

Helping grieving kids

■ The Highmark Caring Place helps kids facing loss cope during the holidays.

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One of the hardest things Amy Hartmann faced the first Christmas without her husband was having to send out the Christmas cards.

“I had the hardest time signing those cards,” said the South Middleton Township resident. “In the end, I just didn’t send them out.”

In 2004, she was Amy Winters, and by that Christmas, it had only been a little more than a month since her husband’s death.

“I remember just not being able to breathe,” she said. “It was total uncertainty. You still have to do day-to-day things to get through life, and you learn to tuck that loss away so you can do other things. That’s really, really difficult. You’re just in survival mode.”

But it wasn’t just Hartmann who had to deal with the suicide of her husband, Blake Winters. There was William Winters, 17, and Timothy Winters, 9, who were suddenly bereft of a father.

Hartmann and her two sons had gone to one-on-one sessions and even a suicide support group, but it didn’t seem to make a difference. It wasn’t until a year and a half after her husband’s death that Hartmann decided to contact the Highmark Caring Place.

“I had five piles of information on the Caring Place from friends, the school and church,” Hartmann said. “You have to think that there must be something there if I’m getting all of this information on them. I just wanted to feel normal again. I wanted to feel like it was going to be OK.”

It was in 2006 when Hartmann along with William and Timothy entered the 10-week program to help grieving children cope with their losses. And Hartmann couldn’t be happier with the results.

“The three of us were very apprehensive at first about coming, and the boys didn’t really want to go, but I wanted to give it a try,” Hartmann said. “I have to say that the name ‘Caring Place’ couldn’t fit any better. You walk through those doors and the first thing you see are smiling faces and kind voices. It was such a warm feeling. You felt like you weren’t alone — there are others like you that feel the same way.”

Highmark Caring Place

Hartmann and her two sons had gone to the Highmark Caring Place in Lemoyne, a non-profit organization that offers free grieving services to children and their families. The facility, which opened in 2003 and is one of four Highmark Caring Place locations in the state, provides two-hour sessions over a span of 10 weeks to help children express their feelings about their losses and to give a place for parents to discuss their losses with other adults.

But the real advantage is to provide a place where it’s OK for the kids to be kids.

“The kids hear the term ‘grieving center’ and they don’t want to go to it,” said John Kajic, site manager of the Lemoyne Highmark Caring Place. “But they see that we have air hockey tables and a fish tank, and they see that it’s something different. There are things kids want to be a part of that they’re not doing because



Michael Bupp/The Sentinel

Amy Hartmann of Carlisle, along with her children (not pictured), have used the services of the Highmark Caring Place in Lemoyne. The organization is designed to help families with the grieving process.

Bereavement camps

Along with the services at Highmark Caring Place, which are offered free of charge, there are also area bereavement camps for kids that are just as easy on the wallet.

PinnacleHealth offers an annual free summer camp at two East Shore locations and area resident Lisa Streett-Liebetrau offers her own annual free camp in Dillsburg.

PinnacleHealth’s Camp Dragonfly started in 1995 and offers bereavement support to children and teens ages 6 to 15 that have experienced the death of a family member from illness, accident, suicide or homicide. The camp is at two locations and occurs over two weekends in June. From June 4 to 6, there will be Camp Swatara at Bethel, and from June 11 to 13, there will be Camp Hebron at Halifax.

Streett-Liebetrau’s Camp Koala got its first start last year and offers its free camp to kids ages 7 to 12. The camp will be held next year from June 11 to 13.

Streett-Liebetrau and Deb Collins, a bereavement counselor at Camp Dragonfly, find that groups of children on their own from their parents can find some solace in knowing their not alone in their grief. An adult to be by them and understand them. They may grieve for a few minutes and then go play. Adults think that children aren’t grieving because they’re not crying all of the time. As long as the adult understands and recognizes the child is grieving, they can tell them it’s OK to be a kid and go out and play like

kids do.

“They don’t grieve differently from adults,” Collins said. “They have the same kind of feelings as adults, but they don’t get the opportunity to express them, especially if a parent is too wrapped up in their own grief. The children are watching adults to see how to grieve, and they learn from them.

