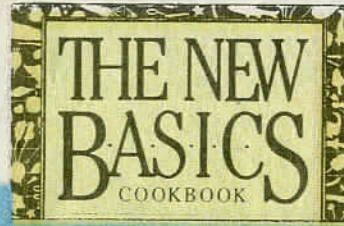


AM

WEDNESDAY

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GREGG WONG COLUMN/1D



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FOOD/1C

DECEMBER 27, 1989

25C

ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS DISPATCH

MINNESOTA

MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

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Dad killed, Mom trapped: Kids keep wits about them

By Jacqui Banaszynski
Staff Writer

Dad was dead and Mom was trapped in the truck with the Christmas presents. The kids heard her calling their names, telling them she was OK, telling them to move away from the truck.

The kids didn't need to be told anything else. They knew they were in trouble, and they knew they were on their own.

Christmas morning was only a few minutes old when the Meyer family's small truck slid off an icy county road north of Jordan, tumbling 50 feet to the bottom of a dark ravine. They had been to a Christmas Eve gift exchange and weren't dressed for a night outdoors. The sky threatened snow. The truck threatened to explode. It was a half-mile to the nearest farmhouse.

Normally, 9½-year-old Danny would have been the one to go for help. He is the

adventurer, a deer hunter who knows how to handle a muzzle-loading rifle, a wrestler at his grade school, a junior partner who wipes down the press at his father's new print shop.

His sister, Dawn, is older by 18 months but quieter and less aggressive. She expresses herself through ballet and tap dance instead of words. When her family first moved to the new house in rural Cologne five years ago, Dawn refused to walk to the school bus stop alone. She still doesn't like to venture into the dark

basement, preferring to send Danny on errands.

But Danny's leg was broken when he was thrown from the truck. Dawn had a broken arm but still could walk. It was not an easy decision, but it was the only one: She would go.

"Between my two kids . . . they were amazing," Susan Meyer said Tuesday from their room at St. Francis Regional Medical Center in Shakopee. "I had no idea anybody

Please see **Accident/5A**



Dawn Meyer

Accident/ Dawn hiked through dark for help

Continued from Page 1A
went for help until I saw the ambulance lights."

Susan Meyer, 35, a printer at Lifetouch National School Studios in Bloomington, suffered minor injuries and was released from the hospital Tuesday. Doctors had to cut off her wedding ring to treat her fingers, which were etched with shattered glass.

The children remain hospitalized in stable condition. In addition to the broken arm, Dawn, 11, a fifth-grader at East Union Elementary School, had numerous cuts and scrapes from flying glass and from scrambling through the dark woods for help. She is being watched for signs of a concussion. Daniel, a third-grader at East Union, is in traction with a pin in his leg and may be hospitalized for several weeks.

Patrick Meyer, 39, an Army veteran who recently opened his own print shop in Carver, was thrown from the vehicle and pronounced dead at the scene. Funeral arrangements are pending the results of an autopsy.

Scott County authorities say County Road 9 was icy and curved.

A light snow was falling just after midnight, when the Meyers were driving home after a round of Christmas visits. They had spent the evening with friends in Jordan, where Patrick Meyer sipped a beer while working outside on a snowmobile engine.

No one is sure how Meyer lost control of the truck. Danny sensed it was skidding and tried to help his father control the steering wheel.

"I think I was out for a little bit," Susan Meyer said. "I remember starting a descent, but I don't remember the final drop. My son told me how we rolled and rolled and rolled."

Susan Meyer awoke to the sound of the family's two springer spaniels, Judd and Tara, yelping from the rear camper. The radio was blaring, a door buzzer was blating and she was alone.

"I kept yelling for my husband or kids just to answer me," she said. "I kept calling their names and wondering, 'Where's my family?' I kept trying to figure a way to get out, but I couldn't figure it out."

The truck was bottom-up, and Susan Meyer's legs were trapped



Danny Meyer



Susan Meyer



Patrick Meyer

under the dash. She wanted to flick on a lighter so she could see, but she was afraid of an explosion. She yelled to her children: "Get away from the truck. Get away from the truck." She didn't have to explain why: Danny had spent enough time around motors to know.

