

Getting past grief

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It's not fair for a parent to bury a son or daughter. It's not fair for a child still in middle school to lose a parent.

But the workers and volunteers at Fernside, a nonprofit organization that supports grieving children who have lost a loved one, do whatever they can to level the playing field.

Lois Bogenschutz lost her husband about a year ago to cancer. Attending Fernside meetings has helped her raise her son, Jeffrey, by herself, as well as express her grief.

"I went to other support groups, but my issues with having a 7-year-old were different," Bogenschutz said. "Fernside gives you the opportunity to focus on family issues."

The death of a loved one impacts people professionally as well as emotionally. One of Bogenschutz's biggest issues is the disconnect between how she feels inside and how she has to act in the business world. As a research nurse at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, she knows there is a level of expectation, even when she just feels like crying.

A 2003 report by the Grief Recovery Institute Educational Foundation, Inc., said businesses lost \$37.5 billion due to the grief caused by the death of a loved one.

Rachel Burrell founded Fernside in December 1986, after the death of her son, David. Grieving her loss was especially difficult, as she had to care for her three surviving children.

When she and her husband were going to Compassionate Friends, a support group for parents who have lost a child, they found other parents in similar situations.

With a donation of seed money from the Junior League of Cincinnati, space on the second floor of [Knox Presbyterian Church](#) in Hyde Park and time from 12 volunteers, Fernside became the second bereavement center for children in the United States. It has since formed an alliance with Hospice of Cincinnati and added many other features.

Fernside's first group included 16 children at one location. Today, more than 800 people, including 530 children, are involved in the evening programs, with more receiving help from Fernside's during-school program. Meetings are held at four locations in donated spaces in Blue Ash, Hamilton, Bridgetown and Anderson Township.

Vicky Ott, the executive director for Fernside, said the peer support groups for children and the simultaneous meetings for their parents or guardians are still the main service Fernside provides.

But its work does not stop there. After 20 years of making the grieving process easier, Fernside has expanded "exponentially," Ott said.

Aside from starting the satellite programs in Hamilton, Bridgetown and Anderson, Fernside has begun a young adult program. This program is for 19- to 26-year-olds who do not fit into the core program.

Another program recently started was a support group for adults with developmental disabilities.

Fernside also offers telephone help, a resource center and lending library, referrals for special needs and camp programs for teens and children.

The organization tries to address a range of issues for people of all ages. "When we see a need, an opportunity, we'll do whatever it takes," Ott said.

For Bogenschutz, Fernside has helped her keep going. Her husband made sure there were newsletters and pamphlets around the house before he died.

"He knew he was sick," Bogenschutz said. "He was setting it up to make sure, to take care of us."

Bogenschutz's 8-year-old son Jeffrey whined during the entire drive to Blue Ash when they went for orientation. Now, he anticipates the meetings.

"He knows when it's Fernside night and looks forward to it," Bogenschutz said. "It helps him settle so much."

The meetings start with a pizza dinner, where families have a chance to eat and talk with their children and other families. After that, volunteers break the families into age groups. The younger children play games, draw pictures and express their feelings in a safe and confidential environment. The adults have their own group, where they are free to open up about their struggles.

"Fernside gives you the opportunity to find out that your feelings are consistent," Bogenschutz said. "The struggles within myself and the struggles I have with Jeffrey are normal."

Going to the meetings gives her time to release her true feelings. She can share her thoughts, talk with other parents, laugh or cry.

John Visse has been going to Fernside meetings with his daughter Nicole, 6, since last September. Visse said he enjoys Fernside because it helps his daughter deal with the loss of her mother. Plus, he sees his pain is shared by others.

The help Fernside provides does not stop once the meetings are over. While they only meet two times a month, the the children can use the coping skills they are taught throughout their lives. In addition, parents learn how to help their children deal with their grief.

After recent meetings, Bogenschutz, Visse and others have gone out for ice cream with friends they never would have met.

"It's nice to hang out and just be normal people," Bogenschutz said.

While Fernside has added new meeting locations for the past three years, Ott does not see any more coming soon.

"Never say never," she said. "We care for anyone who is willing to come."