Hospice Grief Camp helps kids cope with loss
Saturday, August 08, 2009
Case Kramer's self-designed T-shirt had a variety of words written on it, including "interesting," "insightful," "invigorating," "calming" and "forgiving."


Case was one of several young people who participated in the New Morning Grief Camp hosted by Clearfield Hospital Hospice. The camp was designed to help children and teens cope with the death of a loved one; it was held at the Sons of Italy picnic grounds in Clearfield in late July.

Carol Steffen of Bellwood, who founded the New Morning Grief Camp program in 2007, facilitated the four-day program, along with Dana Wilson, hospice volunteer coordinator, and Lori Parks, certified grief counselor.

"Lives were touched this week, but the greatest was to see how a whole group of people came together, campers and volunteers, and gave each other that unspoken bond that will always remain in each one of us," said Mrs. Parks.

"It was an awesome week and beyond anything we could have imagined. We witnessed so many transformations. At first, some of the kids were hesitant to talk about how they were feeling, but by the end of camp, they emerged from the experience with newfound hope," Ms. Steffen said.

Daily activities involved art therapy projects, such as creating memory boxes, ornaments, personalized pillowcases and T-shirts; drums were implemented in music therapy; and games, such as water balloon volleyball, relay races and hiking. Quiet time was spent writing in journals.

Case said that in addition to creating a T-shirt made up of words that described his mother, the activity that impacted him the most was a hike led by Pastor Kevin Orndorff.

During the hike, campers were asked to carry a backpack that weighed approximately 40 pounds. Inside were rocks that had words such as "sadness," "fear," "resentment" and "frustration" written on them. The backpack and its weight symbolized how negative emotions can be a burden to carry.

At the end of the trail, Pastor Orndorff asked each camper to take three or more of the rocks that represented how he or she felt.

"I told them, 'If you let go of the burden, God will carry it for you.' Negative
emotions overwhelm good emotions. Emotions like anger will prevent them from experiencing memories of the loved one that bring them joy," Pastor Orndorff said.

Case agreed and said, "I learned how to let certain emotions go. Before the camp, it was hard for me to talk about my mom because it brought up so many emotions. Now, I feel that I can openly talk about her and the impact she had and feel OK about it."

Donna McCullough, Case's grandmother, said she believed the grief camp helped him sort through his emotions.

"I noticed a change in him by the end of the week. The camp helped," she said.

The children and teens who participated weren't the only ones who walked away with a renewed sense of optimism - the 22 hospice volunteers at the camp said the experience was uplifting.

One of those volunteers was Gerri Jacobson, who said, "Words cannot describe the feeling about seeing a grief-stricken child turn into one who shared his story about his beloved aunt through a song."

She explained that when the campers were asked to write something in their journal about the loss of their loved one, the camper with whom she was paired wanted to write a song and dedicate it to his aunt. Mrs. Jacobson said before writing in the journal that day, the camper really didn't discuss the loss of his aunt much, and it wasn't until the day he made the entry in his journal that he was openly discussing the loss of his loved one.

"He was happy that he was able to share his song at the memorial service and dedicate it to his aunt. I know that he walked away proud of his accomplishments at camp that week and many unforgettable good memories. That week, he learned to express many different feelings in many different ways," Mrs. Jacobson said.

Another volunteer who was moved by the experience was Dottie McBride.

Initially she wasn't sure if she had the emotional strength to help children dealing with loss, but said she was glad she helped and plans to return next year.

"This grief camp changed lives, from the youngest camper to the oldest volunteer. It was incredible to see how the power of God can change lives. There wasn't a dry eye during the closing ceremony. We even had one camper who said he wanted to come back next year as a volunteer," Ms. Steffen said.

Organizations and individuals that made contributions to support the camp include Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, Wal-Mart Transportation, Gathagan Investment Co., Clearfield Sons of Italy, Robert and Donna Veihdeffer, American Legion Freeberg Post 591 Ladies Auxiliary, faculty and staff of Clearfield Elementary School and Daughters of Encouragement of Temple Baptist Church.

"It was fantastic to see three organizations, Temple Baptist Church, New Morning Grief Camp and Clearfield Hospital Hospice, work together to provide a successful youth grief program for the community. I truly believe that God brought us together and worked through all of us to learn and grow through this thing called grief. Grief camp was a bittersweet experience that campers and volunteers will cherish forever," Ms. Wilson said.

For more information about bereavement services offered by Clearfield Hospital Hospice, call Mrs. Parks at 768-2157.