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Carrying on without Cari

Young father struggles to raise 2 kids after his wife's tragic death



Matt Cook brushes 3-year-old Ellie's hair before putting it into a ponytail last month at their home in Countryside. Matt Cook's wife, Cari, was killed in a traffic accident last year, leaving Cook to raise two toddlers alone. (Chuck Berman, Chicago Tribune / November 8, 2010)

By Vikki Ortiz Healy, Tribune reporter

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Matt Cook longs for another hour of sleep, but since the accident happened, he's the only one there to respond to his daughter Ellie's persistent cough.

He trudges down the hallway into the 3-year-old's bedroom. She doesn't appear to have a temperature, so Cook brings her downstairs and allows her to help stir pancake batter. His 21-month-old son, Carson, gets a sippy cup of juice while the sausage links brown.

And just as the young family has done for 17 months, they

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On the morning of May 19, 2009, a driver struck and killed Cook's wife, Cari, as she pushed Ellie in a stroller with Carson, then 4 months old, strapped to her chest. They were blocks from their home in west suburban Countryside.

In an instant, Matt Cook, now 32, unwillingly joined the ranks of a statistically rare group: widowed young fathers.

Less than 4 percent of the 700,000 newly widowed people each year are under the age of 35, according to the Soaring Spirits Loss Foundation, a national network that offers

support for the grieving. Because men are less likely to seek out help, it's hard to determine what number of the young survivors are male and raising small children, said Michele Neff Hernandez, the foundation's executive director.

But members of that small population are starting to find each other and seek help dealing with their losses. Two years ago, at the group's first national gathering, which brought together hundreds of people from around the world, only one man attended. Last year, there were 10.

Cook understands. He knows what it's like to be a man on his own, navigating a life he never expected.

"It's like you're walking a thin line between just totally breaking down and being OK," he said. "It isn't moving on, it's just living. We had to keep living, I guess."

...

Five years ago, Matt and Cari Cook were living exactly the life they wanted.

Cari was loud, fun-loving and outgoing; a perfect complement to Matt, who is more reserved. He proposed at Carmine's in Chicago, then surprised her with family and friends waiting to celebrate at the John Barleycorn bar. The couple married in Cancun in January 2006, then settled into Matt's [Wrigleyville](#) condo.

When they learned they were expecting their first child, Cari joked that she couldn't push a baby buggy "on the corner of Crazy and Insane," their nickname for the lively neighborhood.

It didn't take long to find a tan, three-bedroom bungalow with an old maple tree in front. They pictured barbecues in the yard and kids blowing out birthday candles at the dining room table. Plus, it was not too far from her mother's house and the expressway for Matt's commute.

He was at work when he got word of the accident.

Cari was enjoying a sunny stroll with the kids and their pug dog, Lucy, as she crossed 47th Street near Eighth Avenue in La Grange. She had just lifted Ellie's stroller onto the curb when an SUV swerved into them while traveling more than 30 mph, officials said. Cari absorbed the bulk of the impact; Carson was thrown into the street and fractured his leg. Ellie wasn't injured, but nobody knows exactly what



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was thrown into the street and fractured his leg. Ellie wasn't injured, but nobody knows exactly what she saw.

Cari died at LaGrange Memorial Hospital that afternoon.

The night of the accident, Matt Cook and the children moved into Cari's mother's house.

Carson was in the hospital and had to be introduced to formula instead of breast milk. The family had to plan a wake and a funeral. Ellie kept asking when Mommy was coming home.

Over the next few months, family and friends put flowers at the accident site and persuaded village leaders to lower the speed limit from 35 to 30 miles per hour. They lobbied for improvements to the nearby crosswalk and started a Web site to benefit the children: cookfamilyfund.com. In just a few weeks, they distributed 800 purple bracelets with the words "Slow down. Enjoy life" next to Cari's name.

And in midst of all the activity, Matt Cook created a blog. In hundreds of posts, he alternated between writing letters to his wife and keeping a diary. Some entries were elaborate, with photos and videos. Other entries were short, ignoring grammar rules: "i needed you tonight. i miss u."

