

Lessons from Corinne

After the water taxi accident, nurses on the CCU were changed forever by one special couple

Karen Schillings remembers everything. What she remembers most is trying to find an air pocket inside the blackened, capsized pontoon boat. Finding the familiar shape of a life preserver saved her. She found her way out and was rescued, shivering uncontrollably from hypothermia. She and her husband, Denny, were taken to John Hopkins' Emergency Department. But where was their 26-year-old daughter, Corinne?

"It was surreal," says Karen. "I knew things were being done to me—they used a blanket on me to force in hot air—but my mind was on, Have they found her?"

There were 25 people aboard The Lady D when it flipped over during a brief, violent storm on what had been the warm and sunny afternoon of March 6. By nightfall, all except three passengers had been rescued from the frigid, 44-degree water and taken to Baltimore hospitals.

Despite the ordeal, Denny Schillings, 56, had survived without a scratch. His wife, 55, had chest pain and shortness of breath. Most incomprehensibly, by 9 o'clock that evening, Karen says, "we were dealing with the fact that we no longer had our daughter."

The ED staff did more than make Denny comfortable with blankets, coffee and scrubs to replace his sopping wet clothes. His cell phone lay on the bottom of the harbor. He was 600 miles from his home in Homewood, Ill., and wanted friends to personally notify family. The numbers he needed were not only stored on his speedial, they were unlisted. The ED staff tracked down the numbers and lent him their cell phones.

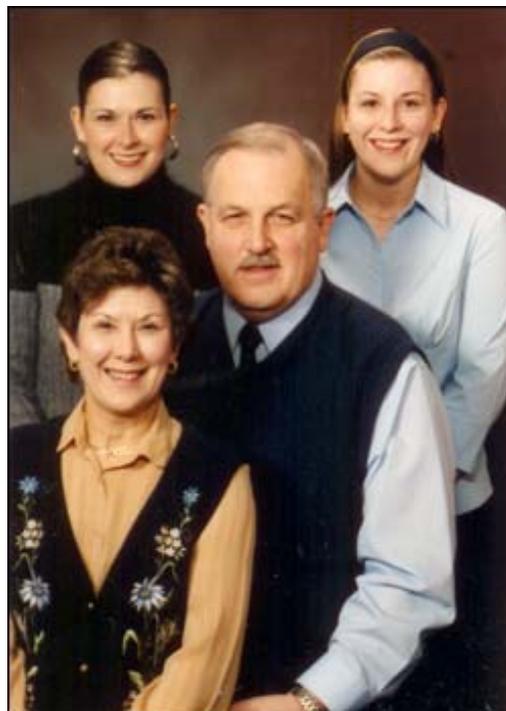
Around midnight, Karen was admitted to the coronary care unit for what was later confirmed to be stress cardiomyopathy, or "broken heart syndrome," a condition brought about by the severe emotional and physical stress she was under (see sidebar). Many of the CCU staff came to work that night not having heard about the accident. One was Larissa George, 24, who took Denny to the waiting room where he told her his daughter was missing. "I just let him talk," says George. "He went on about how wonderful his daughter was, about how much he liked her as a person. Corinne and I are about the same age, and I wondered, Would my dad say this about me? I told him that."

CCU nurse Brenda Hewitt was assigned to Karen Schillings that night. Karen, too, needed to talk about Corinne, and soon found a connection with Hewitt—Girl Scouts. Karen is president of a local Girl Scout Council and Corinne was active in the scouts; Hewitt's daughter is a Brownie. The next day, Hewitt's daughter drew a picture for Karen, a first- and second-grade art teacher.

There seemed to be no end to the thoughtfulness of the CCU staff. They took Denny's clothes home and washed them, made sure his car wasn't towed from the Inner Harbor, and drove him to get a replacement cell phone. One nurse's son, who lives near Washington, drove to Baltimore to pick up Denny, drove him to Vienna, Va., to check out of his hotel, then returned him to Hopkins. "I couldn't believe it," says Denny. "Those kinds of things just kept happening."

The Schillings' tragedy was particularly poignant because it also took the life of Corinne's long-time boyfriend, Andrew Roccella, also 26. Andrew's parents, Edward and Eileen Roccella, of Vienna, Va., also were on the boat, and afterwards told the Schillings that Andrew had picked out a ring and intended to propose to Corinne that weekend.

At Corinne's wake, people waited three hours in line to pay their respects to the Schillings. Their daughter had been an outgoing type who had traveled extensively. She met Andrew while both were studying abroad in Florence. In Milan, she chose to room with five Italians so she could learn slang and different dialects. At the time of her death, she worked as a Web master at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., and had just been accepted at George Mason University in its master's program in international finance.



Karen and Denny Schillings with children Denise, left, and Corinne, who perished in the accident.

“A lot of people in this world could live to be 100 and wouldn’t have what she had in those 26 years,” says Karen. “She was full of life, very independent, and she took advantage of opportunities.”

By the end of Karen’s five-day stay on the CCU, the staff were sad to see her and Denny leave. Larissa George, for one, had never met anyone like them. “Their strength was amazing in the face of losing their daughter,” she explains. “They were always pleasant and thinking of others. I think all of us are different because of them.”

Karen and Denny Schillings likewise have taken a piece of Hopkins back to Homewood, Ill. “I’ve told our friends, you expect the highest quality professionals,” begins Denny. “It’s Hopkins, for heaven’s sake. What you don’t expect—at least Karen and I didn’t—is that incredible humanism. You can emphasize that kind of caring, but you can’t make people care.

“Those nurses would come in, hug us and start crying, and then profusely apologize for being unprofessional. But, I can’t tell you how helpful it was because,” his voice cracking, “to say the least, it was an unbelievable situation for us. And we were a long way from home.”

—Mary Ellen Miller

Donations to the Corinne Jeannine Schillings Foundation (H-F Credit Union, P.O. Box 388, Flossmoor, IL 60422-2299) will go to Girl Scouts who have attained the Silver Award and who are studying a foreign language in college.