

Eric Hartley: Section 60, where pain doesn't fade



Eric Hartley - The Capital

Gina Barnhurst of Severna Park places flowers at the grave of her son, Marine Lance Cpl. Eric Herzberg, on Sunday at Arlington National Cemetery. He was killed in Iraq in 2006. "There's just a huge hole that you can't put back together," Ms. Barnhurst said.

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Gina Barnhurst was sitting in front of her son's grave at Arlington National Cemetery, as she does almost every Sunday, when a burly man in a leather Harley Davidson jacket walked up. He rested his hand lightly on top of the headstone and asked simply: "Husband? Son?"

Ms. Barnhurst, who'd driven from her home in Severna Park, told him it was her son. He said his son was buried not far away. And without another word, Skip Rollins, this mustached bear of a man, knelt down and hugged her.

A while later, they walked over to see the grave of Mr. Rollins' son, Justin, an Army paratrooper from New Hampshire who was killed last year in Iraq and would have turned 24 yesterday. They exchanged e-mail addresses, thank-yous and more hugs.

This kind of thing happens often in Section 60, where those killed in Afghanistan and Iraq are eligible to be buried. Here, on what's been called "the saddest acre" in America, the grief is raw and new.

"There are lots of people here who need to talk, so every Sunday's different," Ms. Barnhurst said after sitting down again by her son's marker.

The talking helps, she said.

"When you first come, you feel like you're the only one this has happened to. You're sort of tunnel-visioned on your own grief."

Twenty-year-old Marine Lance Cpl. Eric W. Herzberg, a 2005 Severna Park High School graduate, was killed by enemy fire in Iraq on Oct. 21, 2006. Since then, Ms. Barnhurst has been dealing with a pain most of us can't imagine.

But she's also become a sounding board and an informal counselor for others dealing with loss, who have formed a small group dubbed the Families of Section 60 that meets regularly.

She's been interviewed on National Public Radio and NBC's "Today" show and in a recent HBO documentary called "Section 60."

When I asked whether it was strange to have her private anguish on public display, she said the group had talked about that.

"We decided that we are our sons' voices," she said. "And we want people not to forget them. We want people not to forget what they've done. We don't want people to forget the men and women who are still over there."

Mixed with the immeasurable grief is pride, especially around times like Veterans Day today, when people who usually don't give much thought to Section 60 or those buried here pause to do so - at least for a moment.

"They're all veterans," Ms. Barnhurst said, looking out over the acres of headstones. "They didn't get a chance to come home, but they're all veterans."

On this Sunday, two days before Veterans Day, there were more people at Arlington than usual. Some days Ms. Barnhurst, who's a county special education teacher for children with autism, is almost alone. She's here most Sundays, through snow and bitter cold.

Ms. Barnhurst, who has short blond hair, wore a light blue Marines windbreaker and a black wristband with Eric's name. Around her neck were her son's dog tags, which she hasn't taken off since she got them.

She and her friend, Rhonda French, sat for about two hours in low-slung chairs and talked as it grew dark. Ms. Barnhurst lighted candles and placed flowers, a photograph of her son and a small American flag around the headstone.

She didn't have time this day, with all the visitors, but often she writes letters to her son to tell him how she's feeling and to ask him for help. At Christmas and other occasions, she helps decorate the small tree next to his headstone.

"It's not a feeling I can describe to somebody," Ms. Barnhurst said of her need to come so often. "You feel drawn to be with them. You feel drawn to be where they are."

As many times as she's talked about his death, it hasn't gotten any easier. Her family is still learning to cope without Eric, who was the middle child, two years older than Matthew and 19 months younger than Katie. (She and Eric's father, Eric F. Herzberg, divorced years before their son's death.)

People ask Ms. Barnhurst if she's "moving on," a phrase she doesn't like. She prefers to say she's "going on." She calls the face she puts on to get through the days at work "a mask."

Good things can bring pain, like the joke Eric would have laughed at and, of course, Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"There's just a huge hole that you can't put back together," Ms. Barnhurst said.

She remembers her son's sense of humor, the way he was a peacemaker among friends and how "sensitive" (not the word a Marine would have chosen, surely) he was to others' feelings.

On this day at Arlington, three Marine Vietnam veterans from New Jersey also pass by and pay their respects to Ms. Barnhurst and the Rollinses. They were there to see a friend's grave in another part of the cemetery, but were drawn to Section 60. They want to make sure Iraq veterans and casualties are honored publicly in a way too many Vietnam veterans were not.

"It's just something we had to do," said one, Ernie Diorio. "It wasn't done for us, but it should be done for these kids."

Paul Becker, a 24-year-old man from Washington, came to pay his respects and was struck by how many of those in Section 60 were his age or even younger.

"I'm just grateful," he said.

As they hugged near Spc. Rollins' grave, Ms. Barnhurst said to his mother, Rhonda: "I wish I could tell you it gets better, but it doesn't."

"That's what's so nice about here is we all know how each other feels," Mrs. Rollins had said earlier. "No one else knows."