# Coping With Tragedy

***By Joyce E. Pennington,***
***Excerpts from "Gussie Nell's Angels-There is a Drill Team in Heaven"***

## Working Through it

*By Kristi Creamer Beaty, Director, Duncanville High Hats*

It's something I thought would never happen to me. Just months prior, several directors and myself discussed the situation. "How would you go on?" "What would you do?" "I don't think I could even imagine how to handle that." Well, I was faced with those questions on November 4, 1995, when one of my precious High Hats was killed in a single car accident. I did not have to imagine anymore. It was now a reality.

It started at 5:00 am, when I received a phone call. I was not startled by the call because we were leaving with our band for a contest in Houston at 6:30 am, so I assumed one of my girls could not find her leotard, ankle warmers, prop or something. It was one of my High Hats, but her story was not just that she could not find something. She had really lost something. She had lost her best friend, Jill Bateman. Denial set in. What a horrible conversation. A seventeen year old girl trying to convince a thirty year old woman that her best friend was killed and I just kept saying, "no."

From this point on, I know God led me, for I had no sense of even where to begin. I first called my band director. What a source of strength he was. He was at my house by 5:10 am. We made the necessary phone calls in order to get confirmation. The whole time I just kept thinking there was a mistake. We then made the decision not to go to the contest. How could 400 young people, who were a part of the halftime show, function after news of this tragedy? The toll it would put on our bodies would prove to be unbearable and we would not be at our best.

We arrived at the school around 6:15 am. Because the news was so recent, barely anyone knew, so many of the students were lining up waiting for the buses, completely unaware that the next few minutes their lives would be changed forever. My band director called everyone into the band hall to make the announcement. And so the grieving process began, not just for myself, but the many others touched by her presence. Counselors, principals, teachers, parents and friends were there to console. I had no idea how to act or react. Death is something I had not had to deal with much in my lifetime. I knew I had to grieve, but I also knew that seventy sets of eyes looked toward me for guidance, love and strength. Never have I felt so weak, yet been so strong at the

same time. So many people were there for me. I called one of my dearest friends who lost her younger brother several years prior in a drowning. She cried with me and told me, "I know this is hard to understand and it sounds crazy, but try to make something good come of this." That thought started the healing. Throughout the weekend, I kept looking for answers, and somewhere along the way, I realized that God would only give to me as much as I could handle. I also began to realize that He chose me for a reason. One of those reasons being that the next time another director has to go through this horrible loss, I will be there to console, listen and share. God chose me to help someone else and I hope that the following information will help you and others through this tragedy.

My first thought is that I pray this never has to happen to you. Just months prior, I believed it would never happen to me, and then, "boom." So never take a moment for granted. You hug those girls and let them know daily how special they are, so if they must leave too soon, they would leave knowing that they were loved.

Secondly, know that the grieving process is different for everyone. Some will cry, others will deny. Some will be strong, others will be confused and maybe angry. Let them work through it themselves and just be there for them.

Thirdly, lean on others. My school district has what is called 'crisis plan.' When a tragedy like this occurs, there is a chain of who should be contacted and responses to take. Counselors, principals, teachers and administrators were all there to help us through. Just their presence was appreciated. Also, make sure you're always with someone for a few days. There is a time to be alone, but try to stay strong by eating right, talking to and being around others. Be prepared to cry like you've never cried before. I did not think I could ever cry so much and some days are still hard. Do not be afraid to lean on those girls. They were there for me as much as I was there for them. They called me, came over and once we came back to school, someone was in my office every hour on the hour making sure I was okay.

Fourth, let the students do what they think is appropriate in remembering your lost one. Some of my girls with the help of some parents made a cross to put up at the accident site. Several students took flowers, mementos, pictures and knick knacks to place there. It has somehow connected them with Jill. The students also had a candlelight service at her accident site. A Dallas police officer, also a High Hat dad, was there to make it safe. Over one hundred students were there singing "Amazing Grace" and remembering happy times with Jill. The Heavens echoed when a small group of choir students sang, "The Lord Bless You and Keep You." We were beginning to feel peace. That night was the first time I saw her best friend smile.

