

CMA Medeiros has been a volunteer with Full Circle Living and Dying (FCLD) since September of 2016. She learned about FCLD through Sushila Mertens, who at the time was an ally, and now an active volunteer of the organization offering death positive “living room conversations” monthly on Zoom. This goes to show you that FCLD offers flexibility to volunteers, who choose how and when they support the work, and the level of activity can ebb and flow.

Interview with CMA Medeiros, an FCLD volunteer and Grief Recovery Specialist

What is your specialty as an end-of-life doula?

I am fueled by guiding people through two independent, and complementary journeys as they trek through life. On the one foot (because these are both journeys, progressing step-by-step), I serve as a guide to the end of the road, walking alongside as you clearly define and express how you and your people want to care for you during end of life. On the other foot, I serve as a guide through grief and loss by teaching you a life skill called The Grief Recovery Method®.

My work in the end-of-life domain emphasizes quality of life. To live well while dying, it’s important to plan how to die well while living. To live well while living, it’s beneficial to learn sooner than later how to grieve loss, which occurs during an entire lifetime, and not just near the end, would you agree? The Grief Recovery Method® teaches us how to digest the pain and suffering that comes from the grief that weighs us down, and use of the Method throughout a lifetime means we don’t ever lose access to the memories we want to cherish as long as we live.

How did you come to this work?

I thank my Mom for leading me to being an end of life midwife. She died, but not before spending her last 10 days at home, with support from the amazing First Health Hospice team. Mom and Dad kept legal paperwork regularly reviewed and up to date. Dad and I repeatedly made clear to myriad care teams that Mom wanted comfort care and to die in peace at home. It took 3 long lingering days to get her off the irrelevant medications, tubes and continued testing, and into bed at home. Hospice offers indispensable support, and at the same time they can only do so much for a client, when there are other clients to serve. Dad and I were able to hire additional professional support because we feared our ignorance would translate into negligence during her dying days. Even with experienced help there were so many questions that overwhelmed me. What did Mom want and need during these final moments? Dad and I had different views about what to do, and Mom couldn’t express her wants and needs because the stroke had rendered her unable to speak. She communicated in all sorts of other ways, but how much of that was tainted by me projecting my own thoughts on the matter? During the 1440 minutes of each remaining day with Mom, how do I show up for her here where I have little control, when I am struggling to be present and calm and fighting against feeling numb from the thought of losing her forever?

What has death and dying taught you?

Dying is not just a one-person act. No one should ever feel like they are alone whether they are the one dying, or they are the one in the presence of someone who is dying.

Based on my experience thus far, the loved ones of the person dying is wanting, more than anything, to be there, to be of service, and to do whatever needs to be done, if only they knew what and how. Knowing how to care for someone who is dying goes way beyond following instructions regarding treatments, machines, tubes, and trials. It is a HUGE deal to have an advanced directive completed, and it's one step in the right direction to reach a goal that makes the dying one and their loved ones feel empowered to be in loving union during this profound time. Chances are that what the dying person wants, and the choices for next steps, may not necessarily light up a clear path forward.

Generally speaking, a person in the middle of who knows where trying to figure out next steps for heading in the right direction might use the technique of triangulation for problem solving. Triangulation is a process whereby you figure out where you want to be by gauging where you are in relation to two additional known points, all three of which help you to determine next steps. Triangulating for next steps when someone is dying involves reviewing the current data, the dying person's documentation including advanced directives, and most importantly, the values that have been driving their quality of life up till now. This is best done as a circle of loved ones who want to be there, and not as a solo act.

What has grief taught you?

Grief visits the living not the dead. Grief is not about death; it is about the often-conflicting emotions that are driven by love and loss and wishing yesterday had been different or better or more.

I collapsed after Mom died and realized months later that her passing was the last straw that stirs the drink (I don't want to break a camel's back). Before Mom died, I had been doing my best to not feel bad about how unsatisfactory my life was. I couldn't escape my thoughts that tallied me up as a loser, even though friends and family would try to convince me how much I had going for myself.

Beginning at age two, I lost my home, friends, family, and familiar places when I moved twenty-six times. I lost my normal when my parents joined a religious sect, and I lost my parents when they didn't approve of me and my first love, so I proposed to and married a young man so I could escape them and the sect's rigid rules. I almost lost my life at gunpoint, and I lost my husband to divorce because it was he that held the gun. I lost trust in humans. I lost my cushy career I thought I'd have till I retired, when the company laid off over half of their employees during the dot bomb years. I lost the chance of bearing my own children. I lost three grandparents before I lost my mom, her mom, and an aunt within a year. I'm sure there is more

loss to come. Life hasn't quite turned out as I imagined, planned, or hoped for, and thanks to the Grief Recovery Method® I am not complaining!

Before Grief Recovery, I avoided the whispers of my true Self calling me out when I'd pretend and exclaim that "I'm FINE! Everything is going to be OK somehow!!!" The mere passage of time was not helping, and it wasn't healing all wounds. A few decades of unresolved grief were weighing me down and now wreaking havoc on my physical body (heartache is now scientifically proven to break down a body!) and I had zero zest for life, present or future.

What advice can you give us about talking about death, grief, and loss?

An ancient Greek proverb states, "If you die before you die, then you won't die when you die." You do not have to do this alone, and chances are HUGE that your friends and family don't want you doing this alone either!!! I invite you to be accompanied in your planning, and to receive the support you need to invite your friends and family to feel prepared right along with you.

"You can have regret from yesterday, fear tomorrow, but peace today by sharing your heart's deepest feelings. A life spent being fearful of showing your soul is a life not worth living."
— Shannon Alder

The grief of losing the chance of a different or better yesterday or tomorrow being not likely or nil doesn't mean you have to keep inside of you all the things you want to get off your chest. Maybe the thought of saying what's on your mind and in your heart makes you afraid you'll be judged or rejected (because we should never speak ill of the dead, for example) or afraid you'll hurt another person's feelings, or meet up with someone's defensiveness. I invite you to imagine being in a safe space with compassionate witnesses who want you to let it out and they promise you it will be received without judgement, without analysis and without criticism. I invite you to imagine how you would feel if you were to let it all out in that safe and confidential space. And then I would invite you consider taking The Grief Recovery Method® The course leads individuals and groups through the method for up to 10 weeks, up to 2 hours each week, on Zoom. Visit www.goodgrief.rocks for more info.

With all of the seriousness of the work you do, I imagine you need some balance in life. What do you do for fun?

I'm a Quebecker who moved diagonally to land in CA where I could live with the tall trees and cruise along the Pacific Coast Highway and visit the Redwoods whenever I can!

As a multipotentialite, I have become one of our county library's "best customers" when it comes to Interlibrary loans (their words not mine). I love to circle with others around a dinner table and dive into conversation about anything under the sky with mutual curiosity and pleasure.