

## CHARITY

# Children's Bereavement Center helps youth deal with loss

Nonprofit provides free services for grieving children, their families



Photos courtesy Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas

The Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas specializes in free grief support for children and young adults ages 3 through 24.

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For all the confusion, anger and sadness Katie Ruder felt over the death of her mother, Becky, the high school senior will never forget the more light-hearted moment when her father, Curtis, first decided they should seek help with their grief.

It had been nearly a year after Becky Ruder's cancer had taken a devastating turn for the worst, and a nearly 4-year-old Katie was in a Target checkout line with her dad. That's when she asked yet another random woman in public, "Hey, would you like to marry my dad? My mommy just died."

"That was sort of a nudge to me that I don't know how to handle this," said Curtis, chief financial officer for Meals on Wheels San Antonio.

Now 17, Katie recounts the story with the kind of warmth, understanding and emotional fortitude she, Curtis, and so many others have found at the Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas, which guides grieving youth and their families through the loss of a loved one.

"The biggest thing that I got out of it was understanding that I am not alone," said Katie, who, along with her father, transitioned from bereavement center clients to volunteers several years ago. Curtis facilitated center groups and is now a board member, while Katie has helped out as a camp counselor.

"Every time I go back, I tell these kids, 'It sucks, but one day you will be happy,'" Katie said. "Just seeing that someone else has made it through the loss of their parent or the grief that they've been through just makes it possible."

The nonprofit started in 1997 with a single support group helping 19 families. This year, the

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Children's Bereavement Center executive director Marian Sokol

center will help some 1,400 children in San Antonio and the surrounding area, plus another 200 children and their caregivers through its Rio Grande Valley location in Harlingen, which opened in February. That's in addition to outreach to those contending with the horrific shooting in Sutherland Springs.

The Children's Bereavement Center specializes in free grief support for ages 3 through 24, with services that cover just about all forms of loss, whether because of chronic illness or a sudden death due to violence or suicide.

The center hosts group support programs as well as confidential individual counseling, plus kids' camps and school-based outreach — all specifically geared for children, teenagers and young adults. Licensed professional counselors direct individual sessions, while trained volunteers facilitate the more open-ended peer support groups, which meet twice a month.

All that support empowers young people who are grieving with therapeutic coping strategies and creative means of expressing their feelings via art, music or other avenues, the better to strengthen themselves and their relationships going forward.

Because, as Katie and so many others stress at the Children's Bereavement Center, life does not end when someone else's does.

"You don't get over grief, you get through it," said executive director Marian Sokol. "And our mission is to help in the healing of the child, the



The creative spaces at the center include a sand tray room full of figures, where children can create a story or re-enact the loss of their loved one.

families, and in some instances, even in the community."

That healing begins in a bright and tranquil environment designed to look and feel just like home.

Inside, the center's ground floor beams with colorful paintings on cream-colored walls, which overlook rich hardwood floors and furnishings across a cozy kitchen, long dining room and glass-walled living room. Outside, wood playground equipment overlooks a peaceful yard with decor that includes a porch swing constructed by an Eagle Scout and a butterfly-shaped bench donated by Zak Williams, son of the late comedian Robin Williams.

The back of the yard hints at what healing awaits. The words "Before I die..." are written across the top of a giant chalkboard there, with the extended refrain repeated in English and Spanish with a blank space for grieving youth to write in their goals.

"Children write what they want to accomplish," Sokol said. "We want to help heal, but we also want to help provide hope for the future."

Katie found that hope at the start of her kindergarten year, when she

and her father first went to the bereavement center's former location on Craig Street. She remembers walking in to find an unused fireplace filled with teddy bears. Then her father joined some other adults, while she joined other 5-year-olds who also had lost a parent to a long-term illness.

After the third visit, Katie told her dad she now had "a soft tummy," a sign the stress she carried was finally starting to ease.

"I think that expressed to me what the center does in such a strong way," Curtis Ruder said.

A typical evening at the Children's Bereavement Center starts with a dinner courtesy the center's volunteer Potluck Partners. Then the adults retire to the living room, while the children go upstairs to their respective age-appropriate groups. The night concludes with everyone gathering in the living room to sing the center's support song.

The center's top floor houses various activity and counseling spaces, from understated counseling rooms and a teen hangout room, to more colorful and child-friendly settings teeming with toys, art supplies and other activity items.

Most of those more

kid-friendly spaces branch out from the aptly-named Expressive Arts Hallway, whose painted walls transition from a dark night to a bright blue day to symbolize what Sokol called a young one's emotional journey "from darkness to light."

Those spaces seamlessly fuse play with therapy. For instance, Sokol said children have used the music room's African drums to tap out the heartbeat of a lost loved one, then talk about their feelings when the drumming stops. A glass art room highlights the analogy of melded glass shards as a symbol of making oneself feel whole again. And Katie's favorite, a drama studio, houses a replica tree trunk, various costumes, puppets and a time machine area for kids to role-play happier times as well as when they lost their loved one.

The center also offers on-site camps in March and November for children ages 7 to 11 who have experienced the death of a family member in the last two years, and a larger summer camp out in the Hill Country for older children and teens.

In addition to community outreach at schools, the Center's website of-

fers online resources and links for other helpful organizations and literature, including a free download of the center's own book by its therapists called "Out Came the Sun." And Sokol said the center recently launched the Wonders & Worries program at the START Center for Cancer Care to help children whose families have received devastating diagnoses.

All that work takes money as well as time. Since almost all Children's Bereavement Center services are free to families, just 1 percent of the center's annual \$2 million budget comes from program fees, Sokol said. The center relies heavily on grants, fundraising and individual and corporate contributions. Last year, Spurs star Kawhi Leonard donated the center's company van, which has been instrumental in helping staff reach out to Sutherland Springs.

"He understands what we do and empathizes with the kids," said Sokol, who noted Leonard was in high school when his father was murdered.

The Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas welcomes monetary donations as well as art supplies, snacks, gift cards and preferably new teddy bears for the children and their families. And it's always in need of volunteers to help with Potluck Partner dinners and facilitate groups.

Katie Ruder plans to major in child psychology after she graduates from high school. Her loss has taught her how to better understand children's emotions, which she said so often can get overlooked because children often lack the means of expressing them.

And as her experience at the Children's Bereavement Center has shown her, paying extra attention to a child's feelings can do wonders.

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