

Losing a Loved One to Alzheimer

Sharon Brubaker and Erica Honore

Grief Specialists

Tony ([00:03](#)):

Erica and Sharon, are sisters who began their grief journey in 2006, when Erica has 10 year old son, Austin drown together, they participated in a grief education program were so moved by this experience. They studied, it became specialists so they could help the brokenhearted find recovery. In 2015 tragedy struck the family. Once again, when Erica's oldest son, Donovan was killed in a motorcycle accident, Erica and Sharon are committed to sharing their experiences of love, loss, and healing through this podcast. Now your Grief Specialists, Sharon and Erica.

Sharon ([00:41](#)):

Hey friends. Welcome back today is February 20th. And if you guys haven't heard, Texas has frozen over. So today Erica will not be joining us for our recording, and we're going to miss her this whole time. She is digging out snow and trying to find water. I love her. I'm sending her a lot of good energy and she's trying to keep it funny right now and survive. But in lieu of Erica, I have an amazing guest that I want to introduce you guys to, this is my client. Geovanna you can call her Giovanna Sarnicola.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([01:23](#)):

Yes, it's much more personal.

Sharon ([01:26](#)):

Giovanna Sarnicola and I just walked through her very own personal grief journey. And she's an amazing young woman and I wasn't much convincing, but I said, please, please, please come and share your story because it will help so many people to hear what it was like for you from beginning until now. So Giovanna Sarnicola, introduce yourself a little real quick to our friends. And remember, you can tell us a little or as much as you like.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([01:50](#)):

Yeah. Well, thank you first and foremost for having me on here. And you've been, you know, considering to have me as a guest, I I'm honored. So as you said, my name is Giovanna Sarnicola born and raised in LA and I came to you when I lost my father February 12th of 2020 from Alzheimer's. And you know, with any first major death, you're confused, you're lost your loan, you're questioning. And I felt very fortunate to have had a network of women who could have referred me to you. Otherwise I would not have known that grief counseling and, you know, grief therapy was even a, the thing that existed. So I feel blessed and privileged to have even been able to experience our journey together.

Sharon ([02:40](#)):

I'm glad you said that because what happens a lot of times Giana is that the griever doesn't call me the grief, call me a lot, but what happens? It's usually the person sitting next to the griever they call because they're looking for the resource. And so it's not always at griever call. So you, I think about that all the time. Cause I did some interviews lately and every single one of them came about by someone else calling. And the truth is you're so down in the trenches trying to figure the grief out, you're not thinking about, Hey, I need to call somebody.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([03:16](#)):

Oh yeah. I mean, it's, it's probably one of the, it's an interesting experience. And I say that lightheartedly because it shows that you can have multiple conflicting emotions existing at the same time. So you're not

even really looking, how do I get out of this, but more so like, how do I not cry for the next 24 hours? You know, it's three hour by hour point of view that you're not even looking at, like, how do I recover from this? You know, it's just, how do I maintain and survive with within.

Sharon ([03:50](#)):

How good were you at not crying within a 24 hour period?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([03:53](#)):

Oh, at the very beginning, not at all every day. I mean, my circumstance was a little different with just so much that had happened prior to my dad passing. And then after his passing that it kind of restricted me from actually processing the grief because I was handling, you know, other arrangements and things like that. So, I mean, I would burst into tears just if there was like a data in, in a commercial, you know, triggers that I didn't think I had or would have that I started to, you know, face. And then of course it gets better now after having done the counseling with you you know, do I still get sad and emotional? Absolutely. I mean, I don't think there's ever going to be a time where I see a dad at a wedding and I'm not going to cry, you know? But it hurts less and what's the best part about it is that I can be there at the wedding watching this. It hurts, but I can be there. The difference that I've noticed.

Sharon ([05:02](#)):

That's great. That's a great, that's a great description of what it feels like to be healed. Right. You're always going to miss him. And you know, my heart is full when I hear you say a wedding because that, you know, that's something that we will always think about. Okay. I think most of our followers, her dad died of Alzheimer's she's so young.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([05:25](#)):

Yes, I, dad was young. He was so my, when I, my dad was 63 when he passed last year and I was 25. And you know, but so he passed at 63, but he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's for five years prior. So that's what 58 he was diagnosed. You know, there's so many factors that could have potentially attributed to his diagnosis. But you're right. He was really young. And so was I really young having to kind of go through this new territory that I was so unfamiliar with. I mean, who at 21 years old is thinking about Alzheimer's right.

