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Volunteer returns to repay center

by John Johnston

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Nine children are opening plastic eggs. Inside each egg is candy - and a question the boys and girls take turns answering.

How long should you miss your loved one?

"Always," says a 9-year-old boy whose mother died.

"'Til I die," says another boy, also 9, who lost his mother.

This Fernside group for first- through third-graders is led by volunteers Chris Pankau, Kathy Stidham and Laura Keinath. Pankau, 26, of West Chester, was in eighth grade when his mother died.

"I almost acted like it didn't happen," he says before the group begins. "I probably wouldn't have dealt with it, if I didn't come (to Fernside)."

Children who don't have the opportunity to express feelings might mask their grief and put themselves at risk for problems later in life, Fernside executive director Vicky Ott says. "By allowing and encouraging them to express their feelings in their own way, we give them the tools to work through their grief and discover the strength within."

Six months after his mother's death, Pankau and his father began attending Fernside groups.

"Fernside's great because (children) probably don't know any other kids who have lost someone, even though they probably go to school with kids that have.

They just don't know, because they don't go to school and talk about that. But here, they can."

Pankau has been a volunteer at Fernside's summer camp for about 10 years, and an evening group facilitator for about six. Through a variety of activities, Pankau and other volunteers help children feel comfortable expressing their grief.



Chris Pankau attended Fernside after his mother's death when he was in the eighth grade. He now volunteers there and works with kids in first through third grades. *The Enquirer/Jeff Swinger*

Still, some children resist, which was the case for a boy Pankau met at Fernside's summer camp. For most of the weekend, he was disruptive. Then he and other children wrote notes to their loved ones, placed the notes on a camp fire, and watched the smoke rise to heaven.

Afterward, "I was carrying him, he was sitting on my shoulders," Pankau says. "He pointed up and said, 'Do you see that star? That's my dad.' That was the first time the entire weekend he mentioned anything about his dad."

It was a small but significant moment, Pankau said. And the boy's behavior improved immeasurably after that.