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Losing own dad at 7 spurs help to kids

By Janet C. Wetzel

HOMETOWN HEROES

Fernside volunteer goes to meetings, camp to ease grief

MARIEMONT - Ted Ackerman was just 7 when he lost his dad, and he still remembers the pain and effort to cope with the loss.

He had important support from his mother and others, but no formal grief support.

In 1995, he learned about Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children, an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati, Inc. He saw the need and offered to help.

A decade later, he's still helping.

At least twice a month, Ackerman serves as a facilitator for meetings with children who have suffered a loss of a loved one. He works months in advance to prepare for meetings, using a guide book, other group experience and his own loss. He looks forward to spending nearly a week each year as a counselor for Fernside's Camp WeBelong in Clarksville, "a real highlight for me."

Fernside opened in 1986 and, is based in Blue Ash. It serves area children, adolescents and young adults who have lost a loved one, and parents or guardians of those under 18, said Mary McCutchen, volunteer coordinator.

"Ted is very caring, sincere and genuine, and the children see this," McCutchen said. "This is very important to children. Ted is so passionate about the work we do here at Fernside."

Ackerman, a risk manager for Parsec, in Queens Gate, a transportation system, said he felt an immediate connection when a friend told him about Fernside.

"It sounded like something I should look into," he said. "Once I got there, it was a real eye opener for me. I wish they'd had something like this when I was a child."

Ackerman has worked with children who have lost a parent or sibling. By sharing his personal experience, the children quickly identified with him.

"I think I communicate with the kids on their level because of my background," said Ackerman, who lives in Mariemont with his wife, Amy, and baby son, Timothy. "It gives me an edge."

Often the children are nervous when they first come in, but the meetings are designed to help them relax and relate to others, he said.

During each meeting, which has a theme ranging from memories to dreams and nightmares, children may talk about their loss. Activities, such as creating a memory box, helps provide a non-verbal release. Families typically stay in the program about a year.

"Anyone who volunteers knows how important it is to others, but it's also very rewarding," he said. "I give, but I get something back every time. It's been therapeutic for me. When my dad died, my Mom did a great job with us, but it's really hard. I wish there had been something like this. I just felt like I belonged to this organization from day one."

To volunteer, call 513-745-0111.

Do you know a Hometown Hero? E-mail Janet Wetzel at jjwetzel@fuse.net, or fax to (513) 755-4150.

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