Sharon ([06:12](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. And that's why I think that the reason I even mentioned that, because I think most of us think you know, it happens to much older people and the children are much older. I mean, it almost was like, you were trust, thrust right into adulthood and a real life experience, right?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([06:34](#)):

Yeah. I was a child parenting my parents. I mean really 21 as old as you think you may be, if you're not 26, I'm still a kid. I think of you as a kid. So I wanna, I wanna kind of go like this.

Sharon ([06:54](#)):

Let's talk about the Alzheimer's and then let's talk about the grief. So that's kind of where I'm going to take you. So in the beginning, yes, I would imagine you were hoping that the diagnosis was not true. Were

you looking at him and expecting him to get better? And were, were there moments where you were looking at him going, no, they missed, diagnosed him. He's I don't see any signs of this.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([07:16](#)):

Well, so gosh, so I remember the moment and I remember the moment that I got the call. It was from my step-mom. I was home from I was home from college for, I think like spring break or something like that. I was in my mom, my bedroom and my mom's house. And she called and when she said I dropped my knees and just started crying. Cause I'm like, what does this mean? Right. I mean, with so many illnesses, terminal illnesses, especially the knowledge isn't publicly known and it's not, you don't know about it until you're having to deal with it. So was I like, you know, in .. What is it?

Sharon ([07:58](#)):

In denial,

Giovanna Sarnicola ([08:00](#)):

Thank you. About his diagnosis. Absolutely. Because for me, he was still that dad that I knew when I was a little girl, I'm like, there's no way. I mean, he's so young, blah, blah, blah. So it was definitely in denial. However, in terms of no, they've misdiagnosed him, you know, there were signs of my dad that we just thought, Oh, that's dad, you know, little things like spelling errors you know, forgetting his phone places or, you know, not closing the, the fridge door and things like that. Now I didn't live with him at this time. And so I was getting a lot of my information from his wife. But still even when I was, you know, living with him part time, there were little things that I could link to now, his diagnosis, that made sense. But at the same time, who wants to come to come to the reality of the fact that your dad Alzheimer's so like, no, this isn't real, this is a real, and I really I didn't really want to know about it. You know, I didn't want to understand it because if I understood it, then I knew what lied ahead. And I really don't think that I understood it until his decline was very apparent. You know, the stuttering, the unable, like unable to put his shoes on. Like that's when it started to get really real because the first two years of his diagnosis, he couldn't drive. So I would pick him up or, you know, he was still my dad and he was still, you know, charismatic and laughing and joking and able to put complete sentences together. And so it didn't feel real until the declines really started to happen. Right. Did I answer all those questions?

Sharon ([09:50](#)):

Yes. You did beautifully. You did. I love it. So there came a time where you got really involved.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([09:58](#)):

Yes.

Sharon ([09:59](#)):

You were, you really got involved and I'm going to ask you a couple of questions that are kind of personal, but did you ever feel resentful of having to get involved because it's a normal reaction to have, and then did you ever feel abandoned? Like you were out there doing it by yourself?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([10:16](#)):

So resentful, I'd say yes, but not necessarily at hidden you know, with Alzheimer's you're you really are dealing even with a grown adult, you're dealing with someone with immense mental capacity of five to

10 year old, you know, just depending on where they are. So I was never angry at him. I was angry at the world, you know, God or whoever it is, whatever you believe in. I was angry at why me, why him, why this, why that, you know, why Alzheimer's of all fricking things, you know? And I did feel really alone. So, you know, I'm my dad's only child. And then he remarried to a woman that has pretty much our immediate family that lives close by. So anytime I'd see him, I'd have to arrange with his wife and then I'd have to drive down. And then I, you know, it was really me. And of course my mom, you know, would ask and try to get involved. But I noticed that I really pushed everyone away that I didn't want anyone being a part of this because for some odd reason, I was kind of like protective of the situation. So that probably caused me to feel more alone than I needed to feel. But just for the mere fact that I was his only kid, but yeah, I felt very much abandoned very much. Like all of this was on my shoulders type of a deal.

