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A unique weekend camp opportunity for grieving kids

by Tom Gallagher



A Comfort Zone Camp scrapbook

In a society drenched in "forever young" myth-making, what can be done to help children struggling with the loss of a parent? Lynne Hughes, who lost both of her parents at a young age, had an idea: a bereavement camp for kids.

Richmond, Va.-based Comfort Zone Camp was the eventual outgrowth of Hughes' own journey of bereavement when as a 9-year-old she lost her mom and then when she was 12, her dad died. The next several years were conflicted, confusing and unsettled.

In 1998, Hughes and her husband, Kelly, founded a year-round weekend camp as a safe and fun place for grieving children ages 7-17. Comfort Zone is the largest grief camp in the country and it's free of charge. Camps are offered in California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Texas and Virginia for 3,000 kids annually.

Though 2.5 percent of kids under 18 in the United States -- some 2.5 million children -- have experienced the death of a parent, "most children who have lost a parent have never met another young person who lost a parent," says Hughes, a mother of two. In 2005 Hughes wrote *You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent*

, a compelling book published by Scholastic, about her journey and that of dozens of kids who lost a parent.

What are the camps like?

"When my dad died [when I was 12 years old] everything was a blur," said now 23-year-old Elizabeth Sullivan. "I was feeling extremely misunderstood and my friends just didn't get it." She has two younger sisters, Emily and Claire.

Sullivan's mother decided that her daughters needed to try Comfort Zone Camp for a weekend.

"I was searching for something that would help my daughters cope with their crushing loss," said Joan Oberle. "Although my girls were going through the motions of their everyday lives, it was obvious to me they were suffering."

Oberle's daughters strongly resisted going to bereavement camp.

"When I dropped them off at camp that weekend, we were all nervous about how the weekend would play out," she said.

After arriving, the 35 reluctant, eyes-to-the-ground campers participated in icebreaker games. Soon they were laughing and looking around and seeing many other kids who had experienced the loss of a parent.

A key component of the camp experience are the one-on-one "big buddies," adult volunteers who are trained and selected for a particular camper based on common interests and other factors. The "bigs" are constantly available to the camper throughout the weekend.

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"The bigs just spend time with the camper, really listening to the camper," Sullivan said. Comfort Zone Camp has over 7,000 volunteers who are trained and subjected to background checks before they can volunteer.

Another core experience at camp is the Healing Circles. The campers are offered an opportunity to share their stories about the loss of their loved one. For Sullivan, "it was the first time I shared my story of losing my dad."

Of course, the camp has rock-climbing, hiking and other "cool" things to do.

"I returned Sunday afternoon to find my daughters looking happy, excited, and with a light in their eyes I thought was lost forever," Oberle said. "The weekend changed our lives forever."

The "free" component of the camp means that Hughes and her board must come up with the funds to pay for the weekend, as well as for travel expenses to get kids to the camp.

"New York Life has really embraced this issue as it is a perfect fit with our company, which provides financial support for people following a death," said Christine Park, president of New York Life Foundation.

"I have had the good fortune of being a big buddy volunteer at the camp and I can tell you firsthand that it

is a life-changing opportunity for the children and the adults," said Park. "It is an amazing, safe place for kids to share with each other their innermost thoughts about their loss and their feelings and the bigs are there to support them."

Grieving is a dynamic process.

Since their dad died, the Sullivan girls have all volunteered at Comfort Zone Camp. Emily, 22, is now a big buddy. Claire is a junior counselor. Elizabeth is now a full-time employee at the camp in charge of volunteers. Even mom has volunteered as a big buddy, a camp nurse and became a Comfort Zone Camp board member.

"Comfort Zone Camp has changed my life," Elizabeth Sullivan says.

[Tom Gallagher writes for *NCR's* regular Mission Management column. His e-mail address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online resources

Comfort Zone Camp
www.comfortzonecamp.org

Comfort Zone Camp's Hello Grief Web site offers an online community where you can share and remember loved ones by creating interactive memorial walls, writing blog posts, and connecting in the forums. Hello Grief also posts weekly stories from people living with loss, and coping strategies provided by grief experts.

www.hellogrief.org

On a journey of bereavement

Most schoolkids are running carefree in the summer months. Meanwhile, parents are staring at the calendar figuring out ways to keep their brood gainfully occupied, properly surveilled and doing something fruitful. The solution: summer camps. Generally safe and controlled environments, camps for sports, piano, art, Bible, and most other activities provide the perfect placeholder on the summer schedule.

Some kids are just not in the mood for summer camp. Circumstances outside their control have taken the "child" out of their childhood. For kids who are experiencing the deeply felt effects of a death of a parent, the process of grieving diverts their energy -- in fact, their whole being -- and thrusts them onto another trail, a journey of bereavement.

In a poll conducted by Greenwald & Associates for New York Life Foundation and Comfort Zone Camps, one in seven adults said they lost a parent before they were 20 years old, 40 percent recall frequently pretending to be OK so as not to upset their surviving parent, and 63 percent feared their surviving parent would also get sick and die.

-- *Tom Gallagher*

Top 10 things to know about a child losing a parent

1. Grief is like an earthquake.
2. Grief stinks.
3. Every loss is unique.
4. You -- a child -- are not alone.

5. There will be changes at home.
6. It's OK to remember your loved one.
7. Other people will not always know how to react to your loss and may say something stupid.
8. There are good things to come out of your loss -- "I'm lucky for what I have."
9. You are not alone
10. Going forward you can choose to survive and live or be a victim. Don't let your loss beat you.

-- Source: *You Are Not Alone* by Lynne Hughes

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