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“There are a lot of Indian traditions I’m trying to pass on to M’aleigh,” Pat said. “It was very comforting for me to have spiritual leaders at Jack’s and Misti’s funerals.”

Recently, Pat had a traditional star quilt made for one of M’aleigh’s archery instructors, Ken Buhl. The star quilt is a traditional gift of appreciation. Buhl has been M’aleigh’s mentor, and Pat arranged a surprise ceremony to give him the gift.

“Doing archery has really been one of the answers for M’aleigh, and it’s important for her to show her appreciation,” Pat said. “She makes me proud in so many ways.”

Pat has also spent a lot of time in prayer.

“Every morning I get up at 5 a.m. and have my coffee and cigarettes on the porch before the traffic starts. Praying was one of the first things that helped me get through the loss,” she said. “God is all around, and I like to take the time in the early morning before anyone is up to talk to Him. That prayer time has really helped me realize that I have received a lot of blessings, too. I have a lot of supportive friends who are there to listen to me talk or cry.”

The compassion of neighbors has been one of the most uplifting parts of Pat’s and M’Aleigh’s journey thus far, Pat said.

“When Misti was sick the last time, M’aleigh was in and out of school and Misti was in and out of the hospital,” Pat said. “One of her teachers brought groceries to the house. The (Yankton) school board sent money. I’ve never seen a more supportive school system.”

“There were lots of people who were always there to do the little things that you don’t even think about but that take so much

pressure off, like keeping the coffeepot full and making sure we ate. Even since Misti’s death there have been nice things. Misti loved bears, and one day we came home and found teddy bears on the porch. We have no idea where they came from. A few times we’ve come home and found an envelope of money or a box of groceries on the porch with an unsigned card.”

It is moments like those that give hope in contrast to the moments that seem so final.

“Both Jack and Misti died at home under hospice care. When they came and took Jack’s hospital bed his death became real to me,” she said. “With Misti, I helped Kevin (Opsahl of Opsahl-Kostel Funeral Home) load her into the hearse. I watched her drive away knowing it was the last time she’d be going out of the driveway. I was adamant that I was going to be with her until the end. I was there in the beginning, and I didn’t want to leave her alone at the end.”

Although losing one’s spouse is a horrendous experience, Pat said losing a child is still much worse.

“Losing a child is the worst thing in the world, no matter what their age,” Pat said. “It was so much worse losing Misti than my spouse. I loved Jack so much, but Misti was my baby. It’s just a completely different type of loss.”

Pat is thankful that she and M’aleigh have each other, and she said they find strength and inspiration by remembering Jack and Misti and living in a manner that would make them proud.

“I’m really glad I have my spiritualism. It would be a lot harder without that. There are many, many people I’ve met here in Yankton who have helped me tremendously with the healing,” she said. “It’s always going to hurt, but some moments it’s not as bad.”

■ *Story and Photos by Tera Schmidt*

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