

LIVING FAITH

Jason Swensen: How strangers became 'family' and brought joy to my heartsick mom

By Jason Swensen 

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It's tempting to regard the remarkable friendship that my mother, Irene, shared with the women of the Taito family as simply a happy coincidence.

At first glance, they appeared to have little in common. They were from different generations and different cultures. The Taitos immigrated to Utah from their native Samoa. My mom spent almost all of her life living just a few miles from the Murray, Utah, home where she was raised.

But when my mother was recently laid to rest, there was Epi Taito and three of her daughters — Sia, Noela and Laha — standing alongside our family at the Taylorsville Memorial Park Cemetery.

My mom didn't know the Taito women this time last year. But it is understood that misery loves (and perhaps finds) company. That idiom typically has a negative connotation — but in the case of my mom and the Taitos, it was their shared misery and grief that drew them together, fortifying and lifting them.

My father, Gary Swensen, died last May. His passing devastated Mom. They were married for 61 years and their union was their identity. It's rare to find a photo of one of my parents standing alone. They were always within arm's reach of one another, literally and figuratively.

In the weeks following his death, Mom visited my dad's grave at the Taylorsville cemetery every day. My brothers and I would often accompany her. But other times she would drive herself to the nearby market, purchase a flower or two to lay at the grave and then spend hours alone at the cemetery with her husband.

My mom was battling late stage lung cancer, so those daily visits exacted an exhausting emotional and physical toll. But she insisted on going.

It was during one of Mom's solitary gravesite visits that she was spotted by Sia Taito.

Sia and her family were grieving their own loss. The Taitos' husband and father, Papataia Sione Taito, had died months earlier after contracting COVID-19. Like my own father, Brother Taito had been laid to rest in the Taylorsville cemetery.

"It was early one morning and I was visiting my dad's grave with my mom and my sister," Sia recently told me. "I saw this older lady standing alone. She was crying and I could see she was talking softly to one of the graves.

"I told my mom, 'I'm going to walk over to that woman and give her a hug. I'm going to comfort her.'"

A natural extrovert, my mom was always on the lookout for a new friend, even in her mourning. So when she saw Sia walking towards her, she began walking towards Sia.

"Irene immediately started talking about Gary and how she was so sad," Sia recalled. "I told Irene, 'It's OK. Gary is in a better place'... I promised that she would be reunited with Gary. I promised her that families are forever."

My mom then asked Sia if she could visit her father's grave. "So we walked together to my dad's grave and we cried together."

Over the next several weeks, my mom and the Taitos would frequently connect with one another at the cemetery. Their meetings were never planned. "We just always happened to arrive at the same time unexpectedly," said Sia, laughing.

My mother had installed a small granite bench near my dad's gravesite. She invited her new friends and their children to rest on the Swensen family bench whenever they visited the cemetery. "Irene told us to sit on the bench because Gary always loved being around the youth," said Sia.

The Taitos sometimes brought flowers or holiday decorations to place at my father's headstone. Even when my mom's heart was heavy, their gifts lifted her spirits.

Millenia ago, the Apostle Paul taught Christ's followers to "comfort yourselves together, and edify one another" (1 [Thessalonians 5:11](#)). His ancient words have aged well and true. Sia Taito is quick to note she and her relatives were not the exclusive providers of comfort. Irene also comforted them. They were edified together.

On the first anniversary of Papataia Sione Taito's death, his family hosted a graveside gathering. Yes, there were tears. But there was also food, gifts and laughter. Sia and her family invited my mom to join them.

“Irene was our special guest that day,” said Sia. “We introduced her to the high chief of our family — my dad’s uncle. We gave her food and chocolate and flowers and a traditional lava lava skirt.”

My brother Gordon is a talented photographer and was able to snap several shots of the celebration. My mom looks happy in the pictures interacting with her friends. She is masked, but it’s obvious she is smiling. When she returned home from the celebration she immediately tried on her new lava lava to dance and pose for more pictures.

The Taitos even promised to take mom to Samoa one day to introduce her to all their family and friends. “We needed Irene,” observed Sia, “and she needed us.”

Despite my mother’s serious illness, we were not prepared for her recent passing. She broke her hip after falling and underwent emergency surgery. Pneumonia immediately set in and her condition deteriorated rapidly. Thankfully, she died peacefully.

A few days later, my three brothers and I gathered at my parents’ gravesite for my mom’s burial. We were surrounded by family, including the Taitos. There was no “extended family” or “adopted family” among us that afternoon. Only family.

“Love brought us together,” said Sia of her family’s so-called coincidental connection to my mom. “We are from different generations and different cultures. Irene is ‘Palangi’ and we’re Samoan. But love brought us together. Now Irene is on the other side of the veil, but I will always be part of her family.”

Sia then shared a tender moment that comforts me: “Your mother once told me, ‘Sia, do not forget my name — I am Irene Swensen.’ I told her “I could never forget you... [You are] my Auntie Irene.”

— Jason Swensen is a senior reporter for the Church News.

News

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