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## Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life

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## BOOKSHELF

# *Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life*

**By Maureen A. Lokrantz**

***Widow to Widow:  
Thoughtful, Practical Ideas  
for Rebuilding Your Life,*  
Genevieve Davis Ginsburg,  
M.S. (revised Sept. 1999).**

By the time this column appears, I will have joined the ranks of new lawyers in search of a fulfilling career. While these three years in law school have prepared me to provide legal services to clients, my personal experience in this same time frame has taught me that a truly good practitioner needs to prepare to give more than good legal advice.

Perhaps a client who is dealing with the loss of a loved one seeks consolation beyond the formalities of probate or trust administration; maybe it's a surviving spouse who went from being a devoted caretaker to being a widow or widower. This person is faced not only with the challenge of taking care of his or

her future financial well-being, but with the uncertainty of his or her own identity. To give effective assistance, you must understand and appreciate your clients' life dilemmas, and your own, from beyond just a legal stance.

Last summer, my father passed away after a long battle with degenerative heart disease. Realizing that the treatment of his illness could take many turns, Dad insisted that I, his up-and-coming lawyer-daughter, take responsibility for updating his power of attorney for healthcare, and help Mom effect his last wishes. Just two short weeks later, he died.

The last few things Dad had asked me to do were to help keep an eye on Mom (along with my five other siblings), help Mom take care of her finances and settle the formalities of the trust, for me to have a happy life, and to "be sure [I] sold his old Jeep so Mom wouldn't have to worry about it."

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*Maureen A. Lokrantz* will complete her juris doctor from Marquette University Law School in May 2002 and hopes to incorporate elder law into her employment practice.

Aside from the fact that the old Jeep died a week after he did, I thought I did what Dad asked me to do. Everything should have seemed right. But I found myself feeling my own deep sadness that Dad would not see me graduate—and then it struck me how much more his loss was affecting my mother.

Mom had been his sole caretaker for the last twenty years of their forty-four years together. Somewhere along the way my mother lost her identity as a woman and an individual. Dad's every pain and ailment had become her challenge. His numerous doctor appointments and hospitalizations were her social calendar. His varying moods and emotions set the tone for her every day. But now, she is faced with starting all over. In a quiet house with her nearly empty calendar, she is faced not only with the process of grieving, but with the fear of creating a whole new life.

Attorneys dealing with trusts and estates routinely assist widows and widowers, and the opportunity may present itself to render some emotional support as well. Knowing that I could not even begin to understand what it is like to lose a spouse after decades together, I realized my mother needed something more. Like any diligent law student, I looked to the books! Through a book, I was able to begin to understand my mother's life and loss, and we were able to connect.

*Widow to Widow* is an excellent book at a very affordable price (under \$15 in paperback) and is available at relatively any bookstore. It is in its third revision (as of September 1999). As the title implies, it provides thoughtful, practical ideas for

widows or widowers faced with rebuilding their lives.

The author, Genevieve Davis Ginsburg, was a marriage counselor by profession until her husband's unexpected death. At this point she began to experience firsthand the trials and tribulations of losing a spouse. She found her deepest comfort and understanding from those who had experienced the same type of loss. In 1977, after a long sabbatical, Ms. Ginsburg established (and continues to direct) a self-help organization called "Widowed to Widowed Services" that deals specifically with a multitude of issues facing bereaved spouses.

The book consists of a compilation of opinions and expressions of not only the author but of other widows and widowers who have passed through her organization. The book has six parts, all of which were helpful, but the first three are those I found most relevant to the elder client. Part One, "A Ton of Bricks," discusses the initial stages of grieving. It focuses on the everyday experiences nearly everyone can easily relate to, like dealing with guilt or the things people say. It addresses handling new decisions, knowing when it's the right time to begin emptying closets and drawers, and adjusting to dinner for one.

Part Two, "Rebuilding Your Life," focuses on the changes that signal rebuilding one's life, including new individual realities, different roles in the family, and social relationships. It discusses tough choices, like whether to wear a wedding ring, to date, and how to manage money.

Part Three, "From Widowhood to Selfhood," discusses the process of really finding a life of one's own. The central advice is

to understand and accept the change from widow to self, and realize a balance between remembering the good about your prior life with your loved one, and realizing who you are as an individual, on your own. Many find an important step is to admit that perhaps it wasn't perfect all the time—and that that's alright.

Part Four provides insight to younger widows and widowers. Part Five supplies information on how to start your own support group, as well as a number of resources that cover a variety of issues, such as career and employment, nutrition, and moving to a new area. Part Six provides a "Widow's Survival Checklist" that gives suggestions on dealing with paperwork, money, peace of mind, and security.

This book provided my mother and me with hours of good discussion about things that I may not otherwise have thought she would want to talk about or even feel. What we both found most beneficial is that it covers so much more than just dealing with the grief of losing a loved one. It provides assurance that even though life changes in ways that may initially feel worse, becoming a widow or widower is a process, no less than other pivotal times in our lives, like marriage, new parenthood, or a change of career. It presents us the opportunity to grow and embrace life in a whole new light.

Although that may sound like a daunting task, the book serves as a soothing guide. It shows widows and widowers that they are not alone, and gives one comfort in knowing that the intense feelings and emotions experienced are normal.