

Cuople's Personal Tragedy Now Helps Others Who Struggle With Loss

Since the death of their 6-year-old daughter, Harry and Cheryl Salem have been helping people find healing from grief

After spending years traveling to encourage congregations to become people of dynamic faith, Harry and Cheryl Salem are finding a new audience—through some of their prayers that were not answered.

The Tulsa, traveling ministers are helping people struggling with loss find new hope by sharing their own personal story of tragedy.

Although close friends such as Oral Roberts, Benny Hinn and Kenneth Copeland prayed for her, the Salems' 6-year-old daughter Gabrielle died of cancer in 1999 after battling the disease for almost a year.

The family faced the ordeal publicly. They continued to travel in ministry, with the young girl appearing to sing hooked up to an IV drip on occasions.

Many joined in praying for Gabrielle, but after her funeral one man approached Harry Salem—formerly a senior leader in Roberts' ministry—and told him his daughter had died because Salem did not have enough faith.

Just three months later, while they were still reeling from Gabrielle's death, the couple discovered that Cheryl, a singer

and former Miss America, had cancer and needed surgery. Their message of faith was being challenged.

“It’s easy to have faith when everything is going good. Faith really comes out when things are tough and when you don’t see what you are hoping for,” Harry Salem said. “We went from faith to trust. Faith is believing for something good in the future; trust is going on when it doesn’t happen.”

The Salems have recounted their journey in two books—From Mourning to Morning and From Grief to Glory—and in numerous TV appearances. They have also found themselves speaking on grief and ministering to individuals they meet as they continue to travel to churches with their two sons, Harry III, 17; and Roman, 14.

“We have a deeper message,” Harry Salem said. “Our ministry has exploded because there are more people out there waiting for their miracles because they didn’t get their first one, people sitting in churches asking: ‘What did I do wrong? Where did I fail?’”

Now cancer-free, Cheryl Salem said she had learned “you can’t have religious ideas about grief. It has no economic lines, no political lines; people deal with so many forms of loss—maybe a loved one, sometimes a career or a marriage. People grieve over some of the strangest things.”

They encourage people to be honest about their feelings and doubts. “People say a faith person shouldn’t ask why,” Harry Salem said. “Jesus hung on a cross and asked, ‘My God, why have You forsaken Me?’ Our flesh has a voice.”

For the Salems, part of their healing came from gaining a higher perspective. "God showed us that Gabrielle was not in our past, she was in our future," Cheryl Salem said. "She is healed, whole, happy, filling heaven with joy. You can't go forward looking back. ... We had to begin to let God give us a new vision for our life."

The Salems were not strangers to adversity. Harry lost his father at age 10, while Cheryl overcame the injuries of childhood sexual abuse and a serious car wreck. They knew they had to work hard to avoid the marriage and family breakdown many who suffer serious loss experience.

"If you focus on what you don't have, you will lose what you do have," Harry Salem said. "Gabrielle is where we want her to go; we still have two boys and still have choices to make. We can't neglect them."

They said the outpouring of love and support they received from around the country helped them. "We had to decide, do you still go on when you have no answer? That's the real question in life," Harry Salem said. "Can you go on when you don't always get a yes? We all go through stages when we don't understand, and the question is, 'Do I still serve God when I don't understand?'"

They find reliving their experiences tiring at times, but satisfying. Cheryl Salem said one day God showed her that "only scars that have changed other people's lives will be seen in heaven. This [loss] is one of those scars that we have, and we want it to be one that we keep for eternity because we want it to change other people's lives."

Andy Butcher