

INSPIRING WOMEN

*Purpose, Passion and Power
in Professionalism*



MARIE FRATONI

And Fifteen Inspiring Women

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TEACHING PE: PURPOSEFUL EMPATHY

Kathi Gerke Balasek

The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others.

—*Albert Schweitzer*

How did I go from being a PE teacher to creating a business that trains professionals in grief literacy communication skills? I am known for my wit, wisdom, and playful spirit, and these characteristics are the threads that keep me growing. I have played many roles, found beautiful joy, experienced deep loss, and have learned that if life is a sport, we all need to bring our E-Game (empathy).

My story begins in a small Montana town, where I was raised by the coolest parents on earth. They instilled in all four of us a sense of service, confidence to follow our own path, and courage to get back up when we fall. My dad was a teacher and basketball coach, and my mom maintained the home and had a business painting and wallpapering people's homes. They made everything fun, social, meaningful, and inviting. They are the reason I became a teacher and why every wall in my house is fun and colorful!

It's Not about Winning

I went to college at Montana State University; it might have been on the seven-year plan, but who's counting? I wanted to be a high school PE teacher and basketball coach. Well, my first job was teaching PE to elementary children. There is something wonderful when you witness a child learning something for the first time. I fell in love with helping students discover a love of movement. Physical education is not about winning. It's about creating a space of safety and care so students have the confidence to develop skills, learn how to work together, and become physically active for a lifetime.

You first must show people you care in whatever you do. This has been my leadership style ever since. I am now a professor at California State University, Chico, where I train future teachers and coaches. Every one of my students knows my motto: "Care first, then go teach!" They must have been listening because I was recently honored with the Most Inspirational Faculty of the Year Award, a student-nominated accolade. It means so much to me to inspire the next generation of teachers!

The Losses That Define Us

I went from wife to caregiver to widow in my thirties and faced raising five children alone, a future I did not sign up for. The darkest time in all our lives became the defining moment that forever changed who I was and who I became. My husband, Jon, did not teach me about dying—he taught me about living, loving, and caring.

I lived a fairy tale. The kindest, most beautiful human in the world, Jon was a dad to three small kids, and I would have married him if he had ten. My three stepkids have carved a space in my heart like no other. We were blessed with two more beautiful children, so in honor of my love for basketball, I got my starting five. Life was wonderful, until it was not.

Jon, who was a commercial airline pilot, came home from a trip and had a bit of numbness in his face and hands. In less than six

hours, we learned that he had a brain tumor. When cancer calls, normal life stops. You live for today. You do not make plans. You are in a holding pattern, waiting to see how the patient feels after surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and numerous appointments. This was the first time I really needed to ask for and accept help. My community, friends and family showed up in ways I never could have imagined.

Jon fought cancer for five years until he passed peacefully in our home surrounded by his family. There is a saying: "People come into your life for a reason, a season, and a lifetime." Jon checked all three boxes. His influence has shaped who I have become as a mother, a teacher, a leader, and an entrepreneur.

During those five years, there were good times, too. We had a couple of healthy, hopeful years. That was when we decided to open a business together. One day, Jon said to me, "Remember how you always wanted to open a clothing boutique? Well, I would like to be here to see you do it." A week later, we secured a building, got a business license, and I headed to Los Angeles to the fashion market. When you live like there may not be a tomorrow, you just go for it! I quit my teaching job, and we opened Montana Blues. No, it's not fishing and hunting gear. I am the Montana girl who hunts for fabulous shoes and fishes for compliments! I had my nose in fashion magazines since I was a young child, and this was a dream Jon made come true.

Get Back in the Game!

Survival does not begin to describe what life was like. I was barely taking care of myself because I was more concerned about the kids. Honestly, that time was a blur. Experiencing widowhood is an emotional, physical, social, and financial marathon toward a new future. I will never be over grief; I simply have learned to walk alongside it. A wonderful grief therapist taught me that I cannot control the waves of grief, but I can choose to manage the people,

places, and things that trigger it. I learned the value of setting boundaries.

Whether I wanted to or not, I had to get back in the game of life. Most of the changes were financial. I needed the ability to earn a consistent paycheck and provide better health insurance for my family. I needed to close Montana Blues and go back to teaching. Well, the universe spoke. A month after I closed my store, someone from the university called and asked if I would be interested in teaching a course. They offered more classes contingent on a higher degree. So, I went back to school at forty-one years old and earned a master's degree with distinction. The energy of being on a college campus helped me start healing.

Fast-forward several years later: All five kids are out of the nest, have earned college degrees, some are married, I have grandchildren, and the timing was right to imagine my next chapter. With the power of my story, lessons learned, and my teaching ability, I knew I could truly help people.

The Language of Loss

Grief and loss are quite popular, yet talking about it is not. On the heels of COVID-19, my business was born. I noticed how the world was grieving, people were dying alone, families were not able to mourn a death together, and I was reminded of the social isolation I felt as a new widow. People do care, yet often they don't know what to say, how to say it, or what to do.

What do you say to someone whose child dies by suicide? Whose father is experiencing dementia? A couple who is experiencing infertility? A fatal car accident? A ninety-year-old grandfather passing away? A young widow with five children?

The reality is that every day we are on the front lines of supporting, empathizing, and communicating with friends, family members, and co-workers about loss, death, and grief, but we were never taught the language of loss. To address this, I created a tool

called Grief Smart Advisor to help people and industries learn grief literacy communication skills to champion others in life's most difficult moments.

What Is Grief Literacy?

Grief literacy helps normalize the conversations and responses surrounding grief and loss so people feel seen, heard, and respected. It's the antidote to the typical unsupportive statements the grieving so often hear.

Four Unsupportive Statements

- "It's in God's plan." Many people question their faith when grieving.
- "At least they lived a long life." There is no hierarchy to loss. The only loss that matters is their loss.
- "You are young; you will meet someone else." One life or love cannot be replaced with another.
- "You are so strong." We live in a society that is conditioned to cheer people up. Grief cannot be cheered away.

Four Supportive Statements

- The death of your mom is a remarkable loss. I will always remember her infectious smile. I am thinking of you.
- I didn't know your brother, but I can imagine that you both shared some fun times together. I would love to hear more about him.
- Your beautiful little girl is in our hearts today. I am holding a special place in my heart for you and your family.
- I am reminded of the time I spent with you and your dad. He taught me a lot about life. What an incredible loss!

Grief Literacy is my love letter to the world. It is a life skill that everyone can learn. My hope for you is that I've tugged at your heart and challenged you to lean into these difficult conversations. Let us bridge this conversational gap to confidently show up for people through life's most difficult moments. Your heart will never be the same!

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