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Camp Firefly in Medford is a beacon for grieving children

By Scott Holden



This year's Camp Firefly, sponsored by the Moorestown Visiting Nurses & Hospice, will be held from Aug. 23-25 at Camp Ockanickon.

MEDFORD-For the last three years, Camp Firefly has lit the path to healing for children suffering from the loss of someone special in their lives.

Funded by charitable contributions to the Moorestown Visiting Nurses & Hospice (VNA), the three day, two night bereavement camp at Camp Ockanickon runs from Aug. 23 to the 25 and is open to children ages 7 to 12 still coping with their grief.

"Yes their individual experience is unique, just as unique as their relationship with the person they lost, but it is good

for them to see they are not alone," said Claudette Colestock, a Grief Support Counselor for the VNA. "The experience of making new friendships and being surrounded by people who have also shared losses is the most special thing about Camp Firefly."

Kim Plasket, Director of Public Relations for the VNA, said she expects 40 to 50 children from Burlington, Camden and Gloucester counties to attend the camp at no charge to their families.

Over the three days, traditional camp activities like swimming canoeing, hiking arts and crafts and cookouts will be combined with specialized bereavement activities designed to help the campers overcome their grief and begin to cope with the loss of their loved one.

During one activity, each child gets their own piece of fabric to decorate as a way to remember and honor their deceased loved one. The pieces are then sewn together into a quilt that is displayed during an interfaith memorial service on the last day of the camp.

"This is one of the key parts of the camp; they learn creative ways to not only express their grief but also to memorialize the people they lost," said Colestock. "By seeing all the other children's squares, they really get to see that they aren't alone in this."

Colestock admitted losing a loved one at any age is never easy, but for a child, the loss can be especially hard.

"Children kind of grieve more intermittently than we do since adults tend to be able to sit with sad and intense feelings longer than children do," Colestock explained. "They also tend to express their grief more through their behavior, so we do creative things like art therapy as well as the physical camp activities to burn off that energy."

On-site adult volunteer camp counselors age 21 and older work directly with the children and also stay overnight at Camp Ockanickon.

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Counselors receive six hours of training from Colestock, a VNA staff social worker and staff chaplain regarding the basics of bereaved children and how the specialized activities work and what they are intended to accomplish, Colestock said.

"It's great training and they (the counselors) really bond, too, so by the time they get to camp, they have really learned to depend on each other because there is a lot of teamwork involved," Colestock said.

Colestock and her staff also spend the weekend, as does a nurse, who cares for any external bumps and bruises.

According to Plasket, the VNA has continued to receive positive responses from the community and has seen continued financial support coming from both the corporate and private sectors.

"The community has been very responsive; school guidance counselors in



particular have been big advocates of the program and we have had a very good reception from companies like Build-a-Bear and personal support from people who have had a loss in their family or just feel that a camp for grieving children is a thing that should be supported," Plasket said.

Plasket and Colestock said a few spots are still available and those interested should contact the VNA at (856) 552-1300 for a camp application.

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