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A Mother's Silver Lining: Community Rallies to Support Grieving Family

By Sophie Braccini



Loto Rickman at Moraga Royale, where she works. Photo Sophie Braccini

It was life as usual for the Rickman family on Dec. 2. Loto Rickman went to Moraga Royale retirement community where she works as assistant to Director Dianne Wilson; her two children went to elementary and pre-school; and their father, Scott Rickman, a lawyer, continued his search for a new job.

Later that day, Loto Rickman received a phone call from the police department. Her husband had taken his own life.

In the days that followed the tragedy, Rickman says that she felt great confusion, and simply tried to do what her heart was telling her to do for her two children. She said that she found tremendous support from the people at Moraga Royale, and from both parents' communities of the schools her children attend.

Rickman is of Samoan origin. She says that in her culture, depression is not a familiar concept and that she had never heard of anyone taking their own life. She adds that there were no warning signs. Her husband hid the depression that runs in his family. He was someone to always tell a joke and seemed happy, or as Creative Playhouse preschool's owner Julieanna Wakileh says it, a vibrant and happy person, a very involved father.

Rickman met her husband in American Samoa when he visited on business; they both worked for the same company, Starkist Tuna.

When she came to Moraga, the culture shock was more profound than she had anticipated. She had lived all her life in a society where violence and crime does not exist, and where no one bolts their door. She says it took her three months to feel confident enough to leave the confines of her home and start looking for a job.

Dianne Wilson gave her that opportunity at Moraga Royale, hiring her as a receptionist. Struck by the young woman's abilities, her willingness to grow - she took classes at Mills College - Wilson gave her successive promotions.

"I feel so blessed I have this job," Rickman says. Moraga Royale, its staff and residents have become her comfort zone since her husband's death, the place she goes to when she seeks moral support.

Wilson understands why Moraga Royale is a comfort zone for Loto and her children. "From personal experience I know that when times are almost unbearable the roles reverse and our residents are the ones offering the support and assurance needed to carry on," she says. She adds that life experience and maturity creates wisdom and understanding, which is a gift that only the elderly can offer those who have yet to experience life's unexpected tragedies.

But what Rickman was not expecting was the outpouring of support from the Moraga community, especially from the parents at Rheem Elementary School where her son goes, and the Creative Playhouse preschool her daughter attends. For the first three months the teachers at Rheem paid for the afterschool care of her son; someone anonymously paid for his hot lunch until the end of the school year; another anonymous parent paid for field trips and added a cashier's check in the boy's backpack.

"I wish that I knew who it was so I could thank them," says Rickman.

Also, the school set up a meal train four times a week from the day of the tragedy to the end of February.

The Creative Playhouse, where Loto's daughter goes full-time five days a week, gave her free tuition until she graduates. "This is huge," says the grateful mother who adds she feels blessed and that words cannot express her gratitude. Wakileh says that she almost did not think anything of it, that it was automatic. "I wanted to offer a safe place for her daughter and peace of mind," she adds.

A Moraga family, the Plantingas, whose child is friend of Rickman's daughter, entirely decorated their house for Christmas. They also helped with a summer camp for Loto's son. Another family gave a Christmas tree, and set up a college fund for the children. She adds that over 50 gifts were lined up under that Christmas tree, along with Safeway and CVS gift cards.

Her son's fourth grade teacher, Lori Bailey, takes care of him during days off school. Other gifts have been received from anonymous donors, and continue to come in.

"I had never seen a community that could step up like that," says the young mother, who wonders what she has done to deserve all this, since she had never been able to volunteer in schools since she works full time.

Rickman adds her children are doing very well, that the first days were hard, but that they are now feeling comfortable talking about their father. At the Creative Playhouse, Wakileh says that the little girl is doing wonderfully, that staff gave her room, attention and let her talk about her daddy who had gone to Heaven.

Loto feels that she does not need a therapist at this time because she has everyone at work to help her.

Scott Rickman has two older children from a previous marriage, one in middle school, and another who attends Diablo Valley College.

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