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LIFE INSIDE

# Losing My Mom Was Hard Enough. Prison Made It Unbearable

Between scant information, limited phone time and insensitive staff, prison compounded a profound loss.

By JULIA ANN POFF

During the four years that I've been in prison, my main fear has been that a loved one would pass away and I wouldn't be able to say goodbye. That fear became a reality on Saturday, Feb. 20, 2021.

That morning, at about 3:30, I sat up in bed and looked around the room. I didn't know what woke me, and I quickly went back to sleep. I rose again at 9:30 a.m. to prepare for the 10 o'clock count. Then, while everyone else was heading to the cafeteria for breakfast, I called my husband.

He answered the phone with a quick "Hi baby," then asked if someone had come to get me.

"No," I said.

"So you aren't there with the chaplain?"

"No," I said again, this time with the knowledge that something had happened.

"Baby are you sitting down?" he stalled, "Because this is going to hurt you bad. Your mom passed away at about 4:30 this morning."

I immediately started crying and screaming. My husband tried to console me, but I kept yelling, "No! No! No!" Then I started dry heaving because I had nothing in my stomach. After a few minutes, I calmed down enough to ask him what happened. He told me that my mom had a urinary tract infection (UTI) that went septic and triggered a heart attack.

My mom had her share of health problems; she had diabetes, she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018, and this was the second time she had a UTI that went septic. She survived the first time; the second was fatal.

Soon I started screaming again, and an officer told me to come to her station when I was finished with my call. And just like that, the 15 minutes I had to talk to my husband were over. I just sat there and cried. When I finally stood up, I was shaking. I use a cane because I have lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. That morning, I was glad I had it to balance me.

The last time I talked to my mom was on February 15. We weren't always close, but we had been mending our relationship. I would call her every week to check on her and my dad and to listen to her call him all kinds of names. They had a love-hate relationship but had been married for 50 years.

As I walked toward the officer's station, I remembered the time we rented a beach house together. One time when my husband and I returned from running an errand, our kids said, "You told *us* to behave, but you should have seen Granny and Papa! They were having a pillow fight!" If I hadn't seen the video the kids filmed, I wouldn't have believed it.

The officer was on the phone when I got to her station, so I headed to my room. Some of the inmates tried to console me and offered me hugs. I accepted them from the women I'm close to, but I couldn't make physical contact with the others because some of them had just gotten over COVID. Five minutes later, someone came and told me that I needed to go back to the officer's station.

"Based on all of that noise you made, I thought someone was being murdered," the officer said before telling me she was sorry for my loss and to get dressed and see the lieutenant. For some reason, I apologized to her for screaming.

Back in my room again, I got dressed. Since I was still shaking, I borrowed a walker from a friend. I would need it to get myself over to the main building. By this time, it was noon. I later learned that my family had been calling since 8 a.m., but it took hours for someone to answer the phone.

When I got to the office, the lieutenant gave me his condolences, told me that religious services wouldn't be available until Sunday, and gave me the option of talking to someone from mental health. I was very angry, but I told him I was OK.

Sunday came and went without anyone coming to see me. A chaplain arrived on Monday afternoon. During our 15-minute visit, he asked me what happened to my mother but didn't recite any Scripture. I had requested that the Catholic priest meet with me to say a rosary on my mother's behalf, but that request went unanswered.

During our call that day, my husband told me that an attorney he'd spoken to offered to file a motion for me to attend my mom's funeral if we paid him \$500. But that wasn't relevant because we were following my mother's wish to be cremated.

I am now coming up on the one-month anniversary of my mother's death. As I play Spades with my friends, I tell them stories about her. I continue to cry many tears and end my nights reading my Bible and asking the Lord to hold my mother in his arms.

I am also establishing a closer relationship with my dad. I've called him every week since my mom died, just to tell him I love him. These are more words than we've spoken to one another in my entire life; he's always been the quiet one.

"I brought your mom home yesterday," my dad announced last weekend. "She's in the corner of the bedroom, surrounded by her angels."

My mom had started collecting angel figurines when I went to prison. Now they are there to comfort my dad and watch over him.

*Julia Ann Poff, 49, has been married for 24 years and is the mother of five children. She spends her time writing articles and a memoir called "Injustice." According to court records, Poff was convicted of mailing an explosive device to a public official. She is serving 10 years and is housed at FMC Carswell, a federal prison in Fort Worth, Texas, for women with special health needs. Bio has been corrected from an earlier version.*

*The Bureau of Prisons did not respond to a request for comment by publication. hhl*