

David and Barbara Ruggieri — Our Lady of Sorrows Bereavement Group

Michael Ruggieri, a 2011 graduate of North Kingstown High School, was out late one night, hanging with some of his teenage friends. They lit a bonfire to stay warm in the cold, February night. They were drinking alcohol, and later, as the night turned to morning, they went out for breakfast at Denny's.

It was soon after their breakfast, a little before 4 am, when the group of teens decided to play a game of "cat and mouse" with their trucks. They raced through the back, wooded roads of North Kingstown. Michael was a passenger in his friend's truck, along with another young, teenage male and their 18-year old friend, Madeline.

The driver of the truck suddenly struck a boulder in the road. He lost control of the vehicle as the truck rolled over several times. The four teens crashed into a pole on Shippeetown Road and the driver and Madeline were thrown from the truck. Michael and the other passenger were pinned inside the crushed steel of the truck's cab.

On that Sunday night, into the early, cold February morning, David and Barbara Ruggieri's lives changed forever.

Their 19-year-old son, Michael Ruggieri, was dead.

Michael left behind his parents, his two younger brothers, and many friends throughout his hometown of North Kingstown. His Mass of Christian Burial at Saint Bernard Church was standing room only.

For four-plus years following Michael's death, David and Barbara did what they could to deal with the pain of losing their son. They turned to friends. They turned to each other. And they turned to the Church, especially to Father Jack Unsworth. He was there, by their side, from the beginning.

They've spent every day thinking about Michael. About his life, and his death at such a young age. But they never asked for help from anyone. They felt they could work out their pain themselves. They learned to move forward, and do all they could to be strong for each other, and of course, for Michael's two younger brothers.

Even as they tried to deal with their own pain, they soon found themselves reaching out to help other parents in North Kingstown who had also tragically lost their children. See, three of Michael's childhood friends were killed in separate accidents, including a friend who was home for the holidays and died in an accident just a little over one year ago, on Christmas Eve of 2015.

David and Barbara are very friendly and outgoing. Even while dealing with their own pain, they were there to console, and do what they could to help the parents of

Michael's friends who had died. They had the experience they never asked for, or wanted. But they understood the pain and what any parent who loses a child goes through. And they wanted to help other parents find a way to live life after the loss of a child.

That's why Father Jack turned to them to help form a bereavement group at Saint Bernard this past year. With a high number of parents whose children had died from within the town of North Kingstown, Father Jack recognized the need for a bereavement group that focused strictly on those parents.

David and Barbara offered to do all they could to help, to bring parents together from within the community who, like, them, lived with suffering from the loss of a child.

The group was run by licensed social worker Peter Magnotta of the Diocese of Providence. He heads the Our Lady of Sorrow Bereavement Group that's supported by the Diocese and the Catholic Charity Appeal.

Peter started the bereavement program as part of the Diocese back in 2009 as an eight-week program focused on helping heal after a loss. The program was hosted at parishes throughout Rhode Island for anyone who had lost a loved one. But those who participated in the program were more commonly dealing with the pain of losing a parent, a sibling, or an older family member.

That's what made the bereavement group at Saint Bernard so unique. And why David and Barbara wanted so much to help. It was based on Peter's program, but geared towards parents grieving from a child's death.

The group began meeting in July of 2016. Barbara and David were there, initially, to assist Father Jack and Peter Magnotta help organize the group and bring grieving parents to the group.

But not long after Peter and Father Jack began the counseling sessions for the group of twelve North Kingstown parents, David and Barbara began to realize they still had a long way to go in their healing. Their roles in the group began to change, from group organizers to participants.

They found friendships in the group. They bonded with the other parents who were learning how to live with such tremendous sadness and loss. The help David and Barbara needed, even if they didn't know it at the time, came from the bereavement group supported by the Catholic Charity Appeal.

The eight week program led by both Father Jack and Mr. Magnotta was held at Saint Bernard for an hour-and-a-half one night a week. They brought a group of people

together who, over those eight weeks, became closer than any of them would have ever imagined.

“Peter is amazing. Father Jack is amazing.” said David Ruggieri.

Barbara told us, “He got us all talking. There was a lot of pain that came out. A lot of tears. It was amazing to see us all go through this transformation. We had no idea how much pain we had inside, and how much needed to come out.”

“We had snacks. We had dessert. There was bonding. There was crying. *A lot of crying.* When the time had ended, we would stay for another hour, talking. Nobody wanted to leave. We were afraid to go back out into a world where most people can’t understand our pain or what it’s like knowing you’ll never see your child again. We were afraid to leave this group of people who had so much in common, where we talked about different things and our children and how we could continue helping each other in ways that most people would never be able to understand.” said Barbara.

Since the eight week session ended this past summer, the bereavement group at Saint Bernard has continued to meet once a month. They’ve formed friendships and bonds with each other outside of the time spent at Saint Bernard, and support each other with compassion. They do what they can to help each other take small steps towards living with the loss of a child.

Barbara and David were asked if Michael's death ever caused them to lose their faith. "Not once. We grew up in the Church, as Catholics. We live with gratitude. We are thankful for the Church, for Father Jack, for Peter Magnotta, and all the compassionate people who helped us. We live everyday with sorrow. The pain never goes away. But we are grateful for the generous and caring Catholic community, and for all that God provides us."