

Ready to fall, ready to catch

Mike Moonis created a camp for kids who have lost someone close to them to help them heal together.

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"Ready to fall," a camper calls from a raised platform. "Ready to catch," group members answer from below, where they stand with arms interlocked.

The trust fall is just a game, but for a camper at Mikey's Camp - an annual weekend-long event for grieving children sponsored by Kidz'NGrief and Bon Secours Hospice - the communication and trust modeled in the exercise is part of the healing.

Each of the campers at Mikey's Camp has made a fall that no one's ready for: from a comfortable, familiar world into one where nothing will ever be the same.

It's a world where the only maps are tearstained and a bit imprecise, but they're charted by pioneers who know where the dangerous neighborhoods are and how to guide you through them.

Mikey's Camp is a little dot on the grief journey, and co-director Mike Moonis is familiar with the terrain.

The camp is an outgrowth of Kidz'NGrief, a hospice program that Moonis began attending after the death of his wife, Lea. Beth Pile, bereavement coordinator for the Bon Secours Hospice, suggested the group to Moonis, then a single dad with two daughters.

"I thought it would be good for the kids," Moonis said. "I guess what I didn't realize is that it was good for me, as well."

Kidz'NGrief meets on alternating Mondays and is open to children ages 3 to 18 who have lost a family member. "It's a safe group environment with trained facilitators," Moonis said.

Moonis has since remarried, to Patti Minium, a widowed mother of four whom he met through a Kidz'NGrief group for people who have lost a spouse. The blended family has remained active in the program as veterans.

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"At first, I needed it for myself, but after a certain point, I felt I needed to be there for new families coming in," Moonis said.

Pile - who co-directs the camp with Moonis - said, "Mike's healing journey culminated in an interest in helping others who were grieving."

That interest took Moonis first to the nationally recognized Comfort Zone Camp as a volunteer, then through 30 hours of training to become a facilitator for Kidz'NGrief, and finally to the ground floor of Pile's mission to start a children's grief camp on the Peninsula.

Mikey's Camp is named in honor of Pile's therapy-trained Bernese Mountain Dog, who's one class away from receiving his credentials on paper. As suggested by Mikey's joyful image printed across campers' bright orange T-shirts, the camp is a lively place. Campers play games and complete arts and crafts, along with participating in group events called "healing circles."

The weekend culminates in a memorial service, in which campers can honor their departed family members.

Moonis' favorite camp memory was seeing a camper who wanted to go home Friday night perform a song she wrote for her father at the service on Sunday. "It was powerful to watch her move from one stage of her grief to another."

Moonis notes that even though going through grief himself has "given him a leg up," it is not a prerequisite to volunteering through the program.

Campers are paired with a "Big Buddy" who receives three hours of training and joins them through the entire experience. Like the campers, Big Buddies embark on a journey of their own.

Although all campers have experienced loss, the circumstances behind their grief vary widely. Stereotypically, people think the program is for kids who lost parents through cancer, Pile said.

In reality, it's just as likely for a Big Buddy to be paired with a camper who lost a sibling in a drug deal.

Regardless of the circumstances, "you have to get in there with that kid and feel those same emotions with them," Moonis said. "It's an intense weekend."

Although camp can bring his own grief to the surface, Moonis still says that the weekend is "mostly fun and games."

"The Moonis family is still and will always be accommodating their experience of loss," said Pile. "The opportunities they've had at Kidz has helped with their healing."

"Mike and Patti believe so strongly in support services like this that they made a substantial financial contribution to Mikey's Camp to ensure that other children like theirs could also find healing."

Although grant-funded, the operation runs on a shoestring budget. Campers attend for a nominal donation of \$25, but the actual cost per camper is nearly ten times that amount. Big Buddies and support staff attend at no charge.

"The real goal is to get some money so we can do this right," Moonis said. "We'd like to have the money where we can give each kid a backpack filled with stuff like flashlights and a camera. We'd love it if a silkscreener would donate their services for our shirts."

Moonis is confident that as the community discovers Mikey's Camp, corporate sponsorship opportunities will emerge.

After all, no one is ever ready to find themselves on a free fall into the scariest journey of their lives.

But when a child suddenly does, it helps to know that there will be people at Mikey's Camp to catch them.

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