



## BJC programs help children, teens deal with grief

February 26, 2011 6:02 PM

By JILL MOON | [jmoon@thetelegraph.com](mailto:jmoon@thetelegraph.com)

EAST ALTON — When Jennifer Bosse's husband died in 2008, she knew how to express her feelings, but her then 7-year-old daughter found help expressing her grief by having fun.

Meg, 10, of Rosewood Heights, went to Stepping Stones camp, a free weekend camp for youngsters who have lost a loved one, in 2009. The family's social worker from BJC Hospice told Jennifer about the camp because it is geared toward helping children ages 6 through 12 express themselves through activities and art, such as tie-dyeing flags and creating garden stepping stones. Registration starts in May and camp takes place Aug. 12-14.

"At first I was worried about her being away from home, but I know she wasn't really dealing with things, either," Bosse said. "She was holding it all in and not letting her grief out."

During the month of August, campers come together at Camp Wyman in Eureka, Mo., for therapeutic activities and opportunities to reflect on their feelings of grief, as well as to participate in swimming, races, a carnival and outdoor games.

Meg initially did not want to go to camp, but a few months before Stepping Stones started, two young female camp counselors visited Meg and her mom.

"Then she was really excited about it," Bosse recalled. "It helped her to know others had lost someone close to them, because no one close to her had lost a parent. It helped her feel not all alone. Even though she had her mom and sister here, she saw there were other kids who were like her. That was important."

Bosse, 37, saw Meg letting out her grief through a bit of anger, especially toward her younger sister, Audrey, 7, who was 4 years old at the time.

"She was almost five and didn't understand the permanence of her dad being gone, but with Meg, she knew," Bosse said. "And as a mother, you want them to express their feelings, but you can't force them."

Bosse described the little wooden boat that Meg made with a candle in it to sail in the camp swimming pool, after Stepping Stones' closing ceremony on the final night of camp. She also made a memory stick, which is a Native American tradition, in honor of her father.

"There were a lot of tangible things, and she actually made a stepping stone, and we put it in the garden," Bosse said. "It gave her a lot of opportunity to talk, and helped her open up a little more."

Expression through art is a component throughout BJC Hospice programs, especially for its Wings Pediatric Hospice and Palliative Care program for children with life-limiting illnesses. Wings' Expressive Therapy program is for children living with serious illnesses and includes therapeutic art, guided imagery, music therapy and writing. BJC also has Labyrinth, a one-day retreat for teenagers who have lost a loved one, which is registering teens now for April 16. Grief is a complex emotion for anyone, but it's especially so for teenagers.

Often, teens are told to "be strong" for other family members and, in doing so, put their own grief on hold.

They might be feeling stunned and shocked, especially if the death was sudden, and off-balance at both school and home, explained Executive Director Barbara Westland of the BJC Hospice/Palliative Care/Wings Program.

Families might assume that the teen has friends to lean on, but the friends might not know how to handle the death, and avoid the subject entirely.

So, BJC Hospice holds Labyrinth for teens who recently experienced the death of a loved one. Through special activities and sharing, they will learn ways to identify and express grief, remember the loved one who died and learn tools to cope with the loss in the future. Labyrinth is offered at no charge to the participants, and is made possible through the fund-raising activities of the staff at Magellan Health Services.

Brent Bosse died the day after Christmas in 2008, and Meg attended Stepping Stones in August 2009.

"She started to cry and express her feelings, and as hard as this is, I'm glad," Jennifer Bosse said. "I was glad she was letting it out. She was somewhat angry at first. Adults understand, but for a child it's so much different; they really don't know what to do. She was getting mad easily. It was her way of dealing with it. She's going to deal with it differently, I'm going to deal with it differently, and her sister is going to deal with it differently."

Bosse still considers whether to send Audrey to Stepping Stones now that she is old enough.

"It was a good experience, and I just recommended it to a co-worker of mine," she said. "The kids have a good time and enjoy it. It was good to just have the two overnights. It's short, but good to have the experience, especially for a child who is apprehensive about leaving home and worried about losing the other parent."

Therapists work directly for BJC Hospice and Wings in the Expressive Therapy program, which are available to families regardless of their ability to pay. Wings is the only free program of its kind in the St. Louis metropolitan area, including Metro East.

"It's important to give children alternatives to express themselves with grief, because we know that, developmentally, children are not as equipped to express verbally what they're feeling — or at that stage in life, to even critically think about it and somehow access those feelings," music therapist Sandra Knight said.

"They're not quite there yet. They have feelings, absolutely, and oftentimes they're very intense. It's our job to give them a different palette, whatever might fit for that child."

So BJC Hospice banded together a collection of counselors, social workers, nurses and volunteers for an effort to assure children touched by loss that they are not alone and, in the process, help them learn about their grief.

"We wanted to provide a place where they could be safe, where they could find people who knew what they were experiencing, and could support them," Westland said. "We wanted them to have a place where they would have lots and lots of fun."

Call BJC Hospice at (314) 273-0776 for more information about Labyrinth and Stepping Stones.

---



## Wings in the City

The fundraising group Friends of Wings launched a public art project, Wings in the City, with 56 giant created butterflies last year, and debuted the butterflies Oct. 9 and 10 at the World's Fair Pavilion in Forest Park. The butterflies are on display through May at different locations in St. Louis, with locations available on a printable map at [www.wingsinthecity.org](http://www.wingsinthecity.org). Proceeds benefit BJC Pediatric Hospice Program and Wings in the City.

Troy, Ill., artist Robin Zarzecki encountered Wings, BJC's pediatric hospice, as a professional designer, but she ultimately embraced the program as a personal godsend before her son, Caleb, died June 30, 2008. Zarzecki created one of the 56 clear-coated, painted fiberglass butterfly sculptures on display. Her sculpture is a 5-foot-tall-by-4-foot-wide memorial to her son entitled "Arch Angel." She describes the Friends of Wings-sponsored butterfly as depicting the beauty, complexity and diversity that co-exist with life and death. The butterfly Wings logo is an iconic symbol of hope and grace. The butterfly sculptures, including Zarzecki's, are sponsored by individuals or corporations.

A select few will be available for auction at Friends of Wings' Art Takes Flight Auction Gala at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, May 21, at the St. Louis Hyatt at the Arch. The event is open to the public. Tickets cost \$125. Contact Alicia Allen at [aca2296@bjc.org](mailto:aca2296@bjc.org) or (314) 273-0862 for more information.