

A place of healing and hope

The Lost & Found center helps grieving families cope with their loss.

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News-Leader*

The necklace that Philip Witt wears has nothing to do with vanity and everything to do with love.

It's a sturdy chain, adorned by a simple gold band.

It's the wedding ring that was worn by his father, Steve Witt, the dad that Philip loved and lost two years ago when Steve died unexpectedly of a heart attack at their home north of Springfield.

That was a tough time for 14-year-old Philip, his little brother, Drew, and their mom, Theresa.

"Those first few months, we were on autopilot, just in a fog," recalled Theresa. "We were just numb."

But when the feelings came, they were overwhelming. Theresa was heartbroken, Philip was angry, and Drew was terrified something else bad would happen to the family.

"At first, I thought we could handle it," Theresa said. "But then I realized, 'We're not doing so great.'"

She called for help.

Lost & Found answered.

The organization, which provides support for grieving children and their families, changed their lives.

"It's like magic," says 10-year-old Drew. "You don't know why it helps you, but it just does."

Looking back

Lost & Found opened its doors in February 2001, a shared vision of Springfield attorney Shawn Askinosie and licensed professional counselor Karen Scott.

A year after its inception, the nonprofit organization is thriving, serving about 50 children and their families.

"I knew the need was out there," says Scott. "But I didn't know if people would come. That's a leap of faith, for people to come to a new place, when they're feeling vulnerable, and share their personal feelings ... but they have. And now we're gaining a reputation that lets people know this is a good place, a safe place."

The center, housed on the upper floor of the Askinosie and Grantham law offices on Walnut Street, survives on private donations and community grants.

At Lost & Found, children meet in small, age-appropriate groups headed by trained volunteer facilitators; their caregivers or parents can wait downstairs or attend separate support groups with other adults.

There's no counseling, just support.

"Society places chronological limits on grief," says Askinosie. "There's a time when we're supposed to be 'over' it, over the death of a parent or a brother or sister ... but grief is personal. This is a place where people can go to talk about it, to try to heal the wound the best they can. And they do that; they know they're doing that. We just provide the place and the people for them to talk to."

Families who attend the center say they gain strength from the camaraderie, the support, the knowledge that while grief may be never ending, the human spirit will endure.

“At Lost & Found, I feel like a normal person,” says Drew Witt, who was 8 years old when his father died in 2000. “It’s helped me a lot. It’s kind of like putting together a piece of a puzzle. I can’t finish the puzzle at school, so I go to Lost & Found, and I can find the piece that fits in.”

Lost & Found is modeled on the The Dougy Center, a Portland, Ore., organization for grieving children and their families that’s been acclaimed nationally and internationally.

And if there is any magic in the success of Lost & Found, says Askinosie, it’s in the proven process of peer support.

“The interaction of the kids, that’s the magic. They help each other,” says Askinosie, who serves as a facilitator for a teen group. “I remember one night, we were sitting in a group and one girl was having difficulty expressing herself — she just couldn’t say what she wanted to say. Another girl came from across the circle and sat by her; she didn’t say anything, she just leaned her head on her shoulder. In that moment, I said to myself, ‘This is what Lost & Found is all about.’”

Dealing with the pain

At Lost & Found, healing isn’t bound by age.

The adults meet downstairs, working through their own emotions, while their kids meet up above.

The meetings are confidential — unless professional intervention is needed, the children’s conversations aren’t shared with the adults.

This way, kids can express thoughts they might not feel comfortable sharing with a parent, feelings of loneliness, sadness or fear.

“I thought I was doing all right before Lost & Found,” says Philip Witt. “But on the inside, I was a wreck. I didn’t want to go home, because (my dad) wasn’t there ... and at school, maybe I’d have my head down or tears on my face and when my friends would ask what’s wrong, I’d say, ‘I just miss my dad.’ And they’d walk away with these looks on their faces, like, ‘Still?’”

He didn’t blame them.

“It wasn’t their fault. They didn’t understand,” he says. “There’s no way they could understand unless they’d been through it themselves.”

