

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God ..."

Rom. 8:28

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We know that all things work together
for good for those who love God...

Rom. 8:28

Written by Jason Koshinskie
Photography by Art Becker



“We could’ve very well done whatever we wanted because

people gave us that right,” says Paul.

“We could have gone crazy, we could have jumped off bridges, anything, and nobody would have faulted us because nobody figured you could get through something like this. Neither did we.”

But through their faith, the love of family and friends and the rallying support of a community, they have. They’ve helped themselves heal by helping others. Reaching out through the O’Brien Children Memorial Fund, they’ve brought help and hope to the Shenango Valley. They’ve become parents again, too.

“Our goal was to make the kids proud,” Paul says. “The kids were always concerned about other people. We wanted a way to remember them and to help other people.” While they trusted that God might somehow bring good things out of their situation, they also knew they faced

Paul and Tina O’Brien had everything a young couple could want. They were blessed with three beautiful children, a loving family and close friends. It all seemed to be too perfect. “I lived with a fear that something would happen to one of my kids, I really did,” Paul says. “They just were too good.”

In 1981, Paul’s fear was realized to an unfathomable degree. An accident at the family’s home tragically took the lives of the couple’s three young children – Jill, 7, Paul Jr., 5, and Stephanie, 4 – along with Tina’s mother. “I truly thought the world was going to end,” Tina says.

an extraordinary journey of the heart

Twenty-five years ago this month, Paul and Tina went on an unplanned vacation. His brother John had called with an out-of-the-blue offer to take their wives on a weekend trip to Jamaica. “I just laughed and said, ‘You’re crazy. There’s no way,’” remembers Paul. He told Tina, who mentioned the trip to her mother, Lola, who offered to watch her grandchildren.

“I think we were only going to be gone three nights,” Paul recalls. “We had never done anything like that before. I remember actually asking the kids before, ‘Do you think we should go? I have a chance to take Mommy on a vacation,’ and they were all for it. Afterward, you just wonder if that was a way of getting us out of the house. Someday we’ll know the story.”

Sometime during the second night of the trip, the furnace in the O’Briens’ Brookfield home malfunctioned, causing carbon monoxide to fill the house. The poisonous fumes overpowered Jill, Paul, Stephanie and Tina’s mother, Lola.

Paul’s mother, who lived next door, knocked on the door the next morning. When nobody answered, she went to get help but it was already too late. All three of the children and Lola were gone. Paul and Tina got the horrific phone call that would alter their world forever.

The funeral was surreal. Nearly 2,000 people filled St. Joseph Parish in Sharon. There were four hearses and four caskets. Fr. Tom Dugan and Msgr. John Hagerty were the priests at St. Joseph’s at the time. Others who celebrated the liturgy, including Fr. Phil Oriole, have become friends over the years.

“The tragedy was so unspeakable that there was no kind of verbal response one could

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make to it,” Fr. Dugan says. “The whole situation became a matter of presence, just being with them. I remember saying to myself very specifically, ‘You have to stand with them for as long as it takes.’ It was a grief of such enormous depth, it was overwhelming. I remember Tina saying to me, ‘I’m mourning my children and I don’t even have time to mourn my mother.’” Her mother was just 57.

A year-and-a-half before the accident, Tina’s father died of cancer. The family had taken turns caring for him in the hospital, and everyone had taken turns watching Jill, Paul and Stephanie. The death was traumatic for everyone in the family, especially the grandkids.

“The kids loved him so much,” says Paul. “They saw all his suffering, but I think that’s part of what made them who they were.” When they got a new bike, they’d say, *Why don’t you buy something*

for the poor kids? In a restaurant, it wasn’t uncommon for Paul to hear, *Daddy, that woman over there looks lonely. Can I go sit with her?* “It’s just not natural for a 4- or 5-year-old at all,” Paul says. “The kids are saints. They had no sin.”

The O’Briens’ biggest fear was that they wouldn’t remember things exactly as they were. But they have. It’s just one grace they say they’ve been given. They can remember the smiles, the conversations, the living room wrestling matches.

