I thought suicide was a rare occasion when someone jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. That was my concept of suicide in the ‘70’s.”

And while few people talked about suicide, even fewer people talked about those loved ones left behind. Only a handful of survivor support groups existed. “There wasn’t anything then,” says Marilyn. “The Compassionate Friends groups didn’t exist then, or anything else. So, we cried a lot, but we also had to be there for the other six children. The youngest was just 2 ½. I was extremely grateful that I had other children because I thought how awful this would have been if I had to go home to no more children.”

Living for her surviving children, Marilyn began to pick up the pieces of her life. Indeed, Steven's death transformed a distraught mother into a committed activist. The process started a few years after Steven's death, when another Sacramento teen completed suicide. Marilyn wondered why so many youth attempted and completed suicide. Thus began her single-minded search for answers—as well as her entrée into activism.

At around that time, Marilyn spoke with survivor Charlotte Ross, a pioneer in the survivor movement who encouraged Marilyn to get involved. After being appointed to a senate advisory committee on youth suicide prevention, Marilyn and Chris Moon decided to start a support group in the Sacramento area.

"I thought it would be something like being a girl-scout leader," says Marilyn, laughing. "A community service, something small. Twelve people came to our first meeting in February 1983."

The group soon grew, as did Marilyn's commitment. She now serves as president of the non-profit, Sacramento-based Friends of Survival, which meets twice monthly. (A second chapter meets once a month in the Bay area.) "We have ongoing services for survivors," she says. "Our philosophy is: if you're going to provide services for survivors, you're going to provide services for survivors. They can pick and choose what they think is most helpful to them."

Says Marilyn: "We don't run support groups the way others are run. I'm a firm believer that ongoing services on a regular basis. For instance, I think 8-week groups should be part of a bigger program. Healing after suicide is such a long process. You can't heal in eight weeks."

With nearly 20 years of experience running survivor groups, Marilyn knows what works. "My niche is how to help someone who's grieving after suicide," she says. "You can't take away their pain. What you can offer them is possible suggestions and skills they might be able to use to help them through."

"The people who do this year-in and year-out have to be obsessive," she continues. "The Blooms, Stephanie Weber, LaRita Archibald—we're all the same. We want to help other survivors heal because we know the pain they're going through. We've felt that pain."

Thankfully, she says, newly bereaved survivors can learn from the experiences of "veteran" survivors. "I think we're more aware of survivors and have a better understanding of what they go through and how long lasting their grief is. I don't know that it was understood back in the 70s and early '80s just how traumatized they are. Also, families are more willing to call and say they are a survivor family. They're willing to get help and share what happened to them, whereas 25 years ago people would have been crying in their closets."

Running survivor groups is just one of Marilyn's jobs. She also edits a monthly newsletter that's sent to over 3,000 people nation-wide. She runs an all-day suicide conference in the fall, as well as a retreat in the spring. She raises money—as much as \$30,000 annually—to support her group's efforts. She serves on the boards of SPAN-USA and SPAN-California. She speaks to schools, legislators and mental health professionals—anyone who'll listen—about the societal problem of depression and suicide.

"There's so much to do," she says. "For instance, I think we need a comprehensive suicide-awareness component in our medical schools."

For her dedicated, years-long effort on behalf of survivors, Marilyn was named the AAS Survivor of the Year in Atlanta. "I'm delighted—it's an awesome honor," she said. "It hasn't been work because it's enriched my life. I never would have dreamed I would be doing anything like this. "Steven's suicide changed the whole direction of my life."

But one part of her life hasn't changed. Marilyn, now 63, continues to relish her role as a mom; her kids now range in age from 26 to 43. She also delights in her latest role: as grandmother to nine of her children's children.

"That's what I live for," she says, "the next generation."