Next, be prepared to talk. Some of it will be to stop gossip, while some of it will be to remember the good times. On the Monday following the accident, we all met to pray, pass out ribbons and continue to console. The paramedics that were called to the accident scene came to school that day. One of them was also a High Hat dad. Questions about the cause of death were answered. Did she suffer? Was alcohol involved? Was she wearing her seat belt? We wanted to know the facts and put an end to some of the horrible rumors that were beginning to evolve. There was no alcohol nor drugs involved. She was thrown from her car because she did not have her lap belt on, only her shoulder strap. And, she did not suffer. We prayed for strength to help us make it through the day. I did find the strength to teach my dance classes, simply because it kept me busy and many times, dancing can help us forget some of our burdens that we carry.

The viewing of the body was on Monday afternoon. It was suggested to plan a time for all of us to be there and then plan something for afterwards. The reason is that they would stay

there all night and never want to leave. We planned to meet at the funeral home at 4:30 pm, then meet back at school at 6:00 pm. The next thing I tell you might seem odd–but it was the first time I had seen any girls smile in days. We had a pizza party. It was probably the first time many of them had eaten in days. We also showed old and new videos of our performances that brought tears of laughter to our eyes instead of tears of sorrow. At that time, I was finally able to stand in front of everyone and share many good things that were beginning to occur. First, everyone was wearing their seat belts now, including this stubborn old director. A camp scholarship was established in Jill's name by American Drill Team School© and we would also be starting a scholarship at Duncanville High School. Finally, I shared with them something that brought so much peace to myself and other drill team members. November 4, the day Jill passed away, was also Gussie Nell Davis' birthday. It gave me such comfort to know Miss Davis was up there staring Heaven's very own drill team of angels, and we have a High Hat on the team! It fit perfect with a poem one of my fathers wrote entitled "A High Hat in Heaven" (see page 16). We giggled and smiled about that thought. We made it through the funeral and burial and began to pick up our lives once again.

Lastly, be sure to do something so that your loved one will always be remembered. We have a table where flowers, gifts and cards are displayed. There will be a tree planted on our campus in honor of Jill. We've also started a special scholarship in honor of Jill. Money from that scholarship will go to a newly chosen High Hat each year to help pay for the expenses of being in the first year of drill team. We felt that in this way, Jill will be a part of our team for years to come.

One last note, please know that I certainly do not have all the answers. These are just a few things that helped me and my girls through one of the worst times I have experienced. I know everyone has different ways of coping. The most important thing is to lean on others, especially our Father in Heaven, to give you the strength and love to endure. God bless.

## What I Went Through As a Director

*By Stephanie Carpenter, Director, Pleasant Grove High School Showstoppers*

When I first became drill team director over five years ago, I never imagined that I would become so close to each member, nor that I would ever have to face losing one of them. What is strange is that I never mentioned the possibility of losing a member until one of my good friends lost one of her girls in November, 1995. (See Jill Bateman, pages 15-19) Then, I became frightened that a tragedy like that could happen to my team. When I told the girls what had happened to Kristi Martin's team, the Duncanville High Hats, I told them that I never wanted to go through that with them and I didn't know if I could handle it if I ever lost one of them.

On May 12, 1996, I was out of town with my husband visiting his parents and some friends. That morning I received a call from my sister saying that the assistant principal had called and that one of my girls had been in an accident. It was prom weekend, so I was worried about them anyway. My sister gave him the phone number to my in-laws and a minute later the phone rang again and it was Mr. Mitchell, the assistant principal. He first asked me if someone was there with me, then he told me the story. Morgan, her boyfriend Nick, and his parents were driving home from Austin after the state track meet. They were late coming home because Nick had dehydrated at the track meet and had to be taken to the hospital. Morgan was driving her car with Nick's mother. Nick and his father were in the car ahead of them. They were a couple of

miles outside Texarkana when Morgan fell asleep at the wheel of the car and hit another car on the other side of the interstate.

