

Widows Might nonprofit helps and advocates for widows

Cindy Hval/SR

Nineteen years ago, Namira Bajric and her family found refuge from war-torn Bosnia in Spokane. She raised her three daughters and her husband, Sakib, found work as a long-haul truck driver.

In 2012, the American dream they were building came crashing down. Sakib, 49, died suddenly while on the road in Mississippi.

Drowning in bills, expenses and sorrow, Bajric, who works in housekeeping at Northern Quest Resort, didn't know where to turn.

"It was hard. Everywhere you go, door is locked. There is no help," she said.

Thankfully, help in the form of Widows Might, a local nonprofit, found her.

Founded in 1998 by Wes Teterud and his wife, Adrienne, Widows Might has three core goals: to assist widows, to advocate for widows and to alert family and community members to the needs of widows.

Teterud, an agent at New York Life Insurance Co., heard about Bajric's situation through her workplace.

"We help widows when there is no family or faith-based support available to them," he explained.

That was the case for Bajric. In her North Side home, she recounted the circumstances of her husband's death and its devastating consequences.

"Every morning at 5 a.m., he call to wake me up, but that morning he didn't call," she said.

She'd talked to him the night before and though worried, assumed he'd gotten busy with a delivery. But the day passed without a word.

"He usually call me maybe 20, 30 times a day," Bajric said.

So by the end of her shift at Northern Quest, she knew something was terribly wrong. She called the dispatcher for the trucking company, she called the company where he was due for delivery, and then she and her daughters started calling hospitals.

No one had heard from him or seen him.

She called the Spokane Police Department and was told there wasn't anything they could do until he'd been missing 24 hours. She called the police department in Mississippi and was told there was nothing they could do until a report had been filed in Spokane.

That was Friday night. A long weekend passed. Then early Monday morning a call came from the police in Mississippi. They'd found her husband in his truck, not far from his destination.

"They told me he just go to sleep and never woke up. I never forget that word 'deceased,' " she said. And almost four years later, the tears flowed.

The expense of getting his body home and the subsequent funeral wiped out all the money she had. Her twin teenage daughters and her older daughter and grandson were all living at home at the time.

By the time the Teteruds came to assess her situation, her cupboards were bare.

"I had no food," she said.

She was told she wasn't eligible for food stamps because she earned 24 cents per hour above the income limit.

Because English is her second language, she had trouble understanding the forms she was required to fill out.

"Twenty-four cents," she said. "I didn't understand."

Teterud went over her unpaid bills – a sizeable stack – while his wife took Bajric to Costco.

"It was fun to watch her fill up two carts," she said.

That experience offered Bajric a ray of hope during a very dark time.

"It was the worst thing in my life," she said. "To have my three kids and my grandson and I open the cupboard and the fridge and there is nothing!"

She paused to wipe her tears.

"I will never forget the look on my kids' face when we brought food to the house. Never."

Widows Might stepped in to pay her overdue mortgage, and when the furnace went out, she called Teterud.

"Widows can be taken advantage of," he said.

That's why he personally meets with the widow and whoever is doing the home repair. If something is needed, Widows Might pays the service provider directly.

Bajric said it was a good thing he came out. She'd been told she needed a new \$5,000 furnace. Teterud called for a second opinion. It turned out all that was needed was a simple switch, which the repairman replaced at no charge.

Teterud stresses that Widows Might is not a bereavement group; instead the organization offers practical help to widows with no family or faith-based support systems.

In addition to financial advice and assistance, Widows Might helps widows to network with additional services they may need and holds four luncheons a year. The meals are free and feature guest speakers. Teterud said the average attendance ranges from 100 to 125.

The nonprofit is funded by private and corporate donations.

Teterud's passion for caring for widows came from his previous work as a minister. In fact, he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the plight of widows. He said he learned some surprising facts about this population.

"The average age of a widow is 56," he said. "This isn't a geriatric issue."

Bajric, 46, is profoundly grateful for the help Widows Might provided.

"What these people do for me and my kids – it's something you cannot explain," she said. "They are like angels to me."