

# Children learn to cope with grief at annual Children's Bereavement Camp

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BY ABBEY ROY • ADVOCATE REPORTER • JULY 15, 2010

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NEWARK -- "I put a guitar on my kite because my dad, he loved rock 'n' roll."

Mark Beckner spoke with a strength beyond his 11 years as he explained the design on his homemade kite.

The Kirkersville boy lost his father to a heart attack in 2009, he said. He flew the kite Wednesday to get his father's attention, and he was sure his dad saw it.

There were 49 other kites that joined Beckner's: white plastic diamonds with tails, some designed with rainbows, others with hearts, many with the words "I miss you" lovingly scrawled in marker

"Out here, all our activities are really structured around emotional expression," said John Fouts, bereavement coordinator at Hospice of Central Ohio, which launched its 13th annual Children's Bereavement Camp on Monday.

Wednesday was the first time the camp has had the kite-flying activity, a way for the 6- to 12-year-old campers to send messages to their loved ones, Fouts said. The hands-on nature of the kite-flying and other camp activities is designed to celebrate the lives of lost loved ones while helping children cope with the grief that accompanies death, Fouts said.

For more than a decade, local children have attended the camp after receiving referrals from school counselors or family and community members, Fouts said.

Their stories vary. Some have lost grandparents to old age; others, parents or siblings to cancer; still others, a family member in a car crash or suicide.

During the five-day camp, the children work with counselors and volunteers to understand their feelings, frequently through visual and tactile means. A broken pot, for example, symbolizes the way they feel after a loved one dies. A grief hike through Worried Woods, carefully avoiding Fearful Forest, explores the emotions behind and reactions to the passing of a loved one.

Beckner said one of the most important things he'd learned in the three days he'd been at camp was that "You can still talk to whoever died, even though they're gone," whether by saying a prayer silently or speaking aloud.

Another camper, Britney Channel, 10, said a volcano-building activity had helped her understand the danger of keeping emotions bottled in.

"If you don't deal with your anger, it'll all come out," she said.

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Kimie Alkire, 10, had found the grief hike particularly helpful, she said. "It's OK to worry, but don't (be) grouchy about it and (or) be mean," she said, as fellow camper Brittany Wallace pitched in: "But don't go into Fearful Forest."

Wallace, 10, was at camp because her grandparents had died, and her kite was decorated with a rainbow.

"They're really special to me, so I just thought happy is a rainbow," she said.

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A child flies a kite in memory of a loved one Wednesday morning during Hospice of Central Ohio's 13th annual Children's Bereavement Camp at Sts. Peter and Paul Retreat Center in Newark. (Eric George, The Advocate)

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