After Mr. Mitchell told me the story, I was waiting for him to tell me that she was in the hospital and would be all right. He didn't. Instead, the words I didn't want to hear came out, "She was killed." I can't explain how I felt, but I do know that I have never felt that way before. All I knew was that I had to get to Texarkana to be with the girls and Morgan's family. I wanted to be there for them and I think I needed them there for me.

One of the first things we did as a team was to talk about Morgan and all of the crazy or memorable things she did. We tried to laugh as much as possible. When I think about Morgan, I remember her desire to be the best. She never settled for second best. Even if she had to work harder than others, that didn't matter. She was going to be the best. I was blessed to have Morgan , not only in drill team, but in Algebra II as well. I think that's why I grew so close to her. There are always some drill team girls that you become emotionally connected to. Morgan was one of those girls. She would ask me for boyfriend advice, school advice, or we would just talk about anything. Morgan was also very reliable. I counted on her a lot. I really wanted her to try out for officer this past year, but she chose not to try out. She was a leader anyway and that was plenty for her.

Another thing we did that was very special was to say good-bye to Morgan as a team. We all went to the funeral home, got in a circle, like the girls do before every performance, and said a prayer. This time we all said The Lord's Prayer. After that, we gave our 'special' Showstopper scrunchie to Morgan to keep with her forever.

One piece of advice that Kristi Martin (Duncanville director) gave me when all of this happened was to do whatever we could to honor Morgan. Nothing was too much. Whatever we wanted to do, just do it. That is the advice that I would give in this same situation. Honoring Morgan's memory has helped me heal and helped the team heal.

Not a day goes by that I don't think of Morgan. Sometimes I laugh and sometimes I cry. One thing I do know is that I will never forget her, with her strong personality and beautiful smile. When all of this happened, I said that I never wanted to go through this again and that if I lost another girl then I would quit. Even if it does happen again, I won't quit. I love them too much.

## Losing Three Students...

*By Mary Beth Kepper, Director, James Bowie High School Stars*

It seems like forever ago that Corey, Amanda and Ian were first lost to us. Then, again, it seems like yesterday. In the time that has passed, I have tried MANY times to set my thoughts on paper without success. I have struggled with how to start, what to include, how to say it, and where to stop. In all, I have had my greatest problem trying to find a few lines on a sheet of paper that would do justice to the gift these children were, the contributions they made in their efforts, and the incredible loss we all suffer now that they are gone. But deadlines approach, so I must say something:

Corey, who was killed in a one car accident on her way home one Saturday night, was the team's lighthearted nurturer who could make all of us smile. I can still see her on my left, toward the back, giving me that secret smirk when things were tough, just letting me know that it was all really ok. I also remember that, after her death, she still won the banquet award for best team smile, that her parents stood with the other parents on the closing night of Spring Show when

her senior class performed their last dance together. Corey was also a member of my church. I will never forget how it felt to see her being brought down the same aisle she had recently so happily walked to communion. It was a heart wrenching moment, but also a comforting one to know that she was being sent to rest in a ceremony that was in a place she so greatly loved.

Amanda, who died in a car accident one day as she was accidentally forced into oncoming traffic on an Austin area highway, was the one that gathered up her courage and went away to college. All of her friends chose to stay close to home to go to college. Not Amanda! This was the child that had BIG plans that would take her far from home and out there by herself. That wasn't a surprise to me, as she always managed to find her own way of tackling everything we did in Silver Stars. I could always count on Amanda to have that "just a little different" take on dance style, discussion topics, and brainstorming sessions. It worked well for her. In fact, it was her greatest asset and served her well as she became the lone Aggie from her group and excelled in her time at A&M.

