



## **Americans are grieving. Is Joe Biden uniquely qualified for this moment? — <https://bit.ly/3pE2vb2>**

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What do you get your wife for Christmas when she is dying?

It was a question Keith Van Yahres had been asking himself. Diamonds seemed meaningless. So did clothes or perfume. His wife, Elizabeth, was diagnosed last September with glioblastoma, a rare and aggressive type of brain cancer.

Most patients live a year after diagnosis. Elizabeth, 63, is bedridden.

She hoped to see Joe Biden be elected president before she died. Her dream was fulfilled when they watched his victory speech from their Wilmington home. She had admired him for years, owning signed copies of his memoirs. The inscription from him reads, “Keep the faith.”

The best gift he could give his wife, Van Yahres thought, would be a call from the president-elect. Acknowledging it was a long shot, he emailed a friend who knew the politician personally, asking if Biden had a couple minutes to spare.

The couple, like many Americans, had a quiet Christmas this year. By the evening, no call came and Van Yahres and his wife began getting ready for bed.

Then the phone rang. The caller ID said “Anonymous, Washington, DC.” His heart felt like it was exploding.

“Is this Keith?” the man calling asked. “It’s Joe Biden.”

On speakerphone, Biden, whose son Beau died of the same cancer, spoke to Elizabeth for about five minutes. He told her to keep the faith and talked about how research is advancing every day. He said “all of the right things,” Van Yahres recalled. It was comforting to both of them.

“Listen, if the president-elect takes the time to call somebody on Christmas Day,” he said, “doesn’t that say a lot? I couldn’t stop crying for some time.”

With a political life marked by tragedy, Biden has privately comforted grieving people in Delaware and beyond for the past 40 years. He has often given out his personal phone number and attended funerals, once for a woman who donated \$18 to every one of his campaigns.

Now, when Biden takes the oath of office on Jan. 20, he is poised to become the president of a whole country that is grieving.

More people are expected to die from COVID-19 each day than those killed on 9/11. Twelve million Americans are unemployed, many drowning in debt. Others don’t believe the outcome of the election. And most are lonely, separated from family and friends.

Every day, it seems like it can’t get worse.

Historians, psychologists and grief experts say the country is experiencing a time of mourning likely rivaled only by the Great Depression. They say Biden will have to rely on “grief leadership” — the idea of acknowledging loss and hardship while also helping people find meaning.

In some ways, Joe Biden has prepared for this for most of his life.

“I try to be mindful,” Biden wrote in his 2017 memoir, “at all times, of what a difference a small human gesture can make to people in need. What does it really cost to take a moment to look someone in the eye, to give him a hug, to let her know, I get it. You’re not alone?”

As he sought the presidency, Biden was seen as a foil to President Donald Trump — whom many criticized as insensitive and apathetic. When Trump casually threw paper towels into a crowd in Puerto Rico after the island was ravaged by Hurricane Maria, it became a visual symbol of his presidency.

Beau's death played a significant role in Biden’s campaign — and does even now in his transition. Viral moments of Biden consoling those in the depths of grief became more memorable than some of his policies.

Biden pitched himself to voters as someone who could heal the nation. But can he actually do it?

“If he succeeds,” said presidential historian Jeffrey Engel, “he will go down in history clearly as one of the great presidents in American history. If he succeeds.”

The doctrine of resilience

In the hours after his baby daughter and wife were killed, Joe Biden sat in a Wilmington Hospital room, staring out a window, unable to say a word.

It's a moment Pike Creek resident Lois Lipton Parker remembers decades later. Lipton Parker and her mother had both volunteered for Biden's Senate campaign. When hearing of the accident, her mother sent Lipton Parker to the hospital to express the family's condolences, she said.

Earlier that day, Dec. 18, 1972, her family received flowers from the Bidens. Lipton Parker's mother suffered a series of heart attacks and was recovering at another hospital. She believes Neilia ordered the flowers just before she died.

For about an hour, Lipton Parker played with injured Beau and Hunter in their hospital room. She brought the two large teddy bears. All the while, Biden stared out the window.

"Things were just too good," he would say days later in front of the hundreds at the funeral for his wife and daughter, "something was bound to happen."

The Bidens were almost like Delaware's Kennedys. It was hard not to make the comparison and many did at the time. Joe, Neilia and their three children were young, beautiful, Irish Catholic. Just not rich, Gil Sloan, a family friend and longtime supporter, noted.

"I don't know the Kennedys," Neilia Biden once told a News Journal reporter, when asked about the comparison, "but I don't think they could be half as great as the Bidens."

When Biden first entered politics, Republicans had a firm grip on the state. The Democratic Party was a bit of a mess. Biden, with his youth and toothy smile, was seen as the future of Delaware politics.

He had an army of young people supporting him. Neilia and his sister, Valerie, were the driving force behind his campaign — both having aspirations of him becoming a Supreme Court justice or president.

And then, in an instant, the Bidens, like the Kennedys, became a symbol of American grief.

On the afternoon of Dec. 18, a tractor-trailer carrying corncobs plowed into the Biden family's station wagon with Neilia and the three children inside. They had just gone Christmas shopping.

The car went spinning, eventually hitting a highway sign. The windshield was shattered. The left rear door was smashed into the car. Biden campaign literature was scattered in the street. Neilia and Naomi were dead on arrival at the hospital.

Decades later, Biden said the accident was the first time he understood why people take their own lives.

“It amazes me how many people there are who endure and live with devastating loss with nowhere near the support I have had,” Biden wrote in his book, “who get up every single day, put one foot in front of the other, and simply carry on.”

