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Fernside grows, turns 25

Helps children cope with loss of a loved one

by Brent Coleman

Several hundred supporters and clients of Hospice of Cincinnati and Fernside: A Center for Grieving Children celebrated 25 years of the little center that could Sunday night in Blue Ash.

Among them was Mary Ann Romanello.

"I've been with Fernside since it started, so to see all this is very emotional," said Romanello, who was assigned cleanup but was helping wherever she was needed in the center's Cooper Road parking lot where the party was held.

"Rachel would be so happy."

The late Rachel Burrell founded Fernside in 1986, four years after her son, 27-year-old David, was killed in a car wreck.

"I think Mom just always loved kids," said Ann Burrell of Mount Lookout, standing next to a photograph of her mother in the lobby of a new building that houses Hospice of Cincinnati and its two offshoot agencies, Fernside and the new Goldstein Family Hospice.

Burrell, who does photography for Fernside, said her mother found help with her grief locally through Compassionate Friends.

"But she started thinking there's nothing for a child who had a significant person in their life die," said Burrell.

Inspiration from the Dougy Center in Portland, Ore., and financial support from the Junior League helped Rachel Burrell

establish Fernside. Years after working in leased space, Fernside has its dream offices on the first floor of the new building.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" said Fernside Executive Director Vicky Ott. "Now we can finally put things on the walls."

And that they have.

Down the first hall and around the corner is grief-inspired artwork produced by the dozens of children who receive free group and individual counseling – and hopefully achieve healing – at Fernside.



Floating lanterns are lit and sent aloft Sunday at Fernside's 25th anniversary celebration. The center provides a place where children can learn to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. *The Enquirer / Amanda Davidson*



People walk through a labyrinth made of luminaria to remember family and friends. *The Enquirer / Amanda Davidson*

One child who benefited from Fernside's love, kindness and counseling is Brad Cutter, 15, of Mason. He, his 12-year-old sister, Rachel, and mother, Jill, experienced sudden shock and serious grief nine years ago on the day their father and husband, 37-year-old Rich Cutter, died unexpectedly.

"They were little and confused, and to bring them to a strange place was very scary, the whole thing was very scary – until we walked in to the door (of Fernside)," said Jill Cutter.

"We came out an hour and a half later, and we were calm that first night. I'll never forget it."

Today, Brad is a gifted writer, something he was encouraged to do when he first came to Fernside as a 6-year-old, his mother said. He's also part of Fernside's "pit crew," a group of "teenage philanthropists" who help out with the younger kids on orientation nights or at summer camp.

Brad's mother volunteers at Fernside, too. She helped set up a fern leaf shaped labyrinth of luminaria in the parking lot in front of the center.

"Walking through the fern I helped set up ... wow! It was incredible, amazing, peaceful. I was thinking about my husband and how far as a family we've come in the grieving process," Cutter said.

She's particularly grateful that early on, Fernside had her children make memory boxes that hold reminders of their father.

"My daughter doesn't remember her daddy, so it's a little different for her. But my son has gone to that box several times, important times," Cutter said.

Speakers at a brief ceremony Sunday included Eddie Goldstein, the major donor to the building fund. The Harry's Corner Flooring owner said he and his wife, Arlene, did it for the kids and parents like theirs.

As rain threatened to close down the celebration, children in attendance were called up to stand on the stage. They counted down from 10, slowly.

And when they reached zero, strings of lights came on, illuminating trees around them. Then 25 Asian sky lanterns were lighted and released to float up and away into the misty sky.

At that moment, if anyone felt grief, it had to be brief.



A labyrinth made of luminaria is created in the shape of a fern. The celebration also marked the opening of the Goldstein Family Hospice of Cincinnati. *The Enquirer / Amanda Davidson*



Eddie Goldstein speaks during an event marking Fernside's 25th anniversary and the launch of the Goldstein Family Hospice of Cincinnati. *The Enquirer / Amanda Davidson*



Artwork made by children going through the Fernside program hangs on the wall of the new center. *The Enquirer / Amanda Davidson*