

# BOSTON Herald

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**HAPPY FAMILY:** Patricia O'Brien holds a picture of her family, including Marisol, who died when she was 8 years old. The family received counseling from different sources but really began the healing process after a grief program for parents at St. Anthony Shrine in downtown Boston.

Staff photo by Angela Rowlings

This is the first in a four-day series on the role of women who are served by, donate to, work and volunteer at Boston's St. Anthony Shrine. The downtown landmark is preparing to host its third annual fundraising gala at the Boston Marriott Copley Place on Thursday.

In the darkest hours of her grief, Tricia O'Brien begged God for help after the death of her beautiful 8-year-old daughter Marisol.

"After she died, we had secular people counseling us and supporting us but I needed so much more," Tricia told me last week through tears. "I needed to know why God did this. I needed that spiritual support."

Tricia's pleas were answered about a year after losing her daughter. While at Sacred Heart Church in Lexington, Tricia found a card for the Pieta Ministry, now the Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents, a spiritual program at St. Anthony Shrine for parents whose children have died.

Tricia and her husband, Hub developer Tom O'Brien, went to a weekend retreat at the shrine with other grieving parents. The friars and brothers embraced the brokenhearted mothers and fathers, holding Masses for them, singing with them, praying with them, sharing meals with them. The parents wrote letters to their children.

"I can't even tell you how much healing I had that weekend because you're with other parents who have lost a child and you're all in the lowest point of your life," Tricia said. "It was just a beautiful experience. It's helped hundreds and hundreds of parents who needed their faith to help them with this understanding of why God allowed their child to die."

"It was just so uplifting. It gave you faith again, 'OK, it's going to hurt for a long time but I know I'm going to be OK,' " Tricia said. "It was just so cathartic to be with other parents, to share our pain with each other."

Tricia and Tom adopted Marisol from Guatemala when she was 8 months old, the fourth of five children the couple have adopted. They're also parents to Lucas, 23; Nina, 21; Tomas, 19; and Dureti, 11.

With Marisol, the couple had four children under age 5, all running around, playing on swings and laughing. "She was the happiest little kid," Tricia recalled.

As the months went by, Marisol wasn't crawling or walking when she should have been and she was mixing up her words. Just before her third birthday, Marisol was diagnosed with leukodystrophy, a neurological degenerative illness that breaks down the myelin in the brain.

The couple were told Marisol had a year to live. They were devastated.

That summer, Marisol stopped crawling and walking and needed a wheelchair. The family rallied around her.

Nina, then 6, put her arm around her sister and said, "Marisol, this is the coolest chair. Let's take a picture and we're going to decorate it." Marisol hated the sensation of water so her brother Lucas would do funny skits and make her laugh while she was in the bathtub.

Eventually, Marisol lost her ability to eat and her voice. "Which was the toughest for all of us," Tricia said, "because we couldn't hear that laughter."

Tricia brought Marisol to healing services around the world.

“We played together. We watched TV together. We sang songs together. We took walks together,” Tricia said. “Even though she had lost all abilities to do anything she was an integral part of our family.”

Marisol died on Dec. 20, 2008.

“It’s a loss your mind can’t rationally understand,” Tricia said. “You wake up with a hole in your stomach every day.”

Now, she’s in a program at St. Anthony’s to become a spiritual director and hopes to help other parents who have lost children. “I knew I’d be able to breath again,” Tricia said of the retreat. “I knew I’d be able to laugh again and find joy again.”