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Lives Remembered

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Rachel Burrell reached out to help grieving children heal

Co-founder of Fernside developed programs now in wide use

BY REBECCA GOODMAN | RGOODMAN@ENQUIRER.COM

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KENWOOD - Rachel Ober Burrell, co-founder of Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children in Blue Ash, died Wednesday of unknown causes in her room at Carriage Court. She was 79.

"She was an advocate for children and grieving families really all over the world," said her son Peter Burrell, of Mount Lookout. "Her vision was to let the children create the place and create the way in which they dealt with their loved one's death."

In 1982, Mrs. Burrell's oldest child, David, was hit by a car and killed while riding his bike home from the University of Cincinnati. He was 27.

Mrs. Burrell and her husband, Paul, found themselves so swamped with grief that they couldn't help their three other children - especially 17-year-old Christopher - with their feelings.

There were support groups for parents of children who had died, but the Burrells noted a lack of those for children who had lost parents, siblings, other relatives or friends.

Four years after David's death, the Burrells started such a group in a donated space at Knox Presbyterian Church in Hyde Park with $4,500 from the Junior League of Cincinnati. They called it Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children after Fernside Avenue, where Mrs. Burrell used to pick David up from Walnut Hills High School. It became the second such center in the

country for grieving children, the first being the Dougy Center in Portland, Ore.

The Burrells' philosophy was one of self expression. Children were encouraged to draw pictures, act out feelings with puppets, dress up in costumes and put on plays, write stories and poems, talk to loved ones on play telephones, and laugh and cry.

They were also encouraged to talk to each other about their feelings, their sadness, life, death and how to go on.

Since then Fernside has grown from 16 original participants to more than 4,600. It has also helped children around the world by sending care packages and advice to children in Israel and Northern Ireland, after plane crashes and post 9/11.

Fernside offers free peer support group, resources, and summer camp for bereaved children and teens.

A few years ago it merged with Hospice of Cincinnati.

Mrs. Burrell served as Fernside's executive director until 1998.

"In a death-denying culture, children were denied as bona fide grievers and people often didn't know what to do," she told The Enquirer in an interview when she stepped down.

"Until Fernside was created, adults and professionals often assumed that children didn't grieve, quickly forgot or grieved silently without repercussions."

She penned tender, touching answers to children's questions in the "Dear Fern" letters printed in a Fernside newsletter.

Mrs. Burrell held a bachelor's degree from Connecticut College in New London and was a member of the philosophy faculty at Columbia University while working toward a master's degree.

Before founding Fernside, she was head teacher at Hyde Park Community Methodist Nursery School for seven years. She was a play therapist at Princeton Child and Adult Center, where she developed a program for autistic children.

She also served as a Boy Scout den mother, vice president of the Kilgour School PTA, and a committee member for the League of Women Voters.

She was on the bereavement support committee of the Ohio Task Force, which produced a manual for professionals working with survivors of SIDS in 2000.

Mrs. Burrell presented numerous workshops throughout Ohio and spoke at conferences in New York, New Orleans, and Pittsburgh, among other places. She wrote books, brochures and workbooks on the topic of grieving children.

Her husband, Paul B. Burrell, professor emeritus of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Cincinnati, died in 2001.

Mrs. Burrell continued to work at Fernside until 2003.

In addition to her son Peter, survivors include son Christopher Burrell of East Boston; a daughter, Ann Burrell of Mount Lookout; and three grandchildren. Visitation is 2-6 p.m. Sunday at the Elden A. Good Funeral Home, 2620 Erie Ave., in Hyde Park. Mass of Christian burial is 10:30 a.m. Monday at St. Mary Church, 2853 Erie Ave. Burial will be at St. Mary Cemetery in St. Bernard.

Memorial gifts are suggested to Fernside Center for Grieving Children, P.O. Box 633597, Cincinnati, OH 45236-3597.

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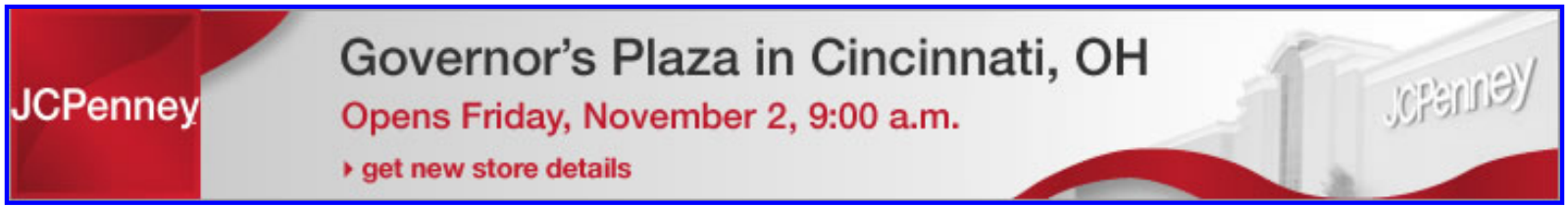

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