

Ava's Grace, a new ministry for grieving parents

BY JENNIFER MILLER

What happens when one's personal life and professional life suddenly collide? Often, the movement of the Holy Spirit may be found.

Lisa Everett, director for Marriage, Family and Pro-Life Ministry for the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, can attest to such a mysterious working of grace, as her family and work life recently coincided in unexpected ways. The result is a new ministry being launched this month, Ava's Grace, the purpose of which is to provide spiritual, emotional and practical support to parents who experience miscarriage, stillbirth and infant loss. The heartbreaking impetus for Ava's Grace is from Everett's personal life.

On April 16, 2016, Everett conducted a daylong training for Miriam's Blessing, a diocesan program that offers concrete support to families who receive a difficult prenatal diagnosis. Part of the training that day included a session on perinatal bereavement, so that peer ministers could be equipped to help families whose babies die before or shortly after birth. Exactly one month later, Everett found herself in the labor and delivery unit of St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, awaiting the delivery of her granddaughter, Ava Madeleine, who had just died in utero at 39 weeks.

The shock and sadness were overwhelming, as Everett struggled to deal with a double grief: the death of her granddaughter and the heartbreak of Ava's parents, Kate and Dale. But she saw God's hand in the timing of her training, which had given her a good idea of how to accompany Kate and Dale as they grieved the loss of their beloved baby.

In the two years that followed, Everett became aware of many misconceptions that exist



about how to help parents who are grieving the loss of a baby before or after birth. Parents who experience the loss of a child at any stage of pregnancy or infancy are often overwhelmed by grief that is intense, isolating and sometimes invalidated by others, usually unintentionally.

Occasionally, people of faith think that they are helping parents contextualize the loss of a baby by saying things like "God doesn't give you more than you can handle" or "Now you have a little angel in heaven." Besides being theologically problematic, these kinds of statements often add to the feelings of isolation and invalidation that grieving parents experience. Their loss is real and enormous, and it needs to be acknowledged, Everett said. Every human life is invaluable and sacred from the very moment of conception, and Catholics should mourn the loss of these little ones who die before or after birth.

Even the words themselves — "miscarriage," "stillbirth" or "infant loss," are topics not widely spoken about in Catholic communities or understood in the fullness of Church teaching.

The idea for Ava's Grace unites what Everett believed as a Catholic woman, wife, mother and grandmother, and what she heard and saw in her work

"There are many types of prayer and liturgical rites within the context of the Church," Everett explained. For example, there is a beautiful ritual for naming and commending infants who die before baptism that was developed by the Archdiocese of St. Louis. There is also a moving blessing for parents after a miscarriage or stillbirth, from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Book of Blessings.

Also, many people do not realize that according to Canon Law, a child of any gestational age whose parents intended to bap-

for grieving parents and those who love them.

Everett knows that not a day goes by that parents and grandparents do not think of their beloved little ones who had such a brief life on earth. Age or time doesn't diminish the love they have for their child and for the relationship, which continues to exist.

Ava's Grace will sponsor memorial Masses on each side of the diocese later this month for those who have lost a child. The Fort Wayne-area Mass will be celebrated at St. John the Baptist Church on Tuesday evening, Oct. 23, at 7 p.m., and the South Bend-area Mass will take place at St. Therese, Little Flower Church on Thursday, Oct. 25, at 7 p.m.

On Saturday, March 23, Ava's Grace will offer a day-long retreat at the Sacred Heart Parish Center, Notre Dame. This retreat will be geared for couples who have suffered miscarriage, stillbirth or infant loss, but individuals will be welcome as well. The retreat will be designed to help couples to turn toward each other and toward God as they journey through their grief.

The patron saints of Ava's Grace are Sts. Louis and Zélie Martin, parents of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, who themselves lost four children — three in infancy and one in early childhood. Like these parents whose path to holiness passed by way of this painful cross, Ava's Grace hopes to help couples to cherish the time on earth that they had with their child, to entrust him or her to Our Lord and Our Lady, and to look forward to the life that will never end.

Later next spring, Ava's Grace plans to offer a "companion" outreach, in which men, women or couples would be matched with others who have experienced a similar loss. "There is a beautiful empathy born of a shared suffering and a shared faith," Lisa reflected. "And there is great value in getting to know someone who has lived through the heartbreaking loss of a baby and has started to heal."

The phrase "heal the broken-hearted" has lingered in Lisa's heart over the past few weeks. It is one of the phrases from Luke 4:18, when Jesus is at His home synagogue and is handed a sacred scroll of Scripture and opens it to read aloud: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted ..."

"Christ alone can fully bind up the broken hearts of parents who have lost a child," Lisa said. "Ava's Grace hopes to be a channel of the love of Christ, which draws close to us in our suffering and heals our deepest wounds."



Provided by Lisa Everett

Launching this month is a diocesan ministry aimed at the often overwhelming grief experienced by the parents of infants who pass away just before or after birth.

in marriage, family and pro-life ministry.

"Early last fall, I really felt in my heart a strong desire to start something in honor of Ava," she explained. She continued to think and pray about it over the next few months, asking Our Lady's intercession to let her know how to best honor her granddaughter's brief life on earth. Clear confirmation came in multiple forms around the feast of the Immaculate Conception in December, after she prayed a novena. She felt the Holy Spirit moving as she began to hear more testimonies of pregnancy and infant loss and the lack of resources to help families deal and begin to heal from a Catholic perspective. With Kate and Dale's blessing and Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades' approval, Ava's Grace was announced publicly on May 17, the two-year anniversary of Ava's stillbirth.

Consultation and development took place over the summer months. The ministry is being formally launched this month, October, which is Respect Life Month and national Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month in the United States.

Ava's Grace hopes to offer practical, emotional and spiritual support to grieving families and to bring the rich resources of the faith to bear on the heartbreaking loss of a child.

tize him or her, is entitled to a Christian funeral and burial. And there is practical help available as well. For example, in helping to plan Ava's funeral, Lisa's husband, Deacon Frederick Everett, discovered that the Trappist monks of New Melleray Abbey in Iowa, as part of their ministry, offer beautiful, hand-crafted wooden caskets for infants in compassion and faith at no cost to families who have lost a child.

The Ava's Grace webpage, www.diocesefwsb.org/avas-grace will go live on Oct. 15, national Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day. It will feature the new ministry's logo, painted with muted watercolors with the name and two olive branches on either side. The Everetts' youngest daughter, Maria, came up with the idea of the two olive branches: one symbolizing life after death, the sign that the dove brought to Noah after the Great Flood in the Old Testament, and the other symbolizing peace — the peace that only Christ can give, in the New Testament.

The page will contain information to help families face the loss of an infant before or after birth, with the support of the rich resources of the Catholic faith, from liturgical rites and burial services to grief resources; as well as recommended books, an array of articles and blogposts



EVEN AMID MISCARRIAGE AND STILLBIRTH

**HE SEES
YOUR
SUFFERING**

DioceseFWSB.org/AvasGrace