

MEMORY MATES
“A Group that Takes on a Life of its Own”
By Richard F. “Dick” Perl

We all have heard of “Grief Group” meetings and Grief Counseling as outreach programs that are offered by either the local funeral home or cemetery. Many churches also conduct weekly or monthly gatherings for their seniors. All these programs have an important roll in the recovery and adjustment period after the loss of a loved one. But after listening to what the widows and widowers had to say, I kept hearing the same message over and over, so I wanted to take a different approach. They said they did not need a ‘grief counselor or therapy’ they wanted to make friends with others who were also going through the process of dealing with a loss. So with this in mind, the birth of the ‘Memory Mates’ occurred.

The process is rather simple. Last summer I sent all the families who we had served within the last six months an invitation to join Mobile Memorial Gardens for a social gathering (a copy of the letter is attached). We had 15 people attend the first meeting. We served refreshments and spent the time together getting to know one another. The group decided we would meet monthly from 10:00am – 11:30 am. It is important to note the gathering was held at a Community Center. I recommend not meeting at the funeral home or cemetery. Remember this is to be a social gathering.

The next thing on the agenda was to line up speakers to address the group at each monthly meeting. Due to the fact the majority of those who attend are ladies; I decided to bring in speakers that could deal with issues that their husbands most likely took care of in the past. We have had an auto mechanic talk about how to make sure you ask the right questions when someone says you need the oil changed, a new air filter, or new brakes. We have had the Better Business Bureau talk on how to check out the people with who you want to do business. During the tax season, we had an accountant come.

Each quarter, the group does a social outing. We have gone to a dinner theater, art museum and a number of concerts. After each outing the group excitingly wants to know what is planned for the next one.

By now you are most likely asking how much does this cost the funeral home or cemetery. The monthly average is about \$75 rental for the community center plus a couple of \$10 door prizes and whatever refreshments are provided. The Memory Mates outings are paid by the attendees themselves. If the Dinner Theater costs \$40, that’s what the individual pays. I have been fortunate to be able to use a church bus/van to provide transportation for those who choose not to drive. The most exciting event was the one we just completed, a 4-day cruise to Cozumel, Mexico on the Carnival Ship, the Holiday out of Mobile (see attached picture). Forty five members attended along with some additional family members. When I first approached the group about taking a cruise, I did not know what the response would be. I was very overwhelmed by the response. Matter of fact, I unfortunately had to turn a few people away because our cabin allotment was full. It cost each person only \$260. In addition, each person got an added bonus of a \$50 onboard credit to spend as they chose.

Each month we send an invitation to all the families who have had a loss during the previous month. We are now gaining 4 – 5 new members each month from the families we serve. Plus we are getting 2 – 3 additional attendees who are friends of the members who have also had a previous loss but may or may not have used our cemetery.

I think the most gratifying thing about the whole program are the comments I have heard such as, ‘If it were not for this monthly meeting I would not ever get out of my housecoat” or “This group has made me realize life is good”. I could add to this list if space would allow, but I think you get the message.

Another amazing point is of the 10 to 12 original attendees, all still come to every meeting. Yes, Memory Mates has taken on a life of its own and I’m just blessed to be a part of it.