

Camp Good Grief: A More Personal Experience for July 2020

By Shari Adler

Each year, since 1997, East End Hospice of Westhampton has run a weeklong tuition-free camp, called Camp Good Grief, for children ages 4-17, who have suffered the loss of a loved one.

Since 2018, the camp has taken place at the bucolic grounds of Camp Paquatuck in Center Moriches. The setting is ideal for the myriad fun activities interspersed among the various grief-therapy modalities. This July 20-23, 88 children were registered to attend camp and receive such therapy from certified therapists as well as trained volunteers all dedicated in their daily endeavors to deliver support supplemented by fun.

Camp Good Grief can truly be a magical place for children in need of bereavement counseling. Sports, archery, arts and crafts, music, playground free-time, kayaking, and fishing are just some of the activities. Intertwined with these carefree opportunities are the variety of group, art, music, and animal-related therapeutic techniques. East End Hospice has established partnerships for the camp with CMEE, the Children's Museum of the East End, the Parrish Art Museum, and the East End Arts for cultural and art enrichment.

According to literature provided to the families, Camp Good Grief "interweaves a specially designed therapeutic curriculum with traditional camp activities." It adds that, "taking part in the activities at Camp Good Grief is a big step forward in the beginning of the healing process." For many children, camp is their first opportunity to speak with licensed professionals.

The young sons of Meg Kretz, and the late Kevin Kretz who died of brain cancer, have had the opportunity to become campers. Ms. Kretz said that her older son started attending camp at age 4. The first day he returned home from camp with a sculpture. When she asked him to describe it, her son responded that it was his Dad's brain, because "it was his brain that made him who he was."



In the best of conditions, based on estimates obtained by East End Hospice, more than 215,000 children in the state of New York, annually, are bereaved and in need of support. This translates to 1 in 20 children who experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18. Unfortunately, we have been bereft of the best of conditions for many years. We have experienced loss from the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, from stress-induced suicide during the financial crisis of 2008, and from drug overdose during the opioid crisis. Currently, we are experiencing such massive loss from the greatest global pandemic since 1918-1920. Bidding final farewells to loved ones is part of our daily lives, now more than ever.

Mary Crosby, East End Hospice president and CEO, explained that many people facing a loss related to COVID are at risk for complicated grief due to the trauma of not being able to see a family member before his or her passing. Families and loved ones are denied access to the hospital beds of their infirmed beloved person to say proper goodbyes. Subsequently, they are restricted from including their communities in funerals, wakes, or shivas. As a result, the person lost is not memorialized and the families need extra support with the grieving process.

Dealing with death in such dire circumstances makes the pain of demise much more palpable. Ms. Crosby acknowledges that all licensed therapists at Camp Good Grief are specifically trained in providing coping mechanisms for the ramifications



of complicated grief, and that they understand the unique issues that surround our current climate.

Ms. Kretz confirms that “camp gives the children the words and language they need to talk about their grief. Feelings that are not talked about get stuck, and are not processed through the person.” Additionally, especially true for the older children, being equipped with positive tools makes reliance on drugs and alcohol for relief much less likely.

In any situation in which a child experiences grief and loss, Ms. Crosby asserts there could be feelings of isolation since it is difficult for a child’s peers to comprehend such emotions. Unlike suffering from a disease or a broken bone, these children feel an invisible pain. When children of bereavement experience Camp Good Grief, they cull a sense of camaraderie among their fellow campers. Their feelings of loneliness dissipate.

In fact, Ms. Kretz assures her children on their first day of camp this year by telling them, “Every camper has something in common ... someone special in the spirit world as their guardian angel. Everyone at camp is here for the same reason.” She states that it is “the one time where the kids don’t have to feel different because everyone at camp shares a special bond.”

In otherwise normal times, children who attend camp reside in the Tri-State area. This year, the CDC guidelines recommend that campers and counselors come solely from Suffolk County and that the camp be capped at approximately half-capacity with 88 campers. There are, however, benefits to the smaller number of campers. For instance, group therapy sessions are more intimate and personal. Jackie Weinstein, an East End Hospice board member, also asserts that, “smaller numbers give us a chance to connect more deeply with caregivers,” during their one-day retreat which provides caregiver support.



Furthermore, many CDC recommended protocols are being instituted to keep campers, volunteers, therapists, and counselors safe from the virus. In addition to requiring that all participants are residents of local areas, all visitor access is restricted. In other years, for example, many East End Hospice volunteers have been invited to camp to serve lunch from a buffet-style food table. This year, rather than include visitors, the mid-day meal is being individually pre-packaged and distributed by on-site staff.

All campers and personnel must be cleared by their healthcare provider to participate in camp. They all receive daily screenings, which include temperature checks and verbal assessments. Anyone who has a higher-than-normal temperature reading is sent home. Cleaning, disinfecting, and hand washing occurs between all activities. Additionally, bus service and pool access are both prohibited. Camp arrival times are staggered. On-site volunteers are wearing colorful bandana-style masks coordinated to match their camp T-shirts in instances where maintaining the 6-foot distance standard is challenging. Most daily activities are conducted in small groups.

At the completion of camp, families of all campers are provided with packets to continue participation of bereavement programming all offered cost free and year round to children, other clients, and their caregivers.

Camp Good Grief was founded by Sarah Zimmerman and former East End Hospice President and CEO Priscilla Ruffin. Ms. Ruffin also co-authored the book about the camp experience, called “Jeremy Goes to Camp Good Grief.”

Twenty years ago, Jackie Weinstein and Susan Katz established the Valentine Salon Luncheon as an annual fundraiser in support of Camp Good Grief, ensuring that camp is completely tuition free.

For more information or to support East End Hospice and Camp Good Grief, visit EEH.org or call 631-288-7080.

