

## OPINION

FAMILY MATTERS / John Armstrong

# Handling Grief In the Classroom

**S**eventeen-year-old "Letoya's" mother died from breast cancer when she was 2 years old. "Peter's" father suffered a gunshot wound and died last fall. "Mary's" mother died five years ago from suicide.

These kids (whose names have been changed to protect client confidentiality) and more than a dozen others like them go to Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. Once a week they miss a class and gather at a group facilitated by The Den for Grieving Kids. Led by a trained

professional and a volunteer (in this case me), the group tackles issues that many of these kids' classmates don't understand – the death of a father, mother, grandparent, sister or brother. Because each kid in the group is coping with a similar type of loss, they're able collectively to share their grief, cry, laugh and support each other.

At a recent session a newcomer tearfully told her story. A fellow group member then spoke up and said, "I see you in some of my classes. You seem so normal. I never knew any of this. Now you can come to me when you feel bad." And that's what this group is all about – kids helping one another, people helping one another. As facilitators, we are there to do just that – facilitate. We facilitate the bonding between these young kids, and the expression of feelings that are hard to get out. We are not there to fix anything, as broken hearts can only mend on their own. Rather, we are there to listen. Oh, yes, we sometimes offer advice. But we are there mostly to provide these kids with a sense of companionship as they confront their grief.

The in-school program is just one component of The Den for Grieving Kids. At the Den, bereaved kids and their surviving parent or caregiver gather one evening every other week to work through their

grief. The kids meet in groups with other kids their age and the adults meet separately. Trained volunteers run most of the groups under the supervision of mental health professionals.

But the leadership at The Den and at Family Centers realized several years ago that there was another population of families that could not make it to evening sessions. Households with single parents, who may be working long hours to make ends meet, are inevitably stretched for time. So a commitment was made to take the program into the schools during the day.

Today, there are programs at 11 schools across four towns – Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk and New Canaan. Last year, more than 150 kids participated, and they came from all age groups, including two elementary school programs, four middle school programs, and four high school programs. Two more elementary school programs are scheduled to begin this spring.

The model for the school-based groups differs slightly from the evening groups. The groups aim to meet every week but only for a single class period, usually 45 minutes or so. Parents sign permission slips, but there is no program for the parents themselves, although plans are underway to offer some support for the

adults in the children's lives.

Despite being a school-based initiative, the spirit of both programs is the same. The groups provide a private place where kids can share their sadness and fears safely. It's a place where they can "get it off their chest" and begin to move on with their lives. In fact, one of the facilitators in each Den group is always a mental health professional. This allows for in-depth intervention, if necessary.

And just like The Den's evening classes, the school-based program is very heavily volunteer-based. And as we approach National Volunteer Day, opportunities to help grieving kids are available. For volunteers, the school-based program requires a sizable commitment, as the groups meet during work hours on a weekly basis. But it provides an opportunity to work with kids in a unique and personal way.

*John Armstrong is a volunteer with the Den for Grieving Kids, a program of Family Centers. With offices in Greenwich, Stamford, Darien and New Canaan, Family Centers is a United Way partner agency that offers counseling and support programs for children, adults and families. For information on volunteer opportunities with Family Centers, call 869-4848 or visit [www.familycenters.org](http://www.familycenters.org).*



### NEW CANAAN NEWS-REVIEW

Editor **Phil Soto-Ortiz**  
Managing Editor **Elizabeth Keyser**  
EASE Editor **John Mordecai**  
Sports Editor **Mark Dwyer**  
Chief Photographer **Cathy Zuraw**

Reporters **Kristiana Glavin**  
Photographers **Amy Morfesseri**  
Real Estate Advertising  
and At Home Pages **Jane Roducha 790-5322**  
Advertising Sales **Lauren Syme 973-4403**  
Editorial Cartoonists **Rich Craig**

NEW CANAAN NEWS-REVIEW  
161 Cherry St., New Canaan, Connecticut 06840  
Phone Editorial: (203) 972-4400 • Circulation: 972-4413  
Classified: 972-4414 • Fax: 972-4404  
[ncnr@bnet.com](mailto:ncnr@bnet.com)

Publisher **Kevin J. Lally**

ADVERTISING AND BUSINESS DEPARTMENTS  
Retail Advertising Manager **Ed Majersky**  
Production Manager **Kevin X. Brien**  
Circulation Director **Andