

## THE KAREN CARPENTER STORY

Anorexia nervosa had received little attention from the public and was a little known eating disorder in 1983, but that year, on February 4, it took the life of Karen Carpenter. She was a gifted and talented young woman who had come to be recognized by her contemporaries as one of the greatest female singers to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s.

Karen had a haunting, melancholy voice and perfect pitch. Her brother, Richard Carpenter, accompanied her on the piano in simple presentations that had her stand out front and sing songs that seemed designed to soothe a nation trying to heal itself from the disillusionment of the War in Vietnam and of Watergate. The performances were in stark contrast to the heavy contemporary rock of the 1970s that was being performed by other artists, such as Elton John, Sly Stone and Led Zeppelin. Yet, as many artists surfaced and disappeared, it was to be the Carpenters' music that would grow in stature and be remembered today.

Karen and Richard's hits included "We've Only Just Begun," "Close to You," and other songs that are "cherished by millions" (Coleman, Prologue, 1994). They sang to royalty and to packed concert halls. The President of the United States described Richard and Karen as "young america at its best". They were also described as "Wholesome, gifted, family oriented, and absorbed [in their work ... ]" (Coleman, Prologue, 1994).

Still, with all her talent and success, Karen evidently felt imperfect and overweight because she went to great lengths to keep from gaining weight. At one point in her adult life she weighed only 72 pounds.

Her friends and family encouraged her to get help, which she did from time to time. The most intense and serious treatment was a year of therapy in New York. She then returned to her home in California. At that point, her family was happy and relieved to know that she had a weight gain to 108 pounds. Within weeks, though, she had collapsed and died. Anorexia nervosa had depleted and deprived her body of essential nutrients. Internal organs were permanently damaged and could no longer function.

The tragedy of Karen Carpenter's death at such a young age brought her disease to the front pages of the media. Celebrity deaths often make the public more conscious of diseases than they might otherwise be. This can be seen in the case of Karen Carpenter and anorexia nervosa. The Princess Diana headlines have done the same thing in focusing public awareness on bulimia.

There are connections from these diseases to family functioning and to nutrition. Bulimia and anorexia can take years to develop and years to cure.

Jane Fonda and Cherry Boone O'Neill, Pat Boone's daughter, are examples of celebrities who have been cured of anorexia, but many people are not cured because nutrition patterns established over a long time have effects on the body that sometimes cannot be reversed quickly, if at all.

That is why good nutrition patterns must be established and maintained throughout the life cycle. Such patterns are first established in the home and family. It is critical that nutrition choices be based upon a knowledge nutritional needs of individuals across the family life cycle.

Resource: THE CARPENTERS: The Untold Story. An Authorized Biography. Coleman, Ray, Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.