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'Fernside gave me back my life' Volunteer repays center for grieving children

by John Johnston

"I was in the fourth grade, and it was hard," says Meyer, who is 32 and lives in Mount Lookout. "No one understands when you're that young and your mom dies. No one gets it. Kids made fun of me. It was like a joke."

She and her only sibling, a sister who is a year and a half younger, began attending sessions at Fernside, a non-profit center for grieving children that Rachel and Paul Burrell had opened in a Hyde Park church a few years earlier, in fall 1986. At the time, it was only the second such center in the country. For the next several years, Fernside was the safe place where Meyer could "talk about the death of my mom, and talk about death in general." It was the place where she felt reassured that whatever emotion she felt about death - anger, sadness, frustration or fear - was normal.

"Life changes after a death, but your life is not over," she says. "Fernside guided me through that transition."

"I felt like Fernside made me OK, like I would have been crazy without it. It essentially gave me my life back."

Which is why, as a young adult, Meyer wasted no time in giving back to Fernside.

After graduating 10th in her class from Princeton High School in 1996 and enrolling at the University of Cincinnati, Meyer became a Fernside volunteer. As a group facilitator, she worked with children of various ages.

"The kids really like the idea that I went to Fernside when my mom died," she says. "It's a good, positive connection for them."

Her efforts were interrupted a couple of times; first when she moved to Switzerland after college to be an au pair, and again when she spent two years in Germany on Fulbright scholarships, teaching English as a second language and interning for a biotech company.

She returned home six years ago, took a job with Heidelberg Distributing - she's now fine wine manager - and connected again with Fernside. Since then she has been working with preschool- and kindergarten-age children who have lost a parent or



Stacey Meyer talks with kids during a session for Fernside grieving center at Blue Ash Presbyterian Church

The Enquirer/Liz Dufour

grandparent.

Their grief often is expressed in artwork, through games that encourage discussion, or when sitting in the sharing circle, where Meyer might ask: Who died in your family? What do you want to tell us about that?

"She gives them the space and time to share their thoughts, and she listens to what they have to say," says Mary McCutchen, Fernside's volunteer coordinator. "That's very important. Because what children need to know is that they're listened to, they're understood, and somebody cares about them."

Meyer has been part of the growth of Fernside, which is now based in Blue Ash and is an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati. She assists with fundraising and twice has volunteered at the agency's teen retreat.

Preschoolers don't provide feedback to volunteers the way teens do. But that's OK, Meyer says.

She knows she's making a difference. Sometimes it's a simple thing, such as a child holding her hand, or asking to sit in her lap. Sometimes it's a child tugging on her shirt and whispering in her ear, "I need to tell you something."

And Stacey Meyer is listening.

About Fernside

Numbers for the past year:

- 1,100: Children and adults in peer support groups (a record)
- 4,400: People who benefited from the Community Outreach Program
- 1,010: Children and adults served by the Crisis Support Program (a record)
- 5,800: Volunteer hours devoted to Fernside

Information: 513-745-0111 or fernside.org