Details of the accident are fuzzy, a result of the dark and the shock and the children's inherent reserve. Susan Meyer told her children Christmas night that their father was, indeed, dead. Then, through slow, easy questions, she pieced together this story:

There was no panic after the

truck stopped. Dawn got Judd, a 10-year-old family pet, from the camper and somehow found her way back up the ravine. Authorities say she and the dog walked a half-mile through woods and swamp before reaching a farmhouse, but Dawn doesn't remember her route. It may have been back along the county road.

She pounded on the door of the first house, but no one answered. She trudged a long country block to a neighboring house, where an elderly couple took her in and, at her request, dialed 911. Dawn issued directions to the crash site

as best she could, then waited at the house for an ambulance.

"She remembers bumming out at the farm because she knew her arm was bleeding," Susan Meyer said. "She felt half of her arm was totally gone, but she knew she had to get help. What a trouper."

Later, Dawn said she was worried about the carpet in the farmhouse because she bled all over it. And Monday night she had a dream and woke up looking at her hands, thinking they were all bloody.

After Dawn left for help, Danny dragged himself to the truck and got some cardboard from the camper. A springer pup, Tara, jumped in the front seat to keep Susan Meyer company. Danny dragged himself and the cardboard to a tree and fashioned a crude shield, where he could be somewhat protected from a blast but still could see and hear his mother.

"He told me he had an eye on me," Susan Meyer said. "He kept his head together and really did great. Both of them did. They did it together."



