

PARENT GUIDE NEWS

Nassau's One & Only

MARCH 2009



BY REBECCA SANDS



Healing After a Loss

HOSPICE CARE NETWORK PUTS FAMILY MEMBERS IN TOUCH WITH THEIR EMOTIONS.

“IN THIS GROUP, WHEN I AM INTO DEEP FEELINGS, WHEN MY INSIDES ARE IN PAIN, WHEN MY THROAT IS CHOKED UP, I GIVE MYSELF PERMISSION TO CRY FREELY WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT,” READS A QUOTE FROM THE GUIDELINE PAMPHLET THAT HOSPICE CARE NETWORK PROVIDES GROUP MEMBERS IN THE CHILDREN AND FAMILY BEREAVEMENT PROGRAMS. “HERE IT IS OK TO CRY.”

Hospice Care Network's Children and Family Bereavement Programs were created to provide comfort and support for family members who have lost loved ones. The programs offer many different services designed to help a person cope with a loss, no matter what stage of grief or emotions the person is experiencing. Services include individual counseling, short-term counseling, group support, crisis intervention, school outreach, community education, professional referrals and the Lending Library program. Since they were first launched in 1984, the programs have been instrumental in the lives of many people in myriad ways.

In 1999, Maggie Fischer, age 17, was killed in a car accident that changed the lives of her family members and friends forever. Maggie's mother, father and brother experienced various emotions that people around them could not understand.

“The hardest part is when you expect the person to walk in the door,” says mom Mary Fischer. Mary describes the first year after losing her daughter to be obscure, with her only remembering particular moments. Mary explains that while the family felt significant pain and loss, she and her husband knew they had to stick together and remember that they still had a son who needed them. Slowly the family began to heal.

A year after Maggie's death, Mary and her husband enrolled in an eight-week support group at the nonprofit Hospice Care Network (HCN) to help the couple work through unresolved feelings. HCN's support groups unite people who are experiencing similar types of loss. The Fischers were thus placed in a group with other couples that had lost a child.

“There are so many mixed emotions, and you feel like it is your fault,” Mary explains. “You question your decision as a parent... [wondering] ‘Should I have let Maggie drive that day.’ Hospice Care Network lets you know that it is normal to have those questions and that it's not your fault. They reaffirm that feeling happy and moving forward is OK.”

Alison Pohlman shares similar sentiments. Her daughter, Carson, passed away in March of 2006 at 8 months old. A month prior, Carson was diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer involving an atypical teratoid rhabdoid tumor. Alison and her husband have two other children—who at the time of Carson's death were ages 6½ and 3½—and their pediatrician recommended they enroll the children in HCN's Children's Bereavement Program.

Hospice Care Network created a variety of activities for the children. The Pohl-

man's son was afraid to sleep because he thought he would die like his sister, prompting HCN to give him Worry Dolls that allowed the boy to express up to six worries at a time. At night, the boy would tell his worries to the dolls so they could worry for him and he could sleep. The Pohlman's daughter made a dream catcher to catch all of her nightmares, leaving her only with wonderful dreams.

“A lot of times, our kids didn't know why they were feeling the things they did,” says Alison, “and the bereavement program helped them break through and understand that their feelings derived from the loss of their sister. The program helped them to cope and understand.”

The Pohlman parents similarly enrolled in an eight-week support group to help them cope with the loss of their daughter. Like the Fischer family, one of the most valuable things the Pohlman's have taken away from the support group is that it is perfectly fine to be happy.

“We were given a renewed hope that we will go on,” Alison says. “There will always be speed bumps to get over, and it is nice to be told that what you feel is normal.”

In completing the eight-week support group, the Fischer and Pohlman families have gained a new strength. They partake in annual fundraisers in memory of their children to generate funds for Hospice Care Network's Children and Family Bereavement Programs. The Fischers are involved in the Maggie Fischer Memorial Great South Bay Swim (www.greatsouthbayswim.com), which has contributed more than \$100,000 to HCN. The Pohlman's are involved in the Carson Lalli Pohlman Foundation (www.twobattles.com), which has raised \$20,000 for HCN.

Photos top to bottom: Maggie Fischer, Carson Pohlman



Rebecca Sands is the public relations representative for Hospice Care Network (HCN), a nonprofit organization that has served patients and their families in Nassau, Suffolk and Queens counties with care and compassion since 1988. HCN utilizes an approach that cares for the total person, addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of patients and their families. Care is provided by an interdisciplinary team of physicians, nurses, social workers, home health aides, dietitians, pastoral care providers, bereavement counselors and trained volunteers. For more information, visit www.hospicecarenetwork.org or call (800)2-HOSPICE.