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A safe place to grieve

Stories by John Johnston

FACES OF FERNSIDE

For 20 years, Blue Ash-based institution has brought solace to families

For 20 years, Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children has offered free support groups and other services to help local families cope with the loss of loved ones. Most support groups meet in Blue Ash, but there are satellite locations east, west and north of Cincinnati.

“(Fernside has) developed a positive, wonderful reputation, not just in this region,” says James Ellis, bereavement coordinator for St. Elizabeth Hospice in Covington, which 10 years ago started a program called STARS: Grief Support for Kids, with the help of Fernside.

Here’s a look at some of the people who make Fernside what it is.

Family found road to recovery

The Siblings



Keilah Freeman, 16, talks to Fernside facilitator Jenny Miller (left) during a recent group session. Keilah lost her mother, Tonyah Harrison, to cancer in 2004.

In January, Carolyn Willis had seven angry grandchildren on her hands. They were signed up for Fernside support groups, but none wanted to go.

“I felt it was stupid,” says 16-year-old Keilah, the oldest.

“I thought it was going to be a whole bunch of kids who lost a loved one talking about how they were sad and depressed,” says Asia, 15.

The most resistance came from 14-year-old Iel, the oldest boy. “I don’t need this stuff,” he told himself.

It was a tumultuous time. Their mother, Tonyah Harrison, had lost her three-year battle with breast cancer in 2004. When their father couldn’t care for them, Willis, their maternal grandmother, got legal custody. The family lives in Forest Park.

Describing how he felt when his mother died, Iel says: “It’s like you’re walking in the street, and a truck’s hitting you. But it’s going in slow motion. You don’t even realize it, and you’re thinking, ‘This isn’t happening to me.’”

Seven months ago Willis took the teens, along with their younger siblings - Hannah, 6; Miykael, 9; Zion, 11; and Yahshua, 12 - to Fernside for the first time.

Almost immediately, they let down their guard. Even Iel.

“He came out that first night, and he had a smile on his face,” his grandmother says.

“They look forward to going. If I’m lying up here, tired or sleepy, they’ll come and say, ‘Time to go to Fernside.’”

Every two weeks they meet in small groups with other children, grouped by age. A volunteer leads sessions that might include arts and crafts, games, music, writing or other activities designed to help kids express their feelings.

“It’s more about fun stuff than sad stuff,” Iel says.

The fun stuff keeps them coming back. That, and the common bond they all share.

“I found it somewhat beneficial to know that I wasn’t alone,” Keilah says. “Talking to other people or listening to other people kind of helped me. And I feel that I helped them, even if it’s just a little bit.”

Asia’s advice to other young people who might be reluctant to attend a Fernside support group: “Give it a chance.”

Says Keilah: “Life goes on. That’s one of the things you have to realize. It might take a while. It took me a while. But life goes on.”

Woman wants to give back *The Client-Turned-Volunteer*



Fernside facilitator Jen Johnson has lost her mother and stepfather.

Jen Johnson was 11 when her mother was killed, struck by a car while jogging.

She was 19 and a student at Miami University when she lost her stepfather, whose car veered off the side of a road.

That's when Fernside entered the picture. Away at college where no one could relate to her grief, Johnson drove every two weeks from Oxford to Norwood to a support group.

"Fernside allowed me to talk with people who had experienced the same thing," says Johnson, now 30 and living in Mason with her husband and their infant daughter.

"It also let me see that it can always be worse. I lost two parents, but there are kids who have had much worse loss than me."

She attended sessions for two years. Then she decided it was time to give back.

Backed by an elementary education degree and a love of children, she trained as a Fernside volunteer facilitator. For the past nine years, she has worked with 8 to 10-year-olds.

"It's therapy for me," she says. "It gives me a chance sometimes to get out feelings."

A child whose father took his life once told her, "If I just could have made my dad happier."

It's not your fault, she emphasizes.

Johnson's stepfather was exhausted when his car ran off the road. He had asked her to run an errand that day. She refused. Maybe if she had done it, maybe if he'd had time for a nap.

It's not your fault.

Johnson came to Fernside 11 years ago looking for support. Now she offers it to others.

“What I really love about Fernside is watching the kids grow and change. So many times I’ve seen kids come in the first time and they won’t share. They might only say their name the whole night, and just listen. The next time they’ll talk a little bit more. And in a few weeks they’re telling us everything about the person who died. After a while, they really want to come.”

‘A good experience’ helps her through loss

The Daughter



Annie Sublett points out family photos at her Hyde Park home. She lost her mother, Mary Ann, to Lou Gehrig’s disease and subsequently attended a seven-week Fernside program.

“She was a good person. She was a good wife and a good mother. She gave birth to me. I was Down syndrome, the last of nine (children).”

Annie Sublett, 30, of Hyde Park is talking about her mother, Mary Ann Sublett, who was 67 when she died in January of Lou Gehrig’s disease.

Annie, who lives with her father, is an active, capable person with a job at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center. But family members could see she was having a hard time after her mother’s death.

“Sad. Anger. Frustrated,” Annie says, describing how she felt.

Then Annie’s sister Mary Beth Lind thought of Fernside. Lind, 37, and her daughters, Marisa, 11, and Carol, 8, had attended its support groups for a year after Lind’s husband, Charles, died of a heart attack in February 2005.