Dealing with that flood of emotion while maintaining an expected routine can be tough for kids, says Sharill Springston, a children’s group facilitator.

“They’re living in this world that expects them to be normal, and it’s just not normal anymore,” Springston says. “Society is uncomfortable with grief — we want it over with; we want to put a Band-aid on the problem and have it fixed. But grieving people just want to be heard and talk and feel the way they’re feeling ... here, they can do that, they can feel and deal with the pain, and it’s OK to be who they are and where they are in the process.”

That’s an immense relief, says Philip.

“When I go there, everything is perfect,” he says. “Even if I go in and I’ve had a crappy day, I come out feeling on top of the world.”

Moving forward together

Grieving is never easy, not at any age.

Any parent at Lost & Found can tell you that.

While their children play and talk upstairs, adults — some still reeling from pain that won’t seem to fade — find their own comfort below.

Steve Page joined Lost & Found last year, after the cancer that plagued his wife for 7½ years finally won.

He came in frustration, knowing his teen-age son was hurting but uncertain how to help.

“I knew he needed more than what I could give to him,” says Page, who was married for 17 years. “I’m not the smartest person in the world, but I may be one of the most caring, and I knew he needed to talk to someone — he needed to be around people who were in the same position he was in.”

A friend told him about Lost & Found; he soon became one of many parents who find solace and support in the bi-weekly meetings.

“What you’re going through isn’t like a job, where you know what you’re doing every day,” says Page. “This, you don’t know what you’re supposed to do — when my wife died ... I was lost. And for a while, it seemed like whatever I did wasn’t right.”

His son enjoyed the meetings, and Steve found that, to his surprise, he did, too.

“I came for my son,” he says. “But it’s been good for me, too.”

Many parents feel that way, says Pat Higham, an adult group facilitator.

“I think that for most of them as parents, they come to help their children, not to help themselves,” Higham says. “But it helps to connect with other people, to hear them going through the same experiences you’re going through. It’s peer support, and it’s wonderful.”

Parents are in a double-bind after a loss — they’re dealing with their own emotions, and they’re often worried sick about their kids.

“I think we help the adults as much as the children,” Higham says. “I know we do. They don’t have that many places where they can go, and just talk, and know their children are being taken care of.”

She sees the parents come in — often guarded, quiet or shy — and watches them open up over time.

“I’ve seen a tremendous amount of growth,” says Higham, a retired nurse. “When they first come in, it’s hard for them; maybe they just sit and listen, maybe they just share bits and pieces ... but then they really open up around each other. It’s a healing process.”

Higham speaks from experience. She could have used a group like Lost & Found, she says, when her 17-year-old son Doug was killed in a car accident in 1987.

“You can’t tell anyone how to grieve, or the best way to grieve,” she says. “And we don’t try to. But I feel like I can relate because of my loss, even though every loss is different. I know that time is a healer. I know that it will get better, that the sun will shine again, even though some days are harder than others and it seems like it will never stop raining. It’s like my mother would say, ‘Everything is temporary.’”

Her reward, she says, is watching the growth of the group.

“If they want to talk about it, I’m a good listener,” she says. “It’s not an easy thing, to talk about death, but every time you talk about it, it’s a little bit easier.

“This way, we’re all in this together.”

Looking ahead

Lost & Found directors have big plans for the future: a toddler support group, a college-aged support group, and someday, a home of their own.

They have the dedication; one day, they hope to have the funds. Started on a shoestring, the organization now needs \$5,000 a month to operate — that pays for two staff positions and covers office supplies.

Askinosie and Scott are confident about the future; they’ve seen the support from the community, the healing of the families.

“One of the things about Lost & Found is that you can’t quantify your results,” says Askinosie. “I can’t give you numbers, we can’t test people. But I can tell you one thing, I know of an instance where someone was dying and they wanted to tour Lost & Found; they wanted to see where their family would be going after their death.

“When I heard that, I knew we were doing the right thing. I know we’re on the right track.”