

Group raises funds and helps families bear their silent grief

Bears for Bereaved Mommies supports families whose babies don't come home.

By *Melani Taylor* for **Here NB**

October 15 is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day in the Province of New Brunswick; Bears for Bereaved Mommies is hosting their third annual Walk to Remember. A not for profit support group for families wrestling with the loss of a child during pregnancy or shortly after birth, this event is intended to raise funds and awareness. For those in Saint John there will be activities and a march at 12:45 p.m. at the head of King Street. A virtual walk will be held online allowing for international participation. Online participants can log in at www.bearsforbereavedmommies.org.

Founding director Terra-Lynn Coggan became aware of the need for support after experiencing three miscarriages and the stillbirth of her nephew Riley.

"Miscarriage and infant death are silent sources of grief for the entire family and when we experienced our loss, we sought out services and came away empty handed." Bears for Bereaved Mommies wants the life of the unborn or newborn to be recognized as a loss worth grieving and for families to receive proper care.

"We raise funds to make bears, ribbons, and to establish programs and services with hospitals and social agencies." Men and women who are trying to have a child invest their hopes and dreams into a pregnancy; they've chosen names, joined baby registries, decorated rooms and picked out clothes and many are shocked to discover that their baby isn't coming home.

Miscarriages, stillbirths and sudden infant death are much more common than many would like to believe. One in five known pregnancies ends in a 'spontaneous abortion', the scientific term for miscarriage.

Statistics Canada estimates that as many as 50 per cent of pregnancies end within the first 12 weeks. This means many women miscarry without even being aware that they've conceived. These facts are little comfort to couples who often end up blaming themselves for their loss. Short of using illicit drugs, it is extremely unlikely that a miscarriage could be associated with the mother. Still, Terra-Lynn says "there's a lot of blame, there's a lot of what-ifs that occur. It's easy to lay blame and it is natural, we're only human." Due to the fact that doctors are unable to explain causes, couples find their losses even more traumatizing and begin to question the abilities of their bodies to create or carry a child to term. Organizations like Terra-Lynn's are raising awareness and funds for research.

"Research in every aspect of pregnancy, infant loss, and stillbirth are understudied or not being studied. If we can see the causes we can find ways of preventing it. And knowing the reasons will take the blame away." When it comes to stillbirth and infant death, Terra-Lynn says that most are preventable through proper prenatal care.

"The World Health Organization says that stillbirths are preventable." The support group advocates better access to prenatal care and more respect for the rights of a mother to have procedures for ending a pregnancy or dealing with a loss explained to them, "sometimes doctors are not up front or they do not know how to approach the situation." The grief caused by the loss of a child is long-term and very real.

In New Brunswick, there are very few resources available and little public awareness. Many couples are encouraged by friends and family members to 'get back at it' or told that 'you can always have another'. Terra-Lynn feels this seemingly callous indifference is simply caused by a lack of awareness.

"When you miscarry early in the pregnancy you are left with the social view that moving forward is normal. Raising awareness will increase support and acceptance in the community." That is why the group lobbied for an awareness day. Terra-Lynn feels that awareness days and months are, "Essential. These are the times when we are the most open to sharing and raising awareness. As with any organization that has a day of remembrance, it is to unite the community."

Women who move on without acknowledging their loss may experience emotional upset as a result of their loss. "The repercussions for ignoring the grief are many. There's long-term depression and post-partum depression complicating their grief. Left untreated it can result in distance with the family, withdrawal from children and the separation of the couple." Terra-Lynn sees as many men struggling as women, men have as many needs as the mothers.

"For some men they're very involved in the pregnancy and the loss touches them as deeply as the mother. But men seem to focus on caring for the mothers and trying to fix their loved ones." Men need to be given permission to grieve and heal as well, for that the group has bereavement support for them as well.

If you know someone who is going through this, Terra-Lynn recommends "simply saying I'm sorry and offering to listen, these parents want to talk about their children, they're not looking for suggestions about recovery, and they want someone to acknowledge their loss." There will always be a place for support groups such as Bears for Bereaved Mommies.

"Pregnancy and infant loss have been occurring for centuries and it will continue to do so for multiple reasons. Some babies are just born or are conceived with challenges that aren't compatible with life."

Through the grieving process Terra-Lynn has learned that she can help others and keep the memories of her losses sacred, only twenty seven and proud mother to a young girl she says, "I'm happy now. I look to the future optimistically."

The organization is currently trying to establish a board of directors. If you are interested, please contact Terra-Lynn Coggan at (506) 696-5521. To learn more about the organization and their ongoing campaigns, please visit www.bearsforbereavedmommies.org,

October 15 is walk day, to participate from anywhere and support the cause, a virtual walk is available online at www.bearsforbereavedmommies.org while a real walk is being held in Saint John.