Ian lost his life in a freak accident trying to catch a train in New Zealand while on a People to People trip. Of course, this was one of those things that just didn't happen. But, Ian was just one of those people that just didn't happen. He sang, played several musical instruments, had performed in The Nutcracker, loved to tap dance, was Captain of the Tennis Team at Bowie, and was into EVERYTHING, especially his new role as a Silver Star Sidekick. I didn't get the chance to know him that well. But one of my closest friends on the faculty at Bowie remembers the last time he saw him. Ian was waiting for some friends at Barton Springs pool, and was at the top of the hill, alone, turning cartwheels along the ridge.

These young people were all at the beginning of their lives. We sometimes find ourselves wanting to say, "Well, it was just their time…" I don't find myself saying that at all. It was not their time. They were all struck down in the beginnings of their lives. They accomplished many things in their short stays here. They touched many people, and enriched our lives by having passed through them. I will not forget any of them, and I will always remember the grief their families and friends suffered when they died. But, they will always be remembered by those of us who knew and loved them. They will always be young, always be hopeful, and always be smiling. Even as the tears threaten to sneak up and out, they are right here, inside me, making me smile at their memories and helping me to carry on. They help me remember that EVERY ONE of our kids is special and that I smile for all of them, too.

## Why Stacy?

*By Julie Rastetter, Director, Clayton Ridge Drill Team*

The day I had to say good-bye to one of "my girls" has left me with such a sense of loss inside. In the twenty years of being the director of the drill team I had just about every type of incident happen with one of my girls. I had just said two weeks before Stacy's passing that death was the only thing I did not have to deal with and hope that I never had to. My girls become a part of me. I could not envision having one pass away.

I will never forget the phone call I received from my husband telling me that Stacy was gone. I stood there and was waiting for someone to tell me it was a joke. He told me to come to school right away, that I was needed to deal with my team. I had a thirty minute drive to get there; I do not even remember being in my car driving. I just remember praying out loud that it was wrong and by the time I got to school she would be all right.

I knew I had to be strong for my team and let them know that we would get through this tragedy together. As I walked into the room where my team and others had gathered, it really hit me. I went to each one of my girls and gave them a hug. We like to give each other hugs as our bonding night at summer dance camp and that kind of hug was certainly needed now.

I was asked by the superintendent and a teacher to ride along out to the Johnson home to extend our sympathies to Stacy's family. I knew it was something I needed to do. I needed to see her mom and dad to know that what had happened was real. When I walked into their house and saw the look on their faces, my heart just broke into a million pieces. My solid as a rock performer – Stacy was gone; but why?

The next several days were hard on all of us. Stacy's funeral was a wonderful tribute to her and all she did in her short life. We as a team sat all together and at the end of the service, we led the casket out and lined the walkway for Stacy to pass through. We held our hands in the traditional pinkie finger hold; I know she would have wanted to be a part of that tradition one last time.

I could always count on Stacy to remember the routines from the beginning to end, even if we did the routine the year before. She was a very strong performer and was always in the front as a leader. She was great at military – being rigid as can be and also great at hip-hop or funk where she could really get into the moves. Whenever she performed she would never wear her glasses. She was blind as a bat without them but she never missed a beat or a position on the floor during routines. I will miss her yelling for me after a routine. She always gave me her glasses to hold for her and she needed them back as soon as possible. It won't be the same without that ritual of having those glasses sitting on the top of the jam box.

I am so blessed to have had the opportunity to have been a part of Stacy's life. I hope I touched her in a way that meant something special to her. I will always hold her in a special little place in my heart. I know she is with us each and every day. I miss you and love you, Stacy.

## Thoughts from Rhonda Ritter

*Director of Hardin Jefferson HS*

Wow! When asked how I "coped with" the death of my captain, the first words I have are "I have no idea". I remember coming to school that following Monday thinking "I have to be strong for the kids". I spent all day with students in my room, crying, laughing, talking, etc., no school work even discussed on that day. The students decided they wanted to do a powerpoint for the funeral to show her life. We began working on it that Monday and continued for two days. I stayed up until the early hours of each morning, piecing everything together, finding the right music, putting it all in the correct order.