'Magnum P.I.'
down, not out

TV TAB/1E



Kennedy
nuptials

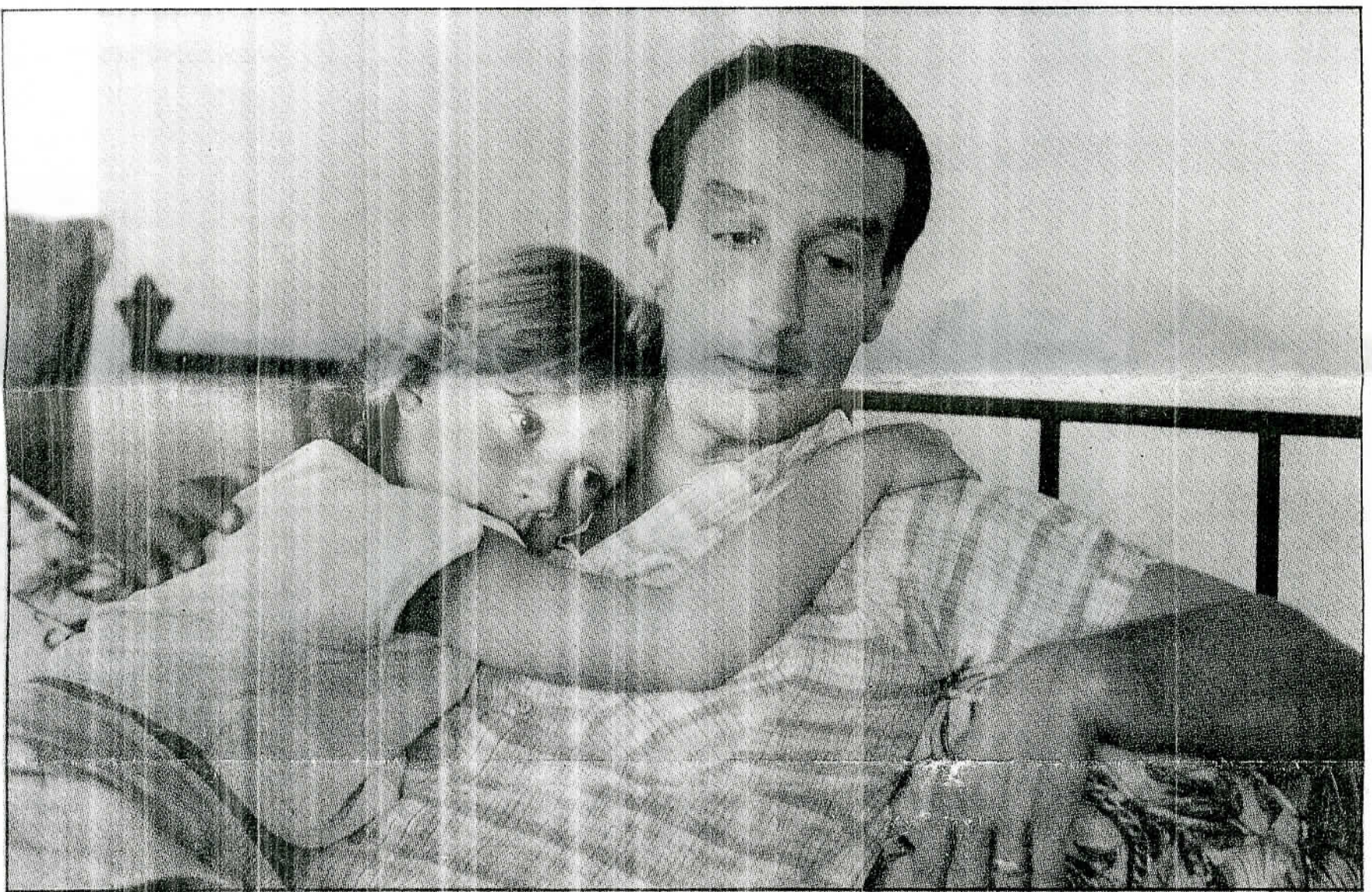
STORIES, PHOTOS/3A

JULY 20, 1986

ST. PAUL
PIONEER PRESS
DISPATCH

MINNESOTA'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

Dreams perished in flames



John Doman/Staff Photographer

Donald Spano holds his surviving daughter, 8-year-old Alison, as he tells of his memories, what happened during the fire, and his plans.

Dad and daughter struggle to keep faith in tomorrow

By Jacqui Banaszynski
Staff Writer

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A small burn mars the tan on Donald Spano's forearm. It is where he cradled his daughter's head when he carried her from the fiery front yard to the cool grass behind the house.

"It's from her hair, not much more than a contact burn really," he says.

Physically, the burn is all that lingers of the day, almost two weeks ago, when a gas pipeline explosion ripped through Spano's life — killing his wife, Beverly, and their youngest child, Jennifer, and forever changing things for him and his surviving daughter, Alison.

The light burn, probably not bad enough to scar, gives no hint of deeper wounds inflicted that day — a day Spano simply refers to as "the 8th."

"I'll never be the same person I was two weeks ago Monday," he says. "That's not fatalistic, just realistic."

Everything else seems normal — even peaceful — at the comfortable home on Woodcrest Drive in Mounds View. Jennifer's ducks, Timmy and LaVerne, paddle sedately in the pond that edges the back yard. A woman's shampoo bottles and lotions clutter the vanity in the bathroom that Spano shared with his wife but that was clearly, he says, "Bev's domain." The books and games and dolls

Please see Spano/10A

Prober sees a challenge

By Charles Laszewski
Staff Writer

Jon Grunseth said it was an accident, that he only intended to blow off a little steam when he wrote a letter to the editor on the Williams Pipe Line Co. gasoline line explosion.

"As someone who picks up the newspaper and reads it every day, I was very aware of Williams' history," he recalled later. "Anybody looking at that history has got to conclude there is a need to ask some hard questions."

Grunseth wrote a sharp letter, which appeared in last Sunday's Pioneer Press and Dispatch, about the Mounds View leak and explosion that killed two people and injured a third. He called Williams' safety record "atrocious at best," and suggested Gov. Rudy Perpich form a commission to study pipeline safety in the state.

