

## After 5: Randy Bacon photo exhibit focuses on Lost & Found families

Healing Hearts

by Katy Steinmetz - Editorial Intern

Kim Hickerson was told that the second birthday after her 14-year-old son's death would be harder than the first, but she didn't think it could be. Then July 2 came around, and she understood.

"Instead of car shopping, we were putting flowers on a headstone," Hickerson says. "We were just numb the first year."

That painful revelation is one she could share with few people. Unless someone has lost a child, she explains, it's impossible to know what bereaved parents are facing.

But there was one place where she knew others would sympathize: Lost & Found.

Springfield-based Lost & Found is a nonprofit organization that provides free counseling to grieving survivors who have lost loved ones. Hickerson's family, after being disappointed with private counseling, started going there almost a year ago, and she says group sessions have helped them cope.

"Without Lost & Found, I really don't know where we would be," Hickerson says of learning to live without son Rodger.

Many grieving Ozarks families aren't aware of Lost & Found, says Director Karen Scott, but that's something she hopes will change as the result of an upcoming collaboration with photographer Randy Bacon.

A photo exhibit, "Mending of Hearts," will feature portraits of families who have lost someone and sought solace at Lost & Found. Roughly 35 pieces, accompanied by the families' stories, will be displayed at Bacon's studio in the Monarch Art Factory, 600 W. College, for the Aug. 7 First Friday Artwalk and will remain there until mid-September.

In addition to letting families know about Lost & Found, Bacon hopes people will view the show as a celebration of survivors and a reminder that each moment is one people might not have had, if luck or fate had been the tiniest bit different.

"Every second is a blessing, and we should live every second as such," he says.

Having the pictures taken also proved to be therapeutic for the families, Scott says.

For many, including the Hickersons, it was the first time they had taken a family portrait without the missing father, mother, daughter, son or other loved one.

"How would you ever take a family picture without one of your children?" Hickerson says. "It was really a breakthrough to see that we could do that."

The families pictured are at various stages of grief. For some, the loss occurred just a few weeks before the photos were taken, but others have had years of recovery, when happy memories may weigh stronger against the pain.

All of the families brought some memorabilia - a picture, a journal, a piece of clothing - to symbolize the absentee.

Scott first asked Bacon to take some pictures at Lost & Found's center for just one evening, hoping to get enough for a new brochure. But Bacon, moved by their stories, wanted to do a bigger show and invited Lost & Found to have counseling sessions in his studio for two weeks while he photographed the families.

For the Lost & Found project, Bacon used minimal direction, as is typical of his style, and a generic background.

That simplicity helped the families feel comfortable enough to open up for his camera, and similar details helped to emphasize their differences, he says.

"Everybody's grief, everybody's experience is different," says Scott. "But they all carry the weight."

Scott, who has a master's degree in counseling and a doctorate in education, spent more than 30 years as a school counselor before co-founding Lost & Found with lawyer-cum-chocolatier Shawn Askinosie in 2001.

Lost & Found serves families in a 15-county area and helped more than 600 people last year, but staff and resources limit the group from doing as much as leaders would like, Scott says. Lost & Found's annual operating budget of roughly \$200,000 is generated largely through donations; the organization has three full-time staff members, coordinators who are paid by the night and about 50 volunteers who operate out of a small house on the corner of Cedarbrook and Pythian.

Hickerson, whose family travels 90 minutes each way to attend counseling sessions, says her family hopes to lend enough financial support so others in Southwest Missouri can get the help they have.

"Until it happens to you, you just have no clue," she says.