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Sharing the Pain

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Monica Novak (seated left) poses with her family -- daughter Alex (clockwise from top left), 16; husband Al; and daughters Casey, 11, and Anna, 9 -- outside their Bolingbrook home on Feb. 25. Novak is the co-chair for this year's Annual Friends of Share Benefit Luncheon and Fashion Show. (Danielle Gardner/Staff Photographer)

By **BETH SUTHERLAND-BICKING** For The Sun

Pregnancy is a time that is full of hopes and anticipations, as the pregnant mother often is referred to as "expecting."

But what happens when the hope and anticipation end in disaster? Thirteen years ago, Monica Novak and her husband, Al, were expectant parents. With a 2-year-old daughter, they already had experienced one birth and had sailed through nine months of a second pregnancy with no complications. But, the day before her due date, Novak, of Bolingbrook, noticed she couldn't feel the baby moving. Concerned, her doctors brought her in for a checkup and found the baby had no heartbeat.

Novak's doctors at Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove performed a Cesarean section to deliver her stillborn daughter. A knot had developed in the umbilical cord, causing her death. They named the baby Miranda.

"That was the biggest blow we've ever had," Novak said. "You don't expect to go through a smooth pregnancy and come home with a dead baby. It was just devastating."

As Novak grieved through her recovery, hospital staff told her about Share, a support group that helps families who have what they call an "unexpected pregnancy outcome." Pat Vaci is the perinatal support services coordinator for Good Samaritan's Share chapter. For more than 20

years, Vaci has helped counsel families. While the national Share organization caters only to families experiencing miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death, Good Samaritan's chapter also serves families with other types of pregnancy complication, such as bed rest, premature births or multiple births.

"We went home and basically just waited three weeks for that (Share) meeting," Novak said. "We were really lost at that time. We had a wonderful doctor who actually made a house call to spare me from having to sit in his waiting room with pregnant mothers and babies. He came to our house to remove my staples."

Novak describes her first Share meeting as very emotional. "We came away from that meeting feeling that we had a place to go. We met other families who were on the same path as us. None of us wanted to be there, but we could talk about our babies with people who understood, and we could be mad or sad and say anything we needed to say."

The meeting was the start of a healing journey for Novak, who attended a Share meeting once a month and began to make friends with other women.

"We ended up with this group of seven women," Novak said. "We'd go to (a meeting) and then we didn't want to leave. We didn't want to go back home. We weren't ready yet," Novak said.

Eventually, one group member suggested they go to the Omega Restaurant in Downers Grove to continue talking. "That was the birth of The Good Grief Club," said Novak.

As the years passed, all the women remembered how much Share had helped them, and they vowed to give back whenever they could. Novak said some of them served as peer support for new grieving families, while others began a newsletter. They all participated in memorial services each year, and some were instrumental in building an Angel Garden at the hospital to remember the children.

Then, a few years after Miranda's death, Novak said she woke up in the middle of the night with an intense urge to write down everything that had happened to her family. She wrote on a yellow pad for two hours straight and then left it in a drawer for a year.

"I didn't know what to do with it," she said. As time passed, Novak felt driven to write her story so others could benefit from it.

Novak eventually wrote and published a book named after the group that had helped her through her loss, "The Good Grief Club."

"I knew it was a powerful story," she said. "I knew that there was a need for it. There aren't that many stories about this. I started writing my own story about losing Miranda, but realized that it wasn't just about her. It was about the friendships with these other women and how the seven of us bonded with this group."

"I wrote the book for bereaved families first and foremost," Novak continued, "to give them comfort and hope."

On Saturday, Novak will sign copies of her book at another Share event near to her heart. Novak is co-chairwoman of the 21st annual Friends of Share Benefit Luncheon and Fashion Show. According to Vaci, the luncheon is expected to draw 300 to 400 attendees. Novak will donate the proceeds from every book she sells at the luncheon to Share.

The show will include lunch, a silent auction and what Vaci calls the "highlight of the show," a Von Maur fashion show featuring former Neonatal Intensive Care Unit babies or siblings of babies who were lost and whose families were helped by Share.

Vaci says they usually raise anywhere from \$40,000 to \$50,000, but says they don't set a goal for any given year. "We just hope to raise awareness," she said. "Just to make the whole community aware of the impact of the babies' lives and just how dire these situations are."

Novak, who now has three daughters ages 9, 11 and 16, is working on another book about her mother-in-law's struggle with Alzheimer's disease. Although she has moved on and continues her process of healing, she says she will never forget.

"When you lose a baby, you think you're never going to laugh again; you're never going to be happy again," she said. "We're never going to forget this. We're never going to get over losing these babies, but there can still be happiness in our lives. We can still enjoy life and still find hope for the future."