"Basically, I just got mad," Grunseth said. "I write a letter about once a year, and that happened to be it. I didn't even know the letter had been printed. I had been out of town all weekend and I was on my way to Washington Monday when Mark Dayton called me. He said, 'You shouldn't write such good letters to the editor because the governor wants to form a commission and he would like you to co-chair it.'"

Please see Probe/11A

Spano/ Father and daughter struggle

Continued from Page 1A

of a 7-year-old brighten the white shelves in Jennifer's room, and more dolls are stuffed into the plastic crates in her closet, resting until small hands reach out and bring them back to life.

Alison, 8, fidgets in her father's lap as he talks to visitors, interrupting with an occasional question or skipping off to find her toys when she gets bored.

It seems no different than other afternoons, with Beverly Spano and Jennifer out on one of their legendary shopping sprees. The house, and those in it, seem to be waiting for them to come home.

But there is that burn in the crook of Donald Spano's arm where Jennifer rested her head for the last time. And a patch of burned grass discolors the neighbor's lawn, as if kissed by a bit too much sun.

It is where Spano found his wife and daughter after the flash.

"We had discussed death, but always mine because of my job. It's not the safest job in the world," says Spano, 35, a switchman for the Chicago and North Western Transportation Co. "Only fools think they're infallible and never going to die."

It is the first interview he's granted since the explosion — a way to respond to the sympathy cards that have poured in from around the country, to acknowledge the keen public interest in his family's tragedy and to announce plans to sue the Williams Pipe Line Co. and the manufacturer of the ruptured pipe.

Alison stays close to him as he talks, hugging his arm or nestling in his lap. Spano pads through the plush carpet in bare feet. The blisters he suffered from running along the burning streets that morning have since healed.

Spano brought Alison home the day after the explosion. It is here they will continue their lives together, learning anew how to be a family. Spano will return to work soon, and Alison will start third grade at nearby Sunnyside Elementary School.

"This is our home and I love it," Spano says. "It's the cumulation of three houses and 13 years of marriage. The ugliness of a few moments hasn't overshadowed the fun times we had here."

The Spanos moved to the modern, split-level house from Fridley just a year ago. Beverly Spano had redecorated it to her family's needs and tastes. Decks line the back, overhanging a sloping lawn and White Oak Lake, a spring-fed pond surrounded by similar homes and friendly neighbors. In 15 years, their mortgage would be paid, the girls would be through college and Don and Bev Spano would just be turning 50.

"This was going to be it," Spano says. "It was kind of our Walden's Pond out here. It had everything we thought we'd need for the rest of our lives."

Monday, July 7, dawned bright and cheerful in Mounds View. The Spano family was settling back into a routine after their annual summer vacation: a few days of luckless fishing up north, then a trip to Wisconsin Dells, riding the duck boats and watching the waterski show, before coming home for the July 4th weekend.

Alison spent the holiday with friends. Jennifer tagged along with her parents while they shopped for dining room chairs.

Spano had been assigned a swing shift that week, and went to work at 3 p.m.

He got home well before midnight. Alison and Jennifer were in bed. His wife was still up, so the couple talked for about an hour before going to bed. The night was warm, and they left the French doors open to the back deck.