For my team, it was extremely difficult. Cathy was the captain, the team member in charge, the motivator, the spiritual connection. We began class in our circle and prayed. I had the team sit down and I went through as much detail about the wreck as I could so that they would know the details and not be concerned with all the rumors about what had happened. Once that was finished, I told the girls that she would only continue living if each of us took a piece of her life and lived it how she would. We went around the room and everyone said what they remembered her for. I told them to hang on to that memory and she would never be gone. For example, she was a very good Christian and was very open about her beliefs. Many of the

girls decided that they would try to be as good a Christian as she was and openly express their beliefs.

We met at the funeral home as a team outside the entrance dressed in our team warm-ups. I then took the hand of my 1st Lt and she proceeded to take the hands of other members. We walked into the funeral home holding hands, circled around the casket in our familiar circle and prayed the Lord's Prayer. It was very emotional. We all cried. I wanted to be there with them when they went in and I think it really helped.

The day of the funeral, I read and reread my speech numerous times thinking, "I can't do this". The team wore their uniforms to the funeral and we had a section reserved for us up front. When I walked to the front to speak, I knew I had to get through this for the students' sake. Several students were going to speak after me and I thought if I could make it through without crying, that will be their confidence. It worked! I made it through and the students thanked me later because they thought, if I could do it, they could.

When the caskets of Cathy and her mother were to be taken out, I turned to my 1st Lt. and asked if she wanted to stand and salute. She agreed. I stood up as strongly as I could and the team followed me with their salute. It was the most touching and memorable thing I will ever take from that ceremony. I didn't cry at the church. I had to be strong.

At the grave site I stood strong until it was over. I spoke with all the students, team members, friends etc who were there until they all left. After that, I broke. I refused to leave the grave site. My husband waited until he thought he could convince me otherwise.

At the following Friday night's game, we entered the stadium with black arm bands to the tune of Taps, while they read a poem I wrote for Cathy. The girls needed to dedicate that game to her memory. We talked about the accident for months after that, the girls needed to talk openly and honestly about their feelings. We then turned in information to Joyce for her book "Gussie Nell's Angels" for Cathy to be a part of. We still make comments today that she is our drill team angel.

Not a day went by that I did not think of her and not a day still goes by that I don't. With my team, we talked about it anytime they wanted to. We changed our dismissal. At first we were called to attention and then dismissed with the team sounding out their team name. Now, until this very day, we circle up, tell each person that we love them and then dismiss. We had discussed that the last thing Cathy had said to me was goodbye and I love you. I told the team, you never know if you will ever get that chance, so we tell each other at every dismissal now. It has brought our team closer together. That year, nothing could have broken those members apart. When we competed at Showtime's competition in Fiesta Texas we won Grand Champions. We did it for Cathy.

Two weeks ago we attended Showtime's competition in Fiesta Texas again. This time, because the current captain and another member were freshmen when Cathy was killed. My current Captain requested that we go back. She was very touched by her and wanted to go back to the same place we were after the accident. She needed those memories to be good again, I agreed and we went. It was a very touching, heart wrenching memory, but the memories were good. We got through it together.

Advice to directors: be strong, pray, let them talk about it, listen to them, let them write their feelings down, create a scrapbook, video, powerpoint etc if it helps them, do whatever it takes to get your team through it, but don't let them quit dancing. Keep them focused on your

overall team goals and make them continue to go on living, even if it is in the memory of someone else.

As a director, I put my feelings on the back burner until I went home. This was very painful. I had to. This girl was like a daughter to me and it still hurts to this day. I still cry about it, but I'm better. I dealt with so many students that weren't drill team members too, that it is hard to convey it all. I may have gone off on a long road here, but with the recent competition, I had a lot of memories built up.