After the accident, Paul and Tina stayed with Paul’s brother, Jim, and his wife, Carol, who gave up their bedroom. They shielded them from everything. But like other family members and friends, they didn’t shun them, either. They made them do things. They took walks and went out to dinner. “We had to be strong for everyone,” Paul says. “If we were down, everybody was down. If we laughed, everyone could crack a smile.”

Having so much support was a blessing, but sometimes it still wasn’t enough. Tina thought the world

was going to end – not just her world but *the* world. Everybody in their family came back to the church. Everyone let go of petty problems. Love came out of everybody and united the family. “It was so beautiful,” Tina says. “I thought, ‘OK, everybody’s going to get back in God’s good graces and the world’s going

to end and that’s it.’ I was content with that and truly believed that. But then we got pregnant and I thought, ‘OK, now what?’”

Pregnant? More children? Although Fr. Dugan had advised them to “fill your home with children again,” it wasn’t something they were planning on. Just a few months after the accident, Msgr. Hagerty was celebrating Mass at Paul’s parents’ house, one of many Masses at the home. Being Mother’s Day, it was all too much to handle.

“Tina said, ‘Paul, I don’t want this, I don’t want to do this,’” Paul says. “So I told Monsignor and he said to me, ‘Paul, this isn’t for Tina. This is for your mother.’” The couple sat together for Mass and later left the house just to get away. “We just held each other,” says Paul. Soon after, they discovered their fourth child was on the way.

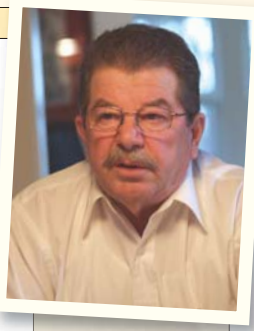
When Sarah was born, it was pure joy, like the birth of a new day.

“It wasn’t just a miracle for us but for all the people who were praying for us,” Paul says. There were 700 people at the baptism. “It was a celebration. Everything was amazing – the Mass, the church, the music.” The eventual births of Susan, Steven and Shannon were miracles for the family, too.

But there still was pain, a longing for the children they had lost. The O’Briens consider themselves the parents of seven children: four of them here and three of them “watching over us,” as Paul says. “You miss those kids just like ... sometimes you don’t know where you’d rather be,” says Paul. The four youngest children grew up wondering about their other brother and sisters and got a sense of what their parents were going through. When Sarah was 12, Tina remembers her telling her, *Sometimes I think you would rather be with the other kids*. “Poor kid,” Tina says, her eyes welling up, “to lay all that on her.”

In his ministry and friendship with Paul and Tina, Fr. Dugan reminded them about having graces in their lives and how people look for miracles. So many simple little things have helped them along the way.

“We feel like small miracles and graces have helped us all along and still do to this day,” Paul says. “We have guardian angels. The kids are helping us and their brother and sisters. And because of our faith, we know we’ll see them again.”



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To find the courage to take this on again – to be parents again, to have children again, to leave themselves open to being wounded again – the O’Briens looked to each other.

“Tina is the most serene person I have ever met,” says Fr. Dugan. “She has a great sense of Paul and of life. She’s an immensely centered person. From that, everything else has come. You have this woman with a lovingly serene heart, and Paul who is all energy and all generosity. They balanced each other perfectly. Her serenity is strength for him and his energy is strength for her.”

They also sought strength and healing in their faith. They went on a pilgrimage with friends to Israel, Greece and Italy. In the summer of ’81, Paul accompanied Fr. Dugan on a mission trip to the Yucatan. There he identified with the poor and the sick. “It was him touching the suffering of the people to expiate his own suffering,” says Fr. Dugan. “It was as if there was this compulsion for him to give to other people to validate the life of his children. He gave with a vengeance and has.”

That trip was the inspiration for the O’Brien Children Memorial Fund. In the fall after the accident, family and friends wanted to do something for Paul and Tina – something more. *What can we do? How can we help?* Friends asked to hold a clambake fundraiser. “That’s what essentially helped start the foundation,” Paul says. Family donations and proceeds from the clambake totaled \$53,000. In 25 years, the O’Brien Children Memorial Fund has given away more than \$800,000 in grants and has an endowment worth more than \$1.3 million.