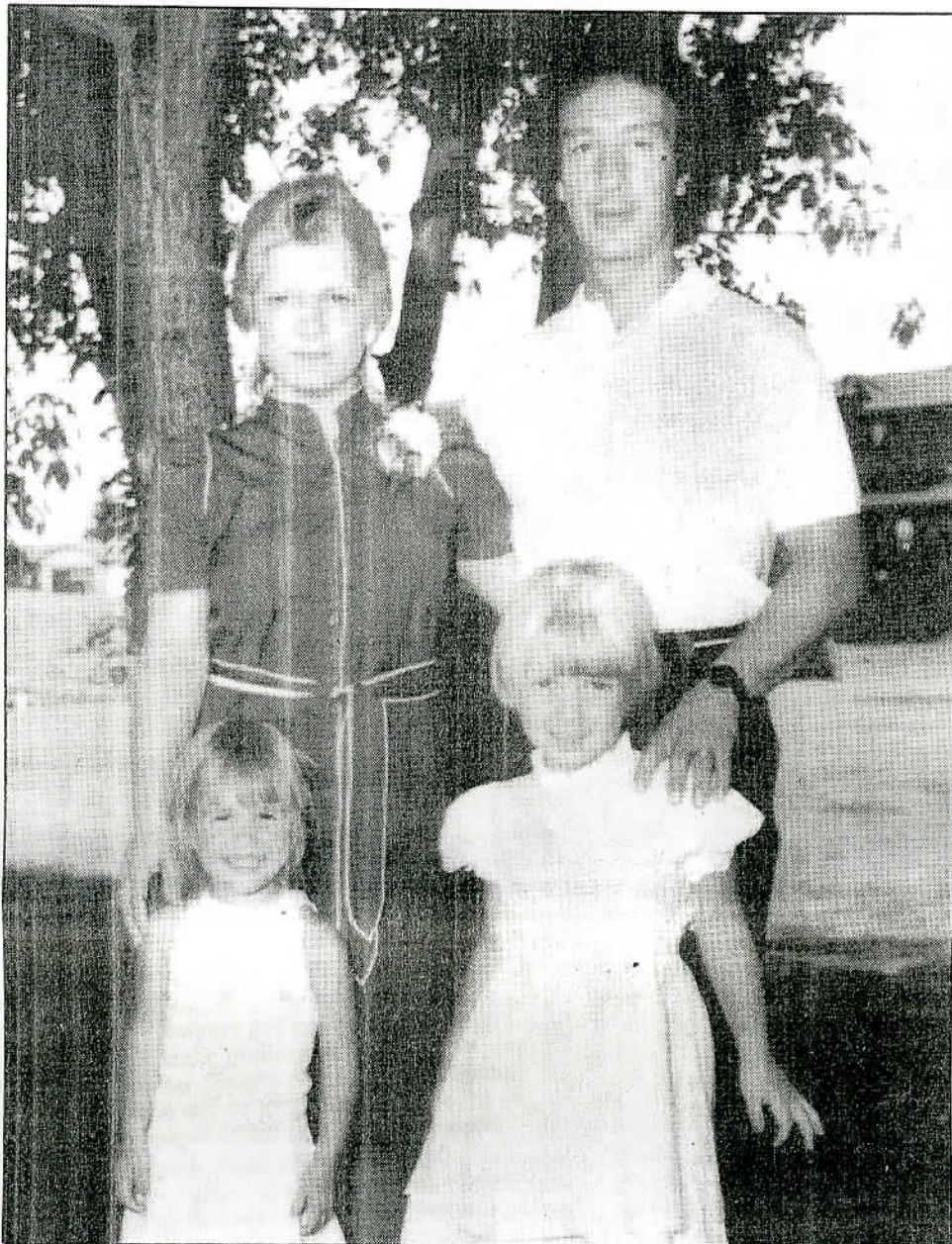
"Everything was completely normal," Spano says.

Early the next morning, they were awakened by an explosion that Spano says "sounded like a cannon." The smell of gas and smoke poured in the open doors. Across the pond, flames danced above the trees.

Like most of their neighbors, the Spanos didn't know a liquid gas pipeline snaked beneath their streets. They thought a

"Ali was terrified. She kept running back and forth between the lake and the house, yelling for her mom and me. In the process of calming her down is when the flash happened. I could see it down on the lake. It lit everything up. And I could hear the screams. So I knew where to look."

Donald Spano



Beverly Spano and daughter Jennifer, left in this family portrait, died in the July 8 pipeline inferno. Donald and daughter Alison are on right.

natural gas main had ruptured and their instinctive response, Spano says, was to get out of the house.

"You just say, 'Let's grab the kids and go,'" he says. "It took me long enough to get a pair of pants on. Bev didn't bother. She was in her nightgown. The kids were, too."

Jennifer's room was just down the hall from theirs. Beverly Spano grabbed the tiny girl, then ran to the downstairs bedroom where Alison usually slept.

