

## Lost & Found helps many deal with loss of loved ones

When they opened the doors to the Lost & Found grief center four years ago this month, co-founders Karen Scott and Shawn Askinosie were confident, from their personal and professional experiences, that the need existed.

"The unknown for us was, 'How long will it take for people to learn we are here and for them to be open to our services?'" says Scott, whose day job is director of student support services for Springfield Public Schools.

"Well, whatever concerns or fears we had about that were unfounded," Scott now knows. More than 230 children and their families have been aided in coping with loss of loved ones by trained Lost & Found volunteers. And many have commented: "I don't know what I would've done without this..."

Yet Askinosie, a well-known defense attorney who struggled for years to heal after being jolted as a teen by the loss of his father, also hears similar words that trouble him: "I wish I'd known there was something like this available here..."

"We've experienced tremendous growth," Askinosie says. "But for me a very important thing still is that I don't want any family to be out there hurting when we might be able to help."

Lost & Found presently has 64 children, plus adult family members, enrolled. An additional 10 kids are in the process of being incorporated into peer groups formed by age — elementary school youngsters, middle-schoolers and high school teens.

Each group, numbering about a dozen kids, gathers twice a month at Askinosie's center-city law office in special rooms colorfully decorated for young tastes. Meetings are overseen by volunteer facilitators who have been carefully screened and spent 27 hours in training and observation.

More than 50 local individuals — including college students and retirees, blue-collar workers and professionals — are serving as facilitators. Most are women. "We need more male facilitators," notes Scott, "because so many of the kids have lost fathers, and the little boys especially gravitate toward male facilitators."

While the children are meeting for 90 minutes upstairs, parents and caregivers gather downstairs for their own peer discussion sessions.

"Although our primary purpose is helping the children, we know they live within a family structure," explains Scott. "So our program also allows the kids' primary caregivers to get some of their needs met by talking about issues with other people who are in a similar situation to theirs.

"The surviving parent often gets overwhelmed

by the things that accompany the death of a spouse," Scott says, "yet they know they still need to meet the needs of their children. With Lost & Found, for one night every other week they can come and say to us, 'Here, take my child' — and for an hour and a half they can talk with others who understand without having to worry how their child is doing or whether the right things are being said to their child.

"They know we're taking care of their child and they can deal with their own issues, which they rarely have an opportunity to do because they're so busy taking care of the business of life."

Children enrolled in Lost & Found must have lost a parent or primary caregiver — or a sibling.

"When a child dies, it's difficult for other children in the family because the parent is struggling, struggling, struggling and really can't meet the needs of the other children," says Scott. "It's really a horrible dynamic for a family."

Askinosie and Scott, who first met when he was a student and she was a teacher at Glendale High School in the 1970s, say the basic premise for the Lost & Found program is confidence in the resilience of human nature. They believe people are capable of withstanding the emotional blow of losing a loved one if given enough time and support.

"Loss and grief are part of normal life, but what makes it difficult is that we live in a society that doesn't want to acknowledge that," says Scott. "Therefore, most people are unprepared to deal with it. What they need — and what we try to provide — is an environment where they can talk about it with other people who understand what it's like."

Does that mean facilitators must have experienced loss and grief in their own lives?

"No, no," Askinosie emphasizes. "It's not telling them about what you went through. It's about listening to their stories and reacting in a helpful manner, which is what our training teaches facilitators how to do."

Askinosie has served as a facilitator but currently is taking a break from that role. He is active in other aspects of Lost & Found, especially in raising funds for the nonprofit organization and serving on the board of directors.

Scott also is a board member, in addition to helping train facilitators. She says she, too, has learned things during the past four years:

"I've been surprised at how quickly families come to us. We have some call the day after a death and start immediately in the program. Some even call before a (foreseeable) death, because they're so scared that they won't do right for their kids and they want to be sure there'll be someplace to get help.

"I've also been surprised by the number of children here whose parents die from suicide. And I wasn't expecting to get so many children who were being parented by single parents who have died, with the kids now being cared for by grandparents. Often those kids had been living away from this community, maybe even in another state. They have an extra sense of turmoil in their loss, because everything in their life now is different."

Lost & Found's launch hasn't been hindered by Askinosie's reputation as a tough defense attorney who has succeeded in helping a couple of high-profile local defendants win not-guilty verdicts.

He says he's received a negative response related to his legal career from only one person, the wife of a minister, who replied to a letter sent to local churches announcing the free availability of Lost & Found services.

"She wrote me a letter back that said something like 'I would never have anything to do with you because you defend murderers. You make me sick...'" Askinosie recalls. "I'm really sorry she feels that way. I can't help but think she'd change her mind — maybe not about me, but about the program — if she came and saw what goes on here."

What goes on, as Scott and Askinosie repeatedly indicate, is mostly talking. There also is some play, which can be especially revealing and cathartic for younger children.

"I was a teen group facilitator for three years, and we'd start a meeting by sitting on pillows that we arranged in a circle," says Askinosie. "We'd go around the circle with everyone saying his or her name, saying who died, and saying how that loved one died. We spend a lot of time remembering.

"Sometimes a new kid couldn't even say out loud that a parent had died, couldn't get it out at all. But they could see that others, who had been in the group for a while, were able to talk about it. And it gave them hope.

"We have an open-ended support group model. That means people are starting and finishing all the time. It gives kids a measuring stick; they can look around the room and compare their own grief with others in the group.

"They see a new kid come in and it reminds them: 'Gosh, that's where I was a few months ago.' And at the same time, the new kids see that kids who've been going through the same things have made healthy progress."

Askinosie says the length of enrollment in Lost & Found is left up to each child.

"We don't tell children when it's time to leave. There's not a set time period. It's not like, 'OK, it's been eight weeks — you're done grieving.' We have some kids who have been with us for more than a year."

Scott agrees: "The kids know. They love their time here and the friendships here — but they know when they no longer need to come here twice a month."

When a child indicates it's time to go, a "closing ceremony" is held. The child selects three polished rocks from a bowl, plus one unpolished rock, and takes the pebbles away as keepsakes.

"The three polished rocks represent the work on their grief that they've done while they've been here," says Askinosie. "The unpolished rock reminds them that grief never ends."

Adds Scott: "We make it clear that they're always welcome to come back if they need to. And, in fact, we now have a couple of facilitators who are former participants."

The payoff for the investment of time and emotion by facilitators in making Lost & Found work is seeing the looks on participants' faces.

"They come in looking weary and sad, and they leave smiling and energized for two more weeks," Scott says. "They get their needs met and get boosted up. The effect is obvious."

Lost & Found has needs, too. Money always is tight (donations are tax-deductible). While Askinosie is pleased that this year's major fund-raiser, Feb. 25 at Highland Springs, already is a sellout, contributions large and small are welcome throughout the year.

Volunteers also are needed. In addition to facilitators (the next training class will be scheduled this spring), volunteers can help with stuffing envelopes, entering data and other recordkeeping chores, making reminder telephone calls to families, writing grant proposals and myriad other aspects of keeping the organization running.

What do the co-founders hope to be able to report about Lost & Found's progress after another four years?

"It would be great for the program to have its own home. We've pretty much run out of room for it here," says Askinosie of his law office, which is located in a vintage three-story house on Walnut Street at National Avenue.

"And," adds Scott, "we want to be able to say we've been able to help even more families help themselves through grief. Because we know the need will still exist."

Volunteers may contact Robin Squires, executive director of Lost & Found, by phoning 832-9423. The mailing address is 1201 E. Walnut St., Springfield MO 65802. Internet access to the organization is available at <http://www.lostandfoundozarks.com/>

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