“As soon as we began going it was, ‘I love this place because everybody knows exactly how I feel,’” Lind says.

She discovered that Fernside was beginning a pilot program for people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities, held in conjunction with the Hamilton County Board of MRDD.

Annie completed the seven-week program in June. “I think that it helped her,” her sister says.

“Yes, it did,” agrees Annie, wearing her mother’s high school class ring on a necklace. “It’s a good experience.”

Pilot program takes off

The Principal



Thomas Boggs, Bond Hill Academy principal, gave a boost to an after-school program to help kids deal with loss.

A spate of violence had occurred near Bond Hill Academy, including a shooting that killed a parent whose children attend the school.

That prompted FamiliesForward, a social-service agency that provides after-school programming and other services for the school, to ask Fernside to offer support groups there. Thomas Boggs, principal of the K-8 school, endorsed the plan.

“The loss of a loved one has an impact on all of us,” he says. “I try to get students to understand death and grieving so that they can move forward with their lives, not only from a social standpoint, but from an academic standpoint. We found Fernside was able to help do that.”

Typically, the Bond Hill Academy sessions draw about 10 to 15 students, many who wouldn’t be able to attend Fernside programs elsewhere because of transportation or

other issues. Children might be grieving the death of a family member or friend, someone lost through sudden tragedy, an accident or a long illness.

Boggs and Julie Theodore, program director for FamiliesForward, say the benefits for students are apparent. “The kids individually have grown a lot. They’re talking more. Their behavior has improved,” Theodore says.

What began three years ago as a pilot program at Bond Hill Academy has since expanded greatly. In the past school year, Fernside’s on-site schools program served 146 children in 21 support groups at 19 schools.

A program for parents

The Volunteer



Ken Rupe helps parents deal with the loss of children.

Ken Rupe leads a Fernside group for parents faced with perhaps life’s toughest challenge: the sudden death of a child.

His goal: get the adults to share their stories.

“When they talk, they realize they’re not alone,” says the retired school superintendent, now a vice president for a moving and storage company. Rupe, 63, lives in Ross Township.

He says parents talk about how it feels when a waitress says: How many children do you have? And about how it feels to be ignored by friends who never ask how they’re doing for fear it might be too painful. And about holding on to a jacket because they can smell their child.

“They think they’re crazy, and then they come into the group, and people say, ‘I feel the same way.’”

In his 10 years volunteering with Fernside he’s seen how talking with others in an accepting environment helps parents move beyond the shock and anger and overwhelming sadness.

In time, most parents reach what he calls “a higher plane of living.” They realize that most of life’s problems are nothing more than minor inconveniences.

But getting to that point is hard work, says Rupe, who has a master’s in counseling.

One father attended regularly but never spoke. His toddler had died in a car accident; he was the driver.

One night, though, when others in the group fell silent, the father began whispering. Tears ran down his face.

“We had to listen carefully to what he was saying,” Rupe says. “It was the first time he was able to talk about what happened. It was a powerful moment.”

About Fernside

Volunteers: Are needed to lead support groups. No special qualifications are needed. Training is provided.

Publications: Booklets, books and fliers for children, parents and educators can be ordered from the “Resources” area of Fernside Online (www.fernside.org).

Donations: Are welcome and help keep Fernside services free.

Information: Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children, 4380 Malsbary Road, Suite 300, Cincinnati 45242. 513-745-0111.
www.fernside.org.

‘How to Help a Grieving Child’

The following is from the Fernside booklet “How to Help a Grieving Child,” which is online in the “grown-up’s area” at www.fernside.org. The most important message: You can’t fix a child’s grief. Instead, honor and support the grief. Be available for the child. Listen. Don’t set a time limit for grief. Encourage the child to share.

Facts of death: Someone close to the child, rather than outsiders, should inform the child as soon as possible. Explain clearly, simply and honestly what caused the death. Avoid euphemisms. Children sometimes think that something they did or said might have caused the death. Explain that it was not the child’s fault.

Spiritual beliefs: Share with your child if your religion includes survival of the spirit or afterlife. This is not a substitute for explaining what happened to the body.

Memorial ceremonies: Describe beforehand what will happen in clear, simple terms. Explain the purpose of each ritual. Include the child in preparations. Encourage the child to attend the services, but don't force the child to do anything against his or her will.

Feelings: Tell the child it's normal to feel angry, guilty, frustrated, scared. Some children grieve openly from the start. Others show no signs for months. There is no right or wrong way.

Talking and listening: Encourage communication, but don't force it. If it's difficult for the child to talk, discuss briefly your own feelings, use memories and stories to help the child find words, draw a picture of your family together or seek the help of a support group or professional counseling.

Fernside by the numbers

(Unless otherwise noted, numbers are for the program year from September 2005 through July 2006)

812

Number of children, teens and adults who attend support groups.

2,441

Children and adults served through the Community Outreach Program, which includes educational requests from schools and other groups.

154

Children and adults served through the Community Crisis Program, in which Fernside counselors respond to schools or community groups after the death of a student or staffer.

49

Children and teens who participated in overnight summer camp, Camp WeBelong, and a teen weekend retreat.

1,264

Telephone consultations.

101

Volunteers who donated 4,275 hours in the 2004-05 program year.