When his wife yelled that she couldn't find Alison, Donald Spano went straight to the living room. As was her habit, Alison had crept out of bed sometime during the night to sleep on the couch, nearer her parents.

As Spano was waking Alison, his wife rushed back upstairs, hand-in-hand with Jennifer. The two ran out the entrance at the top of the stairs, into the front yard. The steel door closed behind them.

Spano followed soon after with Alison. But when he yanked the front door open, he was met by a wall of smoke. He ran with his daughter back through the house, out onto the deck and down the stairs toward the pond.

"Ali was terrified," Spano says. "She kept running back and forth between the lake and the house, yelling for her mom and me. In the process of calming her down is when the flash happened. I could see it down at the lake. It lit everything up."

"And I could hear the screams. So I knew where to look."

Spano tells his story sparingly, but directly. He doesn't flinch at the questions,

but when they get too painful his answers come slowly, and sometimes are no more than a word or two.

Was he able to get to them?

"Yes."

Was he the first one there?

"Yes."

Was there anything he could do?

A pause this time, then finally: "No."

The screams had stopped by the time Spano reached his wife and daughter. Now there were only moans.

"I'm no medical doctor. You always go on faith that there's something that can be done," he says.

"But I knew they were burned. The clothes they had worn were no longer there. The skin on Jenny, once soft, was now hard like leather. The eyes were burned closed. The hair . . . the hair was gone."

He gathered Jennifer in his arms and carried her to the pond, laying her in the soft, cool grass. He asked a neighbor to get a towel or blanket for her, and to keep Alison away. Then he raced back up the hill to his wife.

"I knew she was hurt enough where I shouldn't be picking her up," he says. "She knew she was badly burned and understood I was there and she needed help and I had to go."

Spano ran frantically through the neighborhood, following voices in the dark, searching for flashing lights that might signal an ambulance, retracing his steps and going the long way around when the flames, sometimes eight feet high, blocked his path.

"It was like a war zone," he says.

gle to keep going

When the ambulance arrived, it, too, was blocked by the fire and forced to stop a half-block away. Beverly Spano was carried there on a stretcher. Spano followed behind, his daughter once again in his arms.

They waited then, he thinks as long as 10 or 15 minutes, until more ambulances came. Beverly Spano was rushed to St. Paul-Ramsey Medical Center in the first truck. Spano rode with Jennifer in the second.

"I don't know what good I did, but I kept the compresses of water wet and cool, and I talked to her on the way," he says. "They were concerned with her breathing. I had to encourage her to breathe deep. I told her I was there and we were on our way to the hospital and when we got there they would help her."

Spano stayed with Jennifer in the emergency room, soothing her as the doctors searched her thin arms for a place to insert an intravenous needle, telling her not to be frightened, hushing her childlike fears.

"The girls had just gotten their ears pierced, and we had threatened that if they didn't take care of them, they'd have to come out and the holes would close up. At the hospital, they wanted to take her earrings out, and she was crying, 'No, no, my holes will close up.'"

When Spano was taken to his wife's bedside that morning, both already knew she and Jennifer were dying.

"When I first got to the emergency room, I was confronted by the chief of the burn unit," Spano says. "I asked him to be very straightforward. I asked what were their chances of recovery. He said none."

"You ask him that question, will they make it, and the only thing you can do is hope he'll say yes. But you look in his eyes and know that, yes, he's being honest. But the answer is no."

"Apparently Bev had already asked the same question."

Spano divided his time between his wife and daughter, who were placed in adjacent beds in the burn unit. He spent much of the morning talking with his wife about death and life and God, and the memories shared privately between a husband and a wife. Just two days earlier, after attending Sunday services at Messiah Lutheran Church, Beverly Spano had told her husband how comfortable she felt about her religion, and how peaceful she felt about her life.

"We discussed Ali and myself and what she wanted and didn't want as far as funeral arrangements and a religious upbringing, which was important to her," Spano says. "That was one of her desires for Ali."