Sharon ([11:43](#)):

Yeah. I we're from a family of five children. And when my dad died, I slept that I, I push everyone away. We were, we were trying to do everything together, but I remember this feeling of this is my chance to give back to him for everything he's done for me. I don't know if any of that was like, like that for you. But I remember I felt like this is my chance to really care of him. And I felt so honored to be able to do it even the ugly parts. So I don't know if that was your, but I just remember that. Did you have unrealistic expectations? The, of things that I have to do this, or I must do everything for him or I must visit him every day and that eventually you're like, this is not going to work out.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([12:26](#)):

Yes. you know, it's such a, it's such a weird place to be in, especially when you're still a young adult. You know, at the time I was working nine to five, I was commuting from Santa Clarita to Glendale working nine to five. And then where he lived was Claremont, which is, you know, about an hour and a half there and about an hour and a half to two hours, depending on traffic back. So I would try to go every weekend or every other weekend. And, you know, it was a long commute for work. And then the weekend, can you and I did that. I mean, all, all five years of him being diagnosed to passing. But yeah, I mean, I always felt like I could be doing more. I should be there and right now you know, and you do set these unrealistic expectations of, I have to, and I'm also kind of like a control person. And so that's something that I've learned as well. It's like, I can't, yeah. It's like, Hey, calm down, you know, everything. So I think that, that had a little bit about it because it's my dad. Right. I want to control the situation. I want to be there. I want to, I want to, I wanna, I want to, but in reality I couldn't. And so that was part of the expectations that I had of myself and of the situation. And then just the reality of it.

Sharon ([13:48](#)):

You, you, you also brought another memory to me is that I, whenever there was a doctor's appointment, I want it to be at the doctor's appointment because I wanted to hear it for myself. I didn't want the second hand information because I felt like they always put their twist on it. And I have a sister who's a nurse practitioner and she's amazing. She's amazing at her job, but she always can, you know, she comes across with that doctor. I'm like, no, I want to hear it for myself. And then there was this point where I did a lot of research. Did you, were you doing a lot of research?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([14:20](#)):

I did do a lot a good amount of research. My, my research was more so what what holistic alternatives I could, you know, like coconut oil is really good for like cognitive abilities, blueberries. I was trying really hard to give him all of these like Hilda stick supplements or, but the reality is, and maybe that's where my

hope was. Like maybe if we just pumped him with all these holistic, you know, he'll get better. But with terminal illnesses, there is no getting better. Yeah. And even if I, even if we did pump him with all these holistic supplements, sure. It could prolong the situation, but it's inevitable. And that's where that huge denial aspect. I just didn't know what Alzheimer's was. I didn't know. I was so unprepared to handle it and it's a nasty, nasty disease. So it's sad, you know?

Sharon ([15:20](#)):

Yeah. I I'm on that same token of you pumping him, hit it full. I have, like I said, I have a sister who's a nurse practitioner. So her thing was all we're going to eat this diet. And she was taking out all the carbs and just doing all this stuff. And at the same time I was sneaking in the fried chicken, literally sneak it into him. And there's a came apart where he kind of almost was like verging on dementia and he, but he knew that stuff and I would bring it and he would hide it from her. He knew to hide it from her. So at least, I guess she didn't have the evil sister. My take on it was that I don't know how much time he has here, but I want him to enjoy the time that he has here. And yeah. Did there ever come a time where you felt bad that you were still enjoying life and you were still able to do things? And he was ?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([16:12](#)):

All the time, all the time, all the time. I mean, it was, you know, especially there was this one time and I don't want to make this like too sad and sappy or anything. Cause I want the listeners to actually enjoy my story. But there's this one time that my dad was in a psychiatric hospital and I, you know, went and it was during Thanksgiving weekend or week. And so I went down to see him multiple times as he stayed there. And every time I left, I just had this constant, like I can leave. He has to say, it's like, like when you leave someone from prison, right. I have all this freedom. I have the luxury of driving, eating of going to sleep when I want all the time. And it was even after his passing, it's like, how do I live fully and be comfortable with, you know, living fully and doing what I want to do. But then also knowing that he's suffering, he suffered he's Pat, you know? And so it's this constant battle of, it's not my reality, but it is my reality, you know.

Sharon ([17:23](#)):

Oh, great. Great answer. Did you feel like you were failing him because you couldn't be there 24 seven to do things for him?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([17:30](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah. You know, I, to your point, it's like, you, you want to be the first person to know these things you want to, you don't want to telephone information. You know, I, the situation with my dad is just how he, where he lived. Right. I mean, we in LA literally lived on separate ends of LA and this was, you know, pre COVID. So traffic was still a thing and, you know, it was just gnarly all the time. And so I, you know, I wanted to be there all the time. I wanted to be the one making his food and do it. Cause I, I also felt that I had more of a patience and understanding and love, like, you know, from daughter to father versus, you know, when you're married to the person, you're like, Oh my God. Even, you know, it's like, they get so annoyed. Like..

Sharon ([18:25](#)):

I don't know. I think at this times you throw that out the window, right?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([18:29](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I w I don't know, but yeah, I mean, I absolutely, you know, I felt like I failed him for not being there. I wanted to be there more than I was even capable of, you know?

