

In My Own Words

LANGBEHN V. JACKSON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Janice Langbehn and Lisa Pond, together 18 years, had planned to take their three children on a family cruise. But just as they were about to depart from Miami, Lisa, a healthy 39-year-old, suddenly collapsed. Janice Langbehn discusses the tragedy and its aftermath.

Lisa and I always wanted to have a family together. Early into our 18-year relationship, we became foster parents to many beautiful and exceptional children. We adopted four children and made them a permanent part of our family. Our children came from an underprivileged and abusive background, so Lisa and I made an effort to spend a lot of time together as a family. We thought it would be nice to get out of the cold and head to the Caribbean that February.

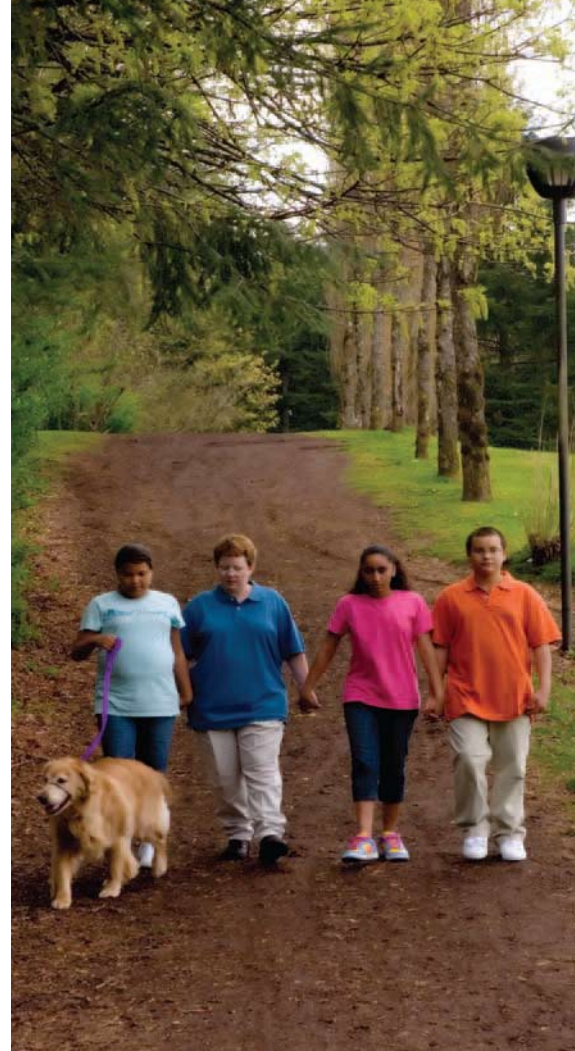
We took our kids on an R Family Vacations Cruise to the Bahamas. While we were still docked in Miami, the children went to the upper deck to play basketball and Lisa went to cheer them on. Suddenly, she collapsed. Lisa had always been very healthy and there were no warnings that she was ill or that her life was in danger. Our children carried her down to the ship's stateroom. I took one look at her and knew it was serious. She couldn't talk or stand up. Luckily, Lisa and I knew sign language; I asked if she had hit her head and she emphatically signed "no." I began to worry that she had had a stroke. I had no idea that this would be the last time that I would see Lisa alive.

Lisa was rushed to the trauma unit at Jackson Memorial Hospital. Instead of being met with compassion and patience when I arrived, the hospital's social worker was confrontational and rude. He told me that I was in an antigay state and that I would need to produce a health care proxy before I would be allowed to see her. The intake nurse also refused to give

me any information. The children and I waited for what felt like forever for word on her condition. I couldn't believe that we were being treated like we weren't Lisa's family. We had spent almost 20 years of our lives together, were raising children together. If that's not family, I don't know what is. I explained to them that I was Lisa's life partner with medical power of attorney. Luckily, I got in touch with a friend and she immediately faxed over our power of attorney papers and medical documents.

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Hours passed before I heard anything about Lisa. Finally, a neurosurgeon told me that she had a massive and fast bleeding brain aneurysm. By then, it had been hours since the last time I saw Lisa. Another neurosurgeon came out to the waiting area and informed me that the aneurysm was too massive and that my Lisa was moving toward brain death. Other than being allowed to watch Lisa receive the ritual of the Last Rites, we were barred from being by her side for more than eight hours until her sister arrived. Lisa had been alone all that time, even though we were just 20 steps away. By the time I was allowed to hold Lisa's hand to soothe her over to the other side, her hand was cold. I could tell that she could no longer hear our words.



Janice Langbehn with daughters (from right) Katie and Danielle, and son David.

Months after Lisa's death, the state of Florida still had not released her death certificate to me because we were not a recognized couple. Without it, our children's Social Security benefits were held up, as were their life insurance benefits.

So we grieved for what was. We grieved for the immeasurable loss of Lisa and we grieved for all the other same-sex couples and their families facing discrimination on a daily basis. Lisa and I never set out to change the world or change how others accept gay families. We just wanted to be allowed to live equally and raise our children well. All we wanted was to be treated with dignity in a time of tragedy. It's hard to believe that was too much to expect. **L**