

STUFFING STUFFED ANIMALS eases grief

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On January 11, 2003, I visited my dad who was recuperating from pneumonia in a care center. That night, as always, we talked about the old days, something we loved to do.

Sometimes the topic of conversation would be about how much fun we have had over the years winning hundreds (more like a couple thousand) stuffed animals from fairs by throwing balls into a bushel basket or bouncing coins into a glass plate.

Even at age 80, Dad was still good at it. Only a couple months before, on his yearly trip to Vegas, he'd won several stuffed animals at a couple of the casinos.

This evening the talk was of the wild parties our neighbors used to throw. At around 10 p.m. we waved good-bye to each other. It was the last time I saw him alive.

As I type this, I can still see him lying in bed on his side, one hand propping his head and the other waving. He died the next morning on the way to the hospital.

This story isn't as much about his death as what happened a few months later.

Many of you know how painful it is to eventually get to the point of dividing up mementos and giving others away. Over the years of visits to the fairs, Dad gave many of his winnings away. However, he still had more than 100 colorful teddy bears and stuffed alligators, dogs, snakes, bulls and pigs of all types ranging from one to three feet in length—all in perfect shape.

They were his pride and joy—his proof that he still had it after all these years.

After each relative took a turn standing in front of the huge pile and choosing favorites, we still had more than 50 remaining. We then contacted the Children's Hospital, told them our story, and asked if they were interested. They were.

So, four months after losing our father, with heavy hearts, my two sisters and I carried each precious animal up the stairs and out the door, stuffing them into the van.

Upon arriving at the hospital's back entrance, three volunteers greeted us. As we opened the van doors and began passing the animals from person to person, we could hear voices in the volunteer room exclaiming "ooohh" and "ahhh."

They had heard the story of the origin of these gifts and my sisters and I later agreed that, with each exclamation, we felt just a tiny easing of our grief. We could just see Dad looking down on the event saying, "So, how do you like this one?"



With the last one unloaded, the volunteers shook our hands.

One, holding two stuffed dogs said, "Thank you so much for doing this. We know that you're leaving part of your dad here, but the children will love these!"

We three climbed into the van and drove off, feeling on top of the world.

Our grief had eased just a bit because Dad had left
us with yet another wonderful memory.

Thanks, Dad.