

Camp Caring offers weekend retreat for grieving youngsters

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Community Corner Ruth Newlin

At Camp Caring, the smiles on the children's faces tell only part of the story. They tell of a fun weekend at camp with the customary campfire sing-a-long and s'mores, hiking, crafts and other traditional activities. The other part of the story, not reflected by the smiling faces, is the story of loss and grief that each camper, or Little Buddy, came to tell.

Camp Caring 2006, a program of Hospice Caring Inc., took place May 19-21 at the Carol Jean Cancer Foundation's facility in Laytonsville. The 24 Little Buddies were a diverse group of 8- to 12-year-olds brought together from throughout Montgomery County through their common bond in suffering the death of a loved one.

According to the Little Buddies, Camp Caring was a resounding success.

“The thing I liked best about Camp Caring was everything.”

“The camp would be better if I could stay for the whole summer.”

“Things I learned at Camp Caring are: there are many ways to cope with grief, lots of people go through grief, and it's OK to cry.”

Vital to the Camp Caring process and philosophy are the trained Big Buddies who volunteered their weekend to individually mentor a grieving child. Many Big Buddies attend camp because they, too, know the pain of the death of a loved one.

Camp Caring provides an environment where children can tell their stories to other children and adults who will listen and not judge them because they, too, know the powerful feelings of grief and isolation resulting from a loved one's death.

Without the Big Buddies and other talented, caring volunteers, Camp Caring could not take place. An array of Hospice Caring volunteers provided crafts, physical activities and entertainment. For the second year, Artstream, a consortium of artists, entertained the entire camp. Also for the second year, the Washington Capitals hockey team mascot, Slapshot, made a surprise appearance.

As the backbone of camp, three volunteer grief facilitators worked with the children in age-appropriate groups helping them to tell their stories, recognize their feelings and learn coping mechanisms to take home from camp.

Camp Caring acknowledges that children, unlike adults, cannot sustain grief for long periods of time. Children need "breaks" in their grief; they need the opportunity to have fun and be children even though their hearts are aching.

Reflecting this reality, Camp Caring is not all tears and grief. Little Buddies also made s'mores, sang songs, played water balloons, used paddleboats, made art projects, had an ice cream social and stayed up late in the cabins.

Once again, the Montgomery County community generously supported Camp Caring, including businesses, restaurants, churches, synagogues, private foundations and individuals.

Hospice Caring volunteers Emma and Jerry Milligan and their team of eight teenage “gophers” kept the camp well organized, tidy and on schedule. This year’s gophers was an outstanding group: Katie Boss, Lauren Boss, Kathryn Ennes, Jessica Godbout, Amelia Stevenson, RebeccaLee Watkins, Anna Wong and Samantha Zito.

Countless other volunteers delivered food, checked in campers, worked behind the scenes in the office and donated much-needed food and supplies. The Camp Caring 2006 Planning Committee was a dedicated and hard-working group that worked beginning in January to create a warm, friendly environment for grieving children.

Ruth Newlin is director of Hospice Caring Inc.’s Camp Caring. To help with Camp Caring 2007, call Newlin at Hospice Caring Inc. at 301-990-8904. Hospice Caring is headquartered in Gaithersburg and operated an outreach office in Olney, which can be reached at 301-260-1327. For general information, visit www.hospicecaring.org.

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