"And she had other wishes . . . some silly ones. She wanted me to go out and get married again."

Jennifer was placed on a respirator, so she couldn't talk, but answered her father's questions with nods and noises.

"She knew I was there and that Mom was across the room. Jenn was always my wishy kid as far as . . . falling down was always a major catastrophe. She had a low pain threshold. I asked her if she hurt. She said no and I'm grateful for that."

"They got quite a bit of morphine. But up until the last hour, both of them could respond."

Beverly Spano died at 10:07 a.m. on the 8th. Jennifer died exactly an hour later.

Alison first learned about death eight months ago when her grandfather died. And she was in the hospital waiting room the morning of the 8th, when her mother and sister died.

Spano shielded Alison from the worst of what happened that day. He kept her from running up the hill to her mother's screams, and didn't let her see her mother or Jennifer after the accident.

But he couldn't shield her from their deaths.

"There's no way you can find pretty words to skim around it and make it sugar and spice and eveything nice," he says. "There's not much you can say besides, 'Your mother is dead.'"

"We hear the wish from her now . . . I

wish they weren't . . . ' To me that says she knows they aren't coming back. She has moved beyond that point and has established that fact. Not that she's dealt with it, but she has established the fact."

Spano is, by his own admission, a quiet man who works hard at not being closed. He forces himself to be aware of his anger, and to deal with it in constructive ways.

He says that will be especially important in the coming months.

"The bitterness has not had a chance to set in, although I'm sure it will in time," he says. "So far from the 8th I've been able to put it on the back burner. But I've been trying to pick a spot to put it, find a way to direct it."

"There are certain things I'm going to demand out of anger, out of hurt, out of grief."

Last week, he contacted lawyers about filing suit against the pipeline's owner and manufacturer. Decisions about additional suits will wait until he is able to study news reports, which relatives are saving for him.

Nor is he yet clear about the specific claims he'll make.

"One of the things I'm going to shoot for is safe communities, to prevent things like this," he says. "There's no excuse for this. There's no excuse why the kids in the neighborhood should have trouble going to sleep at night."

Spano says money can't compensate him for his wife and daughter. But he wants better governmental control of hazardous pipelines, greater public awareness of their locations and penalties so stringent the industry can't afford to be lax.

"I would like to make it so expensive to do it wrong that the only choice they have is to do it right, so the automatic safety factors are built in," he says. "The way they've been doing it so far, they've not proved this is the safe way. They've hurt the environment a lot, and a few people along the way. There's got to be a better way."

While lawyers and politicians grapple with the public implications of Beverly and Jennifer Spano's deaths, Donald Spano and Alison will be grappling with the private implications of life without them.

For Alison, there are questions of security — physical and emotional — and the sudden status of being an only child.

"Ali will be playing with the toys, and she'll say, 'This is Jenny's.'" Spano says. "And there's an inflection in her voice that says, 'Is it OK to play with it?' As angelic as Jenny was, she could be a stinker about certain things. Sharing her toys happened to be one of them. So now we're in a period of whose was whose."

"But these things don't happen overnight," he continues. "Like me, Ali has her good times and her not-so-good times. When the sun goes down, she still gets nervous."

Spano does what he can to reassure her, understanding there are no guarantees. He watches Alison, and himself, closely for signs of stress. He encourages her to spend time with friends, and talks to their parents about Alison's moods. And if they need professional help, Spano says he won't be too proud to seek it.

"But at this point, we'll take care of each other," he says. "That's what a family is for. You grow together and live together and take care of each other."

Meanwhile, Spano must face his own questions, questions without any easy answers, inevitable questions like "Why me?"

"That question can't be answered now," he says. "When it will be is when I stand in front of God, because he's the only one who can answer that. I'm going to have to live with it until that time."

"And I try to stay away from questions like, 'What if?' You can't live with what if. I'm as much at peace as I can be with a situation like this."

"And right now, what I need most is peace, being able to finally sort things out in my mind. Right now, I just know all fathers should give their kids a kiss every night and be thankful they've got them."