“I think the most important part of Camp Dragonfly is that it lets kids be where other kids are, so they understand that they’re not alone in feeling this way,” Collins added. “A lot of the times they’re the only ones in their class who have a loved one who has died. The camp lets them share experiences and see the same sort of losses.”

At Camp Koala, Streett-Liebetrau tries to make sure that kids do have room to be themselves while also getting a chance to talk if they want to.

“We don’t get into the really heavy stuff,” she said. “It isn’t just doom and gloom. Let’s focus on living and surviving — let’s think of something positive. We do have grief therapy and everything is centered on that, but the kids don’t know it. Everything is tailored to get them to tell their stories, but we do a lot of games in between.”

The Highmark Caring Place also offered its new summer session for parents this year. It will also have a memorial service on Dec. 30 from 6 to 8 p.m. for all families who have been a part of the program since 2003.

they don’t think they should. Here they can be as much of a kid as they want. They can talk to us, be as noisy as they want, play games and deal with their anger in a safe way. I’m always surprised to hear how much laughter is in here when we have our sessions.”

The Highmark Caring Place has a number of rooms for adults, who are separated into groups based on their type of loss — the loss of a child or the loss of a spouse — and the facility also offers four rooms for children based on their age.

Kajic explained that children in each age group will approach the death of a loved one differently. The birth to preschool kids don’t have a sense of object permanence and won’t understand that a loved one really won’t make it to that birthday party a few months away. Kids aged 6 to 9 will show more fear and call close family members often while they’re away to make sure they’re alive. Children at this age are also likely to wet the beds more often.

Those in the middle school age range will deal with death a little more scientifically and ask questions about what happens to the body while also wondering if they were directly at fault for the loss. Teenagers are more likely to focus on faith, life and death and humanity.

Different grieving process

But Kajic was quick to note that people all handle grief differently, no matter what age they are. That can also

In Focus

Child grieving facts:

- Among the children that come through Highmark Caring Place in Lemoyne, 50 percent are mourning the death of a father, 25 percent are mourning the death of a mother and the other 25 percent are mourning the death of a significant family member, whether that be a sibling, grandparent or even a very close friend.
- One child in 20 will have a parent die before they graduate high school. One in seven will experience the death of an immediate family member by the age of 10.
- An estimated 73,000 children die every year in the United States, and of those children, 83 percent have surviving siblings.

make handling grief during the holidays a tougher issue on parents and friends.

Lisa Streett-Liebetrau, who organizes Camp Koala in Dillsburg for grieving children, lost her two younger sisters when she was a teenager and remembered what the holidays were like after the car crash.

“My mom never put up a Christmas tree again,” Streett-Liebetrau said. “It was hard for me to never have Christmas come back home, at least not in a traditional way. There was never a celebration. When I was a kid, we all had our own ornaments, but we never put those up after that.”

Ignoring the loss was not something that had worked for her as a teenager, and with two kids of her own now, Streett-Liebetrau plans on hanging up her sisters’ ornaments with her kids.

“My kids are excited,” she said. “They never knew my sisters, but they have a little part of them (with these ornaments). I think people should keep it as normal as possible. Try to keep it much of the same as before — still hang up those stockings and

ornaments. They should do it for the kids. That’s what I would’ve liked. Just try to keep the memories alive.”

Hartmann’s sons, now 22 and 14, created a memory box through one of Highmark Caring Place’s arts activities. The box remains in the possession of her youngest son.

“It was great to know that you weren’t alone in this,” Hartmann said. “I think this really helped my sons. It’s nice to finally breathe again.”

ON THE NET:

- More information on grieving support for children is available online at:
- Highmark Caring Place — www.highmarkcaringplace.com or call toll-free at 1-866-613-4673 Camp Koala — www.campkoala.org
- Camp Dragonfly — www.pinnaclehealth.org/services/bereavement-programs/#camp-dragonfly or call 1-800-889-1098 for the Camp Hebron location or 1-800-222-5236 for the Camp Swatara location