

reprinted from April 17, 2011's
Cincinnati Enquirer

THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children marks 25 years of healing

by John Johnston

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On a January day last year, 54-year-old Doug Cepluch baked brownies with his daughters, Carly and Grace. Then he lay down to take a nap, had a heart attack and died.

His widow, Rebecca Cepluch of Lawrenceburg, knew her children, then ages 7 and 10, would need more help dealing with their loss than she could provide. So 13 months ago the three of them began attending support groups at Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children.

"Fernside stepped in and showed us more love and compassion than I could possibly imagine. It saved our lives," said Cepluch, whose family still attends.

This year Fernside marks 25 years of providing free services to help families heal from loss. The non-profit organization has a \$619,000 budget and relies on community donations and financial support from Hospice of Cincinnati. (Fernside became a hospice affiliate in 2001.)

When founder Rachel Burrell opened Fernside's doors, it was only the country's second such center for grieving children. Today there are hundreds of such programs, and some got their start with help from Fernside.

Fernside itself has grown tremendously over the years, but it remains true to its pioneering founder's philosophy, "which is listening to the children, and letting them build the place," said

executive director Vicky Ott.

Ott started at Fernside 15 years ago as a volunteer and worked alongside Burrell, who died in 2007. "I remember her talking about how children were the invisible grievers in society." They suffered in silence.



Stacey Meyer, center, reads a story to 3- 6 year old kids during a session for Fernside at Blue Ash Presbyterian Church last summer.
The Enquirer/Liz Dufour

Burrell had firsthand experience. Her son David, 27, was riding his bike home from the University of Cincinnati in 1982 when he was struck by a car and died.

Burrell and her husband, Paul, were so overwhelmed with grief that they couldn't help their other three children. There were support groups for grieving parents, but none for youngsters.

Four years later, the Burrells started Fernside in a Hyde Park church. Today, Fernside's evening support groups for ages 3-18 meet in donated space at Blue Ash Presbyterian Church, Cornerstone United Methodist Church in Liberty Township, Margaret B. Rost School in Green Township, Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Anderson Township and St. Xavier Church, Downtown.

More than 700 children and adults attend evening support groups each year. Children are grouped with others their age; parents and guardians meet separately.

Children's sessions are structured around themes – "things we've heard children talk about," Ott said. They include dreams and nightmares; memories; changes and rebuilding; feelings; and special days, such as holidays and birthdays.

Grieving is hard enough for adults. But lacking the same life experiences, children “are not equipped to deal with some of their worries and their questions,” Ott said.

Why did this happen?

Will somebody else in my family die?

Who will take care of me?

“Depending on children’s age, sometimes they can’t even articulate their worries or questions,” Ott said. “We give them lots of ways they can express their grief.”

Children are encouraged to draw. To paint. To write. To put on plays.

Terry Haggard of Monfort Heights volunteered at Fernside for 10 years.

“One of my most learned lessons from volunteering is grief knows no age,” she said. “When I was leading a group of 3- to 4- year-olds, I thought to myself: How could these kids know why they are here? And then I heard a little girl on a play phone talking to her dad. She told him, Daddy, my room is messy. You need to come help me clean it. And then she proceeded to have a conversation with him.”

Fernside’s 120 volunteers make families feel safe and welcome. They are trained to facilitate support groups that service people in Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky and South-east Indiana.

Patricia Boettcher of Norwood became a group facilitator 11 years ago. In 2006, she was leading a group of girls, most of whom had lost their fathers. In November of that year, Boettcher’s father got sick and died. She took leave from the group to spend time with family.

“I remember being in Wisconsin planning the funeral with my mom and in the mail comes a giant envelope,” she said. “It was filled with cards from the girls in my group telling me, their facilitator, to be strong and I could get through this time. ... I still have those cards and find strength in the fact that those little girls have all gotten through it, and so can I.”

Peer support also is important.

“(Children) share all kinds of things when they come to Fernside, or some nights they don’t share a thing, they just listen to the other kids, which is just as powerful,” said Jenny Perry of Montgomery, a Fernside volunteer for almost 20 years.

Fernside’s reach extends beyond the evening support groups. Last year about 3,000 people benefited from programs that include an overnight summer camp for ages 7-12; a weekend retreat for teens; a crisis response program for schools or other organizations; a school program that provides on-site support for grieving students; and presentations to community groups.

Information

For information about Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children, visit www.fernside.org, which has resources on how to help a grieving child, or call 513-745-0111.

Anniversary events

All year: 25 Drive, a community-wide quarter collection to support Fernside’s free services. Kits are in local schools and businesses. Call the number below to get a kit.

April 29: Reunion of Fernside volunteers.

April 30-May 1: Team Fernside participates in the Flying Pig Marathon.

May 22-23: Hospice of Cincinnati Summertime Classic, a golf event to benefit Fernside. 513-865-1616.

Aug. 11: 25 Ways to Leave an Impact, an open house for bereavement professionals.

Nov. 20: Luminaria Lighting, in conjunction with Hospice of Cincinnati’s Celebration of Life Tree Lighting.

Information: www.fernside.org or 513-745-0111.