Because there was no community foundation in place, the O’Brien Fund became the first charitable fund of the Shenango Valley Foundation and a voluntary board of directors was established. Today, ▶



The O’Brien children, Shannon, 16, Steven, 20, Sarah, 24, and Susan, 22, at the annual clambake fundraiser in Brookfield last October.

the foundation has more than 250 charitable funds in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio; each has its own unique charitable purpose, totaling more than \$25 million in charitable assets. In 2005, the foundation gave away more than \$1.8 million in grants. Paul says, "We hope the seed we planted, now named the Community Foundation of Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio, will continue to thrive and benefit the poor and needy in our area forever." The foundation is structured to make it easy for all philanthropists of any size and means to create a charitable fund to further benefit their community.

The foundation partners with community and faith-based agencies including the Prince of Peace Center in Farrell, the Salvation Army and the United Way to help the less fortunate in the region. The O'Brien Fund has benefited children and the elderly in need of medical and dental attention, wheelchairs and home entrance ramps and equipped vans for the handicapped. "We're helping people who are at the end of their rope," Paul says. Reasonable



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requests simply aren't refused. Bob Jazwinski, vice president of the foundation, recalls one Christmas when the O'Brien Children Memorial Fund teamed up with the Strimbu Memorial Fund. They reconditioned a 15-passenger bus and filled a dump truck with toys, school supplies and health necessities. Paul drove the truck and they hired a Santa to drive the bus. They made a surprise visit to West Hill Ministries, a faith-based youth ministry in Sharon, and presented them with the bus and other items to be used in their youth ministry. "Paul looked like Santa Claus unloading those things," he says. "You should've seen the looks on those kids' faces."

After 25 years, the foundation's clambake continues. It's just much larger now. Through the sale of tickets and a silent auction, it's one of the largest annual fundraisers for the foundation. This past October, Paul and Tina hosted 1,000 people at Yankee Lake Ballroom in Brookfield. With a Margaritaville theme, guests dined at the seafood bar and lobster and clambake buffet while listening to the tunes of a Jimmy Buffett cover band.



Paul and Tina O'Brien take a quick break during this year's fundraiser for the Shenango Valley Foundation.

"We want people to have fun when they're here," Paul says between what seems like a thousand handshakes – all with people who just want a moment to say 'hi' and 'thanks.'

Everyone knows what the event means, too, especially the O'Brien children. Sarah, 24, remembers her first clambake as "an awkward 12-year-old." She and her siblings understand that many of the people who attend went through the grief with their parents and that goodness has come from even an unspeakable tragedy.

"It's so important for us because we never got to meet them and people are here remembering them. It means they haven't been forgotten. That means so much to our parents," says Sarah.

Paul and Tina try not to talk about the accident a lot. Sometimes it's just too hard. But they read each other. They know when to pick each other up. They don't visit the cemetery as often as they used to, either. "Sometimes it doesn't feel like they're there," Paul says. "I feel like they're with me when I'm plowing the field behind the house." They're also present in the heart of the Shenango Valley.

Fr. Dugan says Paul and Tina could have become utterly what they aren't, utterly bitter people. But instead, he says, they became more and more who they are.

"What it comes down to in the end is that they are two people with an immense capacity to love," he says. "They love each other and they love their children. They have experienced human suffering and they reach out to try to lessen it. What more can you say about that?" ⊕



▶▶ To learn more about the O'Brien Children Memorial Fund, visit the Shenango Valley Foundation on the Web at www.sv-foundation.org or call **724.981.5882**.

“Like a shepherd he feeds his flock and gathers the lambs in his arms, holding them carefully close to his heart, leading them home.”



Paul and Tina O'Brien lend this pin to friends and family members whenever they feel someone is in need of comfort. The photo of their three eldest children, Jill, Stephanie and Paul, is a treasured source of strength.

inspiration