



JUNE, 2020

## Finding solace in helping to handle grief

Brisbane Seniors

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## Tragedy leads Doris to bereavement education

LEARNING to grieve can be the toughest lesson of all.

When Doris Zagdanski was diagnosed with breast cancer seven years ago, someone suggested to her it was the worst thing that could ever happen.

"I just looked at them and said 'No, I've already survived the worst thing in the world – breast cancer is just a small stumbling block'," the Gold Coast grandmother recalls.

"I didn't tell them the details, just that breast cancer didn't rate for me."

That might sound surprising until Doris explains that, for her, the "worst thing in the world" was losing her daughter Claire to cot death, which is now known as sudden infant death syndrome.

More than 40 years later, the 66-year-old admits that while she might have learnt to live with the grief, she has never forgotten what it was like.

But she has found a way to handle the pain, for many years working as a grief

educator and now training funeral directors with some of Australia's best-known brands – including White Lady, George Hartnett Metropolitan and Somerville Funerals – on how to deal with people coping with the death of a loved one.

The daughter of post-World War II migrant parents who spoke only German in their Geelong home, Doris was so determined not to be "the wog kid" that she devoted herself to learning English and became an over-achieving, straight-A student.

Not content with simply being bilingual, she studied Japanese in high school and then Japanese and German at university, ultimately becoming a Japanese teacher at her alma mater – Oberon High School at Belmont.

"Mum is German and Dad was Ukrainian – she was 20 and he was about 27," Doris recalls. "They were lucky to come to a country that was very good to them and gave our family so many

opportunities."

Doris's father passed away about 10 years ago but her 91-year-old mother still lives in a nursing home in Geelong and continues to speak to Doris and her siblings in German, while they respond in English.

Determined to make something of herself, the young Doris became an overachiever.

"If I didn't get an A – 95 per cent or 100 per cent – I considered I didn't do well," she says.

But as is so often the case, the attitude that set Doris up to soar when she achieved also set her up to crash badly when she felt she failed. For her and her husband, Peter, that crash came on June 17, 1980.

Her life was changed forever that night after she discovered Claire's lifeless body in her cot and then could only watch as Peter desperately performed CPR, sobbing as he begged their baby girl to start breathing again.

"It took me at least five

years to emerge from that cloud of grief. I've since learned that you don't get over that sort of grief – you learn to incorporate it into your new way of living."

Compounding Doris's pain was a feeling that she hadn't been allowed to say goodbye properly during the funeral process.

"I've always regretted that I didn't get to pick her up and hold her one last time, from the moment we found her in her cot.

"I didn't get to do it when the ambulance took her away and when I asked the funeral director if I could

hold her one last time, he said, 'No, we don't do that'."

Three years after Claire's death, Doris met a funeral director and told him how she felt, in no uncertain terms.

She pulled no punches in letting him know she thought funeral directors knew little about grief – parents' grief in particular – and didn't know anything about holding funerals that were a meaningful way of



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saying goodbye. To his credit, he invited Doris to share her views at a conference of funeral directors and two years later, in 1984, offered her a job.

Since that day she has not only worked as a funeral director, but also devoted her life to training others in the industry on how they can do their jobs with compassion, respect and empathy.

"A mentor in the funeral industry once told me that what happens in the first five days after a death can impact on that family for the next five years," Doris says.

Doris has written seven books and countless articles and columns to help people deal with grief, and since 1992 has worked for national funeral brand InvoCare, both as a funeral director, Queensland general manager, and now as a trainer based at Nerang.



**DEALING WITH DEATH:** Funeral industry trainer Doris Zagdanski.