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A public display of affection

By Laura Pulfer

Two first-grade boys were playing together. Giggling, scuffling. The usual lively boy bonding. Finally, one child was ready to say something important. "My mother died," he said.

"Butthead!" the other boy exclaimed with an air of shocked recognition. "So did mine."

Their tragedy. Their language. Their discovery that they are not alone. Adults call it peer support.

The kids were at Fernside Center for Grieving Children. At another session, some other kids - children of parents who died violently - traded unspeakable details. Blood. A gun. The police.

No, not unspeakable. That is exactly the wrong word. Speaking about their feelings is what they do, conversations started by a remarkable woman in the midst of her own anguish.

Really focused

Last week Fernside's founder, Rachel Burrell, was honored at a dinner. Rachel appeared baffled by the attention. She is miraculously without ego.

Several years ago, Newsweek sent a photographer to record the woman behind one of only two centers in the country where grieving kids could go to heal. (The first was the Dougy Center in Portland, Ore. Now there are about 40.) The photographer came directly here from a shoot in California, where Elizabeth Taylor's stylists and assistants had scurried around the actress in a fog of hairspray and kissing up. Rachel had to be dragged away from a conversation with a child and coaxed to comb her hair.

The photographer looked into his lens, blinked and said with wonder, "This is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

That's what happens when you really focus on Rachel. You see something unexpectedly lovely. Her goodness, maybe, shining through exquisitely fragile features and soft blue eyes. She looked luminous Thursday night, as she officially left the agency she started 16 years ago with her husband, Paul, after their son, David, was killed in a traffic accident.

"There were lots of support groups out there for us," she said. "But nothing for our other children."

International help

Rachel, a piano and nursery school teacher, knew they needed kindred spirits to help them recover. Other kids.

"Our idea," she said, "is that children would say what they needed." Rachel would listen.

Eventually what she heard would make its way around the world. On request, Fernside has dispatched care packages with precious advice developed over years of listening to kids. To Israel. To Northern Ireland. After school shootings. After plane crashes. After 9-11.

From the original 16 children in a circle, Fernside now serves 451 directly and another 3,661 through outreach programs. It has gone from the basement of one church to the annex of another to the Bethesda Professional Building in Blue Ash. All you have to do to get help at this place is to call 745-0111 and ask. Everything is free of charge.

About 18 months ago, Fernside merged with Hospice of Cincinnati, which engineered the celebration Thursday for volunteers, staff, family and former clients.

The excuse was Rachel's retirement on her 75th birthday. But I suspect that there were just a lot of people who could not bear to let Rachel go without a support group.

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