## The Healing Process

*By Jon Fisher, Director, Round Rock HS Dragonettes*

The following are some things that the Dragonettes and I did to assist with the grieving process upon Casey's death:

The studio bulletin board became a place for placing personal messages, poems, articles, cards, letters, drawings, etc. from ANYONE in the school. For weeks students would come and read, reflect or contribute more to the board as a means for healing and staying connected to her and others who loved her. While standing and reading, it created an opportunity for dialogue, counseling, and consoling among students and her friends. A table was placed in front of the bulletin board that also was filled with flowers, photos and special mementoes that students placed in her honor.

The team created a scrapbook of memories for her parents. Each Dragonette created a page that represented their relationship or admiration of Casey, in their personal way, and it was bound in a monogrammed cloth cover in her favorite color of purple, and on her 18th birthday, the team visited her family and presented them with the book. Again, this was a way of healing for each Dragonette to express their feelings regarding Casey. The family was very appreciative of the book.

We planted a pink rose bush in the Memory Garden on our campus, and it serves as a local place for Dragonettes to ponder their thoughts, take a moment of reflection, and/or stay "physically" connected to her presence on earth. Surprisingly, the first time the rose bush bloomed was on Casey's 18th birthday! Truly a sign from God that Casey's beauty remains on earth, and she is glancing down from Heaven above!

In the spring show, the year she died (her Jr.. year), her class (rookies) created a dance in her memory and performed it as a tribute to her and her family. In the spring show, her Sr.. year, as part of the senior slide show, a portion was dedicated to Casey, and while the slides played of her, the Sr.'s had decorated tall, clear glass candles with her name, motifs, flowers, etc., and systematically paraded them into the theatre, and placed them on a ledge at the front of the stage, as a sign of unity for the Sr. class and in memory of Casey's beauty, talent, and energy. This portion of the show was emotional, healing, and very effective. Following the slideshow, the FINALE, or traditional high kick was performed, and it meant so much to the team and more importantly to the Sr.. class to dance with the candles glowing brightly in front of them, symbolizing Casey's presence in the "last dance".

The cross marker on the bridge where she was killed is weekly maintained, even today, by current team squads. They freshen up the ribbons, flowers, and mementoes that were originally placed on the wreath. Also, purple ribbons with a pink rose were made by social

officers at the time of her death, and are still worn by many current/former team members. I wear mine to each contest on my suit jacket as well.

At the Sr.. game, the Sr.. Dragonettes receive their charms and necklaces from the booster club during pre-game on the field. Casey's family attended the ceremony, along with her little brothers, one who carried her hat, and the other wearing her letter jacket, and accepted her charm. This was the first time the family had faced the team and any aspect of high school activities, since Casey's death almost a year prior, and it was emotional but again healing.

In the stands, we had a wreath made of the number of seniors on the team with a pink rose (her favorite) in the center to represent Casey. Again, this was a healing touch and to keep her memory alive through an important game.

In a recent tragic death of drill team girl on a local sister team, we made ribbons for their uniforms, a banner which represented the girl, motifs that represented the theme for our team and their team as sisters. It proudly is displayed in their studio, and signifies our compassion and understanding of their loss, as we have endured the same. We also, met on a day that was open for both teams and had a sister pow-wow to air feelings and show support on many levels to their team.

I hope these are helpful ideas. I realize many of them were tailored for issues and events on our team, but they may spark an idea or inspire someone to do something similar for their team or sister teams.

## Honoring Our Lost Member

*By Denise Cochran, Director, McNeil HS Majestics*

It has been the most difficult year in my 17 years of teaching. No one can prepare you for what you will experience. I prayed daily for strength and wisdom to lead my team. Of course, our dear Lord provided!

Here are a few things that we did: We as a team always wore purple on the 13th of each month. Kelly died on July 13th and this was her favorite color.

Each month, each squad did something special like planting a rose bush, making a Thanksgiving book for Kelly's family, video taping a blessing, giving a purple rose to others in Kelly's honor, visiting her grave site for every holiday...so many things. Her memory has been alive all year. We are doing a big number this week in the Spring Show dedicated to her.