

November 6, 2018

To whom it may concern:

My closest friend's daughter died on February 5, 2018. Our world was "turned upside down" and we were thrown into a world of pain and grief that is inconceivable. The absolute worst happened to my friend Christina, her family and to those who loved her daughter Katrina dearly. Katrina was like a daughter to me. Try to imagine your world, as you know it, being totally and forever changed in a split second. Imagine that one of your beloved children, who you kissed goodnight last night, talked to on the phone yesterday, or said I love you to as they walked out the door today, **did not** return home. Not today, not tomorrow or not ever! Imagine being at work in the middle of a meeting and all of a sudden everyone is excused but you. You then find yourself alone with a Sheriff asking you if you know the person on the photo and you hear the words, "she was found dead." Later, you learn she was murdered by the hands of her best friend's brother.

I am sure that you cannot even begin to imagine the horror of it: it's inconceivable. I pray you haven't experienced a loved one's death in such an atrocious way. The reality is, we did. I witnessed the unbearable and constant pain Christina endured for months, including the sleepless nights. It took every ounce of strength she could muster up just to get out of bed. I share this with you because I want you to have an understanding of how things were before the retreat.

The purpose of this letter is to express my experience with the *Hope United Grief Group Retreat (HUGG)*. I searched and searched for a retreat for Christina to go to, and after searching for 2 days I found HUGG. I called and spoke to Marlene and inquired about it. I knew after visiting with Marlene that this was the retreat for Christina. I was hoping for a retreat nearby, here in Texas. I couldn't find one: not like this one. We traveled about 1,300 miles for this retreat. I was worried that if we didn't do something soon, we were going to lose Christina most likely to suicide. I believe with all my heart God had a hand in this, and Marlene was His instrument in helping us get there.

September 14, 2018 was the first day of the healing process. We learned very quickly that there is "HOPE" but we can't do it alone.

For the first time since Katrina's death, I witnessed Christina experience:

- A safe place to begin the healing process;
- Peace for the first time since the death of her daughter;
- A realization and acceptance that her beloved daughter was gone and not coming back;
- The ability and need to be gentle with herself;
- The realization that she could give herself a break from grieving 24/7;
- The ability to bring her mind back to the now instead of dwelling on the details of her daughter's death through techniques taught by Linda the spiritual director.

Christina will always have a void in her life, and there will be some challenging days ahead. Yet since the retreat, I see her smile more often.

The women who served on the HUGG retreat are a gift from God. They all have experienced the loss of a loved one. They have turned that pain into a beautiful servant's heart to serve in the most intimate way. They allow themselves to be His hands and feet in building a safe place for those who need a soft place to land during a time of pain and despair. The numerous lives they impact through their service is immeasurable, as their work extends beyond the retreatants to their families, friends, and all the loved ones who mourn along with them. As I walk this journey with my beloved friend Christina, I am forever grateful for the experience and knowledge I gained through this retreat! So much so, that I feel a strong calling to bring the retreat to Texas where many people are in need of healing and support in their grief.

"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." (Matt 5:15) We are all called to the little ways of discipleship, to become a simple candle for Christ. These women leading HUGG are the simple candles for Christ. They helped shine His light in a time of darkness, and we must do everything in our power to help them continue in their efforts to spread the light.

Sincerely,

Sylvia