Sharon ([18:45](#)):

So did there come a time, Jonah, where I have, my niece is Giana, so that's why I can say, okay. Did they ever come a time where you walked in and he didn't know who you were?

Giovanna Sarnicola ([18:59](#)):

Yes. yes. And that, that was the most difficult part. You know, with Alzheimer's there are going to be new thresholds, right? When you decline, this is the new normal. And so, you know, at first it was he'd forget words, he'd you know, forget times and, you know, distant families names and, you know, just normal forgetfulness. And then it got to, he forgot. He doesn't know how to put his shoes on. He can't change himself. He can't use the restroom, brushing his teeth, eat, you know, these things. And then I think one of the last declines was him. Not necessarily, he knew me, like you recognize me, but he didn't know our relationship. So with Alzheimer's the person with the disease usually asks the same question over and over and over again. So I remember our, our tradition was I'd come down, I'd see him. I'd take him out to lunch. There's this little downtown area where he lived, that we'd walk around and there was a candy shop that DVD shop, like we would, we'd have our little tour. Then I remember we were driving back and he kept asking me, who, who are you? Who are you? And I was like, well, I'm your daughter. And he was like, who's your dad? And I was like, well, you're my dad. And then he just kept asking that so much that I eventually, I just started describing him to him. So it was like, what's your dad? Like, who's your dad? And I, and so I would say, Oh, you know, my dad's is great guy. He's Italian, he's Italian man. Like, you know, he's the work on the police force. Like, you know, it just kind of like build him up, hype him up. And he would be like, wow, he sounds like a guy.

Sharon ([20:47](#)):

That must have been a hard day.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([20:54](#)):

It, it was hard. Definitely hard. I mean, no one at any age that was difficult. Especially, you know, and I don't mean to keep bringing my age into it, but it was just such a, such a challenging time, like fresh out of college. My life is ahead of me. I think I'm going to, you know, I think one thing, and then this happened, and then now my life is my dad. I mean, for five years after college, my life was my dad. And yeah, I mean, it was just, it was difficult. Cause it's, it's also, how do you handle certain situations, right? The person with Alzheimer's going to get irritated. They're gonna, they're not gonna understand. They can't communicate. So you, as the other person, how do you assess and adjust the situation to make sure that that person is comfortable? Isn't it, you know, freaking out or anything like that. And it's just, it's a difficult thing to navigate in any regard.

Sharon ([21:56](#)):

So yeah. Yeah. yeah, I think that, that is so true and that you get, you're like, I keep mentioning my age, your age is huge. There's like other things it's like, you were so young, right? That's number one. But number two, you are the only child also. You know what I mean? And so yes, that those, those two points are huge to this, to this story. So this is what I want to do. I want to for you to tell us who your dad, his name say his name so everybody can know who he, who he is. We're talking about, we're going to end the show here and we're going to make this a two-part because I want to talk about, I just want to we'll

do the, what it's like to grieve. Alzheimer's. So tell us a little bit your personal story about your dad. That's where I'd like to end.

Giovanna Sarnicola ([22:46](#)):

Yeah, my dad my dad was my best friend. His name is Steven Star Nicola, but he would go by Stephanos article because chicks dig it his lines, not even kidding. He's Italian, obviously he's a twin, one of four. My family migrated from Naples, Italy to New York, from New York to California. He grew up in the fifties. Taught me all about Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, big band. Oh yeah, I'm an old man deep down inside. And you know, he went to the police force in the eighties and then was on the Marshall, the U S Marshall service for 25 years after that, just kind of bad guy, you know?

Sharon ([23:31](#)):

Oh, thank you so much for sharing them with us guys. Remember, this is part one that was just screaming through the Alzheimer's and then we're going to talk about that was dealing with Alzheimer's. And now we're going to talk about, look for part two of a grieving through Alzheimer's see, on part two guys.

Erica ([23:46](#)):

Hi friends, Erica Honore here with healing starts with the heart, Sharon and I are so glad you joined us for another great episode of our podcasts. We hope you enjoyed this episode. We want to let you know for more information, you can go to our website@healingstartswiththeheart.com. There you will find not only today's podcast, but all of our podcasts, along with our blogs, the information on the programs that we offer and the Griever's Guide, which is something Sharon and I put together to document how we came to be your grief specialists. We also have a quiz to take, to identify if you are truly grieving. And if you want to talk specifically with either Sharon or myself, you can schedule an appointment there. You will also find a place to join our private face book group at hope, heal and recover. Thank you so much for being with us. Have a great day friends.