Two weeks after the accident, Biden, in the chapel of Wilmington Hospital with news cameras surrounding him, raised his right hand as he took the oath to become Delaware’s U.S. senator. Sons Beau and Hunter watched just feet away from their hospital beds.

Reporters noted how pale Biden looked. The U.S. senator publicly said he would give himself six months to see if he could balance being a senator and a father. He uttered the now-famous line: “We can always get another senator, but they cannot get another father.”

“He pulled himself together,” Sloan remembers. “We were convinced he was in it and would stay in it. His sister played a big role in that decision. She assured him of his presence and parenthood.”

Valerie moved in with her brother and the two boys. In a decision that defined his career, Biden commuted to and from Washington every day.

“Failure would happen in everyone’s life, but giving up was unforgivable,” Valerie said of her parents’ teachings in a September interview with "Frontline."

“It was the doctrine of resilience,” she said. “Well, honey, yeah, that — things were tough, but come on. My dad would say, ‘It’s not how often you get knocked down, it’s how quickly you get back up.’”

David Kessler, a leading expert in grief, said Biden is an embodiment of “post-traumatic growth,” the idea of positive transformation following a traumatic event. Kessler, who recently wrote the book “Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief,” spoke with Biden after Beau’s death in 2015.

Despite millions of Americans currently in mourning — over a dead loved one, a loss of a job, a canceled wedding — the country is still very much a “grief illiterate society,” where these feelings of loss live in the shadows, Kessler said. This is especially true now when, because of COVID-19 restrictions, people are often grieving by themselves.

The first step in moving forward in grief, he said, is to feel the pain of the loss. Kessler said he found that Biden is a rare public figure who can identify people’s pain — and help them talk about it.

“That’s a bit of his superpower,” he said of Biden. “That’s kind of been his superpower all along.”

For the past 40 years, Biden has been known to show up at funerals, make personal calls and master the art of a eulogy. He often gives the same advice to those grieving: There

will be a time that the loved one's memory will "bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eye."

"That's when you know — it's going to be OK," Biden wrote in his memoir. "I know it's hard to believe it will happen, but I promise you, I promise you it will happen."

When Lipton Parker's mother was discharged from the hospital in 1973, she called Biden's Senate office to again give her condolences. It started a relationship in which the two spoke several times a week for years, Lipton Parker said.

"If she didn't call him, he called her," she said. "I believe he kept her alive; it was something to look forward to."

"Doctors told her she had only three years and she lived 12 years."

'Healer-in-chief'

The details of the funeral, almost a decade later, are still hazy for the Lee sisters. In December of 2011, they found themselves in a fog of grief. Their mother's death, days earlier, was sudden, violent and public.

Rachel and Timnah Lee remember the hundreds of people who came to the Wilmington temple that day for Marsha Lee's funeral, so many that they had to turn people away. They remember seeing the bits of red clothing among those in the congregation, honoring their mother's favorite color.

And they both remember hearing their aunt's gasp when Joe Biden arrived. Neither knew nor invited him, but their mother's murder grabbed national headlines. This was their first time meeting the politician. The gesture has stayed with them for years.

"I've told so many people that story," Timnah Lee said, "especially if they were on the fence about voting for another old white guy. Would Trump do this? I don't think so."

When Biden stands on the steps of the west Capitol on Jan. 20, he will inherit a country facing a convergence of crises. During his first 100 days, Biden has already promised to "change the course" of COVID-19. He has promised 100 million vaccinations and to get children back in schools.

But his promise to unite the country might be the hardest.

"It's a tough time," said U.S. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester. "What he provides is that empathy; he provides that caring and understanding because of his lived experiences. And I think people feel that."

"It's almost as if he will be a healer-in-chief," she said.

Not all presidents have been able, or willing, to show Americans their ability to empathize with grief, even if the country's most powerful men suffered significant losses

in their lives, said Engel, founding director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

Engel sees the most similarities between Biden and Franklin Roosevelt. They both reacted similarly to trauma in their lives, and they both entered office during great times of stress.

When Roosevelt became paralyzed, it made him realize people could suffer losses by no fault of their own, ultimately affecting his belief in the role of government, Engel said. It allowed him to be able to connect with a man who lost his life savings in the Great Depression or a family who lost their home during the Dust Bowl.

Tens of thousands more are likely to die from COVID-19 in the coming months. Conservative estimates already show that nine people are impacted by every one COVID-19 death, said Dr. Joshua Morganstein, who studies the mental health impact of disaster events.

Research has shown that the words and actions of leaders play a significant role in the well-being of the community and the trajectory of its recovery, said Morganstein, a professor at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

This idea is called “grief leadership,” and it was first written about by researchers at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, who were studying the aftermath of the 1985 crash of a military transport that killed 248 U.S. troops.

When leaders, at any level, verbalize the experience and pain a community is going through, it makes those feelings “more real and it makes it more OK,” Morganstein said.

He said it’s often the lack of acknowledgment by leaders that makes the pain last much longer.

One example, Morganstein said, is when President George Bush flew over New Orleans in Air Force One in 2005 following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, instead of being on the ground with those affected.

The community later said they felt the president was distant, not connected and did not understand their pain. It was soon seen as a massive failure of Bush’s presidency.

“Those are the things that leave people feeling forgotten,” Morganstein said. “And disregarded.”

When his wife, Marsha Lee, was murdered in 2011, some told Scotti Lee that she was in a “better place.” It made him angry. She should still be here, he thought.

Weeks after her funeral, Timnah Lee answered her father’s telephone. It was the vice president, asking to speak with her father. He wanted to check in on him. Scotti Lee felt Biden was one of the few people who could understand how he felt.

“It was a man who lost his wife,” Timnah Lee said, “to another man who lost his wife.”

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