

Lost and Found

A new center in Springfield offers support to grieving children.

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News-Leader*

After the tears dry and the funeral ends, after the hugs, the kisses and the heartfelt words, even after silence reigns and the world moves on, it's not over.

Grief never ends.

And for a child, who learns through death that nothing is forever and life can change in the blink of an eye, the loss of a loved one can be particularly hard to take.

"You don't get over it," says Karen Scott, the coordinator of counseling for Springfield Public Schools. "You adjust to life without the deceased person, but your life will never be like it was because you've experienced such a loss ... for a child, death shatters that sense of being able to count on everything being OK."

There are tears, questions, sadness and often the need for someone to please, please listen.

Enter Lost & Found, a nonprofit organization started by Springfield attorney Shawn Askinosie designed to offer a safe, caring environment where grieving children and their families can share their experiences while they heal.

"Our goal is to help them work through the sadness," says Scott, who serves as director of the center. "You have to acknowledge the loss and experience the pain of the loss, but eventually you have to reinvest in life. Eventually, you do find life is worth living."

'A place of all emotions'

The Lost & Found center is located on Walnut Street, on the top floor of the rambling old house that serves as the Askinosie and Grantham law offices.

But it looks anything but formal.

Winter sunlight streams through the windows, hitting walls and a ceiling painted sky blue with clouds. Toys, art supplies, puppets and stuffed animals abound. The room is bright, cheery and kid-friendly.

A closer look, though, offers insight that this is a special playroom. In the corner is a toy IV cart with medical supplies; on the table is a toy telephone.

"A lot of the kids have seen hospital procedures, so they're familiar with this stuff," says Scott. "And sometimes, they like to talk on the telephone to the person who died."

At Lost & Found, kids meet in age-appropriate groups that are headed by facilitators and number eight to 10. The children come to the center with their caregivers or parents who can either wait downstairs or meet in separate support groups with the other parents attending.

The children's groups are structured at the beginning and end, with rituals that allow the children to talk about and remember the person who died. Their words stay confidential.

In between, there's play time, where children can do whatever they want, whatever they need. They talk, play, burn off steam.

"This really is a place of all emotions," says Scott. "When people are here, sometimes, almost always, there are some tears, but there's a lot of laughter. It's a good place to come; they have good feelings while they're here, and the facilitators are trained in addressing grief issues ... It's about moving forward."

Peer support

Lost & Found — whose services are offered free to the community — is modeled after The Dougy Center, a Portland, Ore., organization for grieving children and their families that's been recognized both nationally and internationally for its success.

Lost & Found is one of 110 programs worldwide based on the center's methods.

The Dougy Center was started in 1982, when a nurse named Beverly Chappell became acquainted with a 10-year-old boy named Doug Turno, who was dying of cancer.

"He was just a phenomenal young man," says Joan Schweizer Hoff, associate director of the center. "He would talk to the other kids and spend time with them — he'd say, 'You're dying of cancer and I am, too, and it's OK; let's talk about it.'"

Chappell saw how the little boy's openness and communication helped him and others work through their grief, and she originally wanted to open a center for terminally ill children. At that time, though, the idea was not widely accepted, and the center evolved into helping those left behind.

Today, it serves about 350 children a month.

"It's a peer-support model," says Schweizer Hoff. "We believe kids know what they need to do to heal themselves."

The center is based on four tenets:

- Grief is a natural reaction to the loss of someone.
- The intensity and duration of grief is different for each person.
- People have the capacity within to heal themselves.
- Caring and compassion helps in the grieving process.

"We're a child-oriented organization," says Schweizer Hoff. "Whatever (children) need to do, they can come to the center and do it."

She uses as an example a 5-year-old boy whose mother had died. He would come to the center each week and immediately begin playing with the toy trains.

"To adults, that doesn't look like grieving," she says. "It just looks like playing."

Eventually, though, the boy was able to share how he and his mother used to go out every day to the train tracks behind their house, watch the trains go by and count the cars.

"So for him to keep his mother in his consciousness, he would play with that train, and every time he touched that train, it would help him. He knew inside that was what he had to do."

Facilitators use a technique called reflective listening to help the children. They don't counsel; they repeat the children's words back to them in such a way to validate their feelings.

"If someone takes the time and energy to give back to you the words you gave to them, it means those words are important," says Schweizer Hoff. "And it gives (children) a vision of what they're saying or doing."

The time spent at The Dougy Center — and Lost & Found — is open-ended.

Says Schweizer Hoff: "When they're ready to move on with their life, when the death is not the No. 1 priority in their life, when dance lessons or basketball or something else is more important, then they're ready to move on."

Spreading the word

Askinosie and the Lost & Found staff are spending their days now getting the word out about the center.

"We're talking to funeral directors, doctors, hospice, nurses, counselors — anyone who might come into contact with a family after a death," says Askinosie. "I want to make sure that any child or teen-ager who needs this knows about it."

Right now, there are 12 grief facilitators trained, with others still in training. The staff is volunteer; the center survives on donations.

The \$5,000 start-up money was provided by Jim D. Morris, the founder of Morris Oil.

He was a close friend of Askinosie's father, Lawrence, who died of lung cancer in 1975, when Shawn was 14.

But that wasn't why he donated the money.

"I really have a soft spot in my heart for kids," he says. "I grew up during the Depression, and I saw kids with nothing, and so much abuse ... when Shawn told me about this program, I just wanted to help. Whether it's abuse or grief or any kind of hurt, it's all the same. We all need a shoulder to lean on."

Eventually, Askinosie and staff would like to see the program expand, to provide community outreach. For now, though, they're gratified by the response they've had.

"One of the things I'm just struck by is how grateful people are and what a relief it is to work through these grief issues," says Scott. "It doesn't end when the funeral ends. Sometimes, the shock wears off after the funeral. Everyone goes home, and that's when the sadness begins."