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Last Updated: 11:20 am | Saturday, October 13, 2007

Burrell's gift: a place to grieve

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Hundreds of families here and across the region went into mourning Wednesday at the news of the death of Rachel Burrell, founder of Fernside, Greater Cincinnati's nationally lauded center that serves grieving children.

Mrs. Burrell was gentleness incarnate, a soft-spoken woman who turned her own family's tragedy into a ministry of healing for hundreds of local sorrowing children.

Because of it we can offer these words of wisdom to those who now mourn Mrs. Burrell's loss: Express your pain. Share it. Feel it. Draw it. Write of it. Speak of it.

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After her son David's death in 1982, Mrs. Burrell and her husband Paul created a place where children could do those things. And grief lost its stigma at Fernside.

Children who had lost close family members to illness, accident, violence and suicide came to Fernside programs - completely free of cost - and let down their guard. No one tried to distract them. No one made them feel uncomfortable when they cried. No one censored their painful, awkward questions - did I cause my brother's death, what if I'm mad at my mom for dying?

And because children heal better without shame or silence, Fernside became a place of growth and intimacy, of honesty and openness, even of laughter and play.

Begun in donated space at Knox Presbyterian Church in 1986, Fernside moved to its own space in Norwood in 1994 and merged in 2001 with Hospice of Cincinnati in Blue Ash. It now offers programs at three satellite sites and in dozens of public and private schools. It has been the prototype for dozens such centers across the country. More than 25,000 children and their families have been touched by its sensitive care.

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At its core, Fernside is about treating death with honesty and children with dignity. It has saved hundreds of children from suffering in silence, fostered their resilience and thus strengthened the emotional and mental health of our community.

It is a legacy that grew out of Rachel Burrell's love for her son and concern for his three grieving siblings - a one-of-a-kind place where children learn that grieving well is the first step to living fully and loving bravely.

Mrs. Burrell stepped down as executive director in 1998 but her heart was never far from Fernside, and her quiet, gentle approach continues to shape its culture.

"I just hope that my dreams don't get lost, and that some of them will come to pass," she said, approaching retirement.

We believe the compassionate work of Fernside has since surpassed even its founder's vision. It is a legacy to Rachel and Paul Burrell, and an ongoing tribute to their son David, whose life they continued to celebrate and whose death was turned into an opportunity to teach and heal.

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