Cook found unexpected support from a small community of young widows and widowers with children who were also blogging about their losses. He sent e-mails to a few, pointing out tragic similarities and inviting them to stay in touch.

The return e-mails all came from women.

"It's harder because men don't reach out," said Matt Logelin, who blogs about raising a daughter after his wife's sudden death just hours after giving birth. Logelin's blog led to a book deal and the creation of a foundation that awards grants to widows and widowers raising children.

Of the nearly 100 applications for grants received thus far, only six have been from men, Logelin said.

Three months after the accident, Matt Cook decided it was time to return home. His mother-in-law, Carolyn Stevens, urged him to stay. She thought it would be more comforting to live close to her, Cari's brother and three sisters, who also were devastated and eager to provide stability for the kids.

But Cook's mind was set.

"I could see that he maybe wanted to grieve without all of us knowing that he was doing it," Stevens said, adding that she has learned that everyone who loved her daughter must find their own way to continue.

"Continuing is OK because never does it leave your head. I wake up thinking of her, throughout the day I'm thinking of her," she said. "The bottom line is, we have survived."

With Cook back home and back to work, his days became exhausting marathons. He woke the kids and got them dressed just in time for Cari's mom to pick them up. He commuted an hour and a half through traffic to his Lake Forest office and another two hours in the afternoon to pick up the kids in Mount Greenwood. Then it was time for dinner, baths and maybe a story before they all fell exhausted into bed.

It hurt Cook that Cari wasn't there when Carson took his first steps. He had to get the video camera, set it on a table and hit record, then squat back on the floor and coax the toddler toward him.

Or that on a happy day at a baseball game, when he casually told a stranger Ellie was "in heaven" as she ate one of her favorite snacks, a giant dill pickle, Ellie asked, "Like Mommy?"

Most of all, he worried about all the instinctive mothering his children would miss. Was he pulling Ellie's ponytail back the right way? Would he remember to list Carson's milestones in the memory book? Would they know how much their mother had loved them?

Much of this was recorded in his blog, where he expressed his pain and frustration in ways he could not in person, even to family and close friends.

"There are things he tells us, and then there's things that I read on there," said Yolanda Hancock, a close friend. "I hate to read it because it's so heartbreaking, but I can't not read it because I'm concerned for him."

Seven months after Cari's death, the couple's friends threw their annual Christmas cookie party. The hostess, Jen Felten, cried when she saw Cook arrive with Ellie, Carson and a bag full of individually wrapped gifts for each of their friends' children.

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"I know how hard that was for him to even find the time to go do that," Felten said, tearing up again. "He was trying to find ways to show his kids, not just talk about her, but live what she had done."

The 47-year-old Chicago woman accused of causing the accident, Mary McPhillips, received two traffic tickets. Cook has filed a wrongful-death civil lawsuit against her, the driver of another car involved and the village of La Grange.

McPhillips declined to be interviewed but asked her brother, Jay Riordan, to speak on her behalf.

Choking through tears, Riordan said McPhillips, a mother of five, has struggled to get out of bed many days and has taken medication to help deal with depression. Someday, she hopes to have the opportunity to apologize in person, he said.

Cook tries not to think about the blame. Questions about "why?" linger, but he doesn't allow himself to get angry, he said.

Instead, he focuses on his role as sole parent. In September, he quit his job as an IT specialist with the [Chicago Bears](#) to become an independent computer consultant, allowing more time at home. He plans to repaint the house's exterior and fix a leaky roof before winter.

On a recent Sunday, it was supposed to thunderstorm all day. But for a brief period in the morning, the sky was blue and cloudless.

Cook quickly raked leaves into a pile under the maple tree. Then he grabbed his camera.

With Cari, taking photos of the children playing in the leaves was a fall tradition.

It still is.

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Does anyone know the address to Matt's blog?

sugarcanelane at 11:29 AM November 09, 2010
Sad story. We never know when we will die. Older people it seems must live their lives thinking of their death everyday...

chigirl33 at 10:53 AM November 09, 2010
Matt, you are a real hero. Not these "fake" heroes ginned up by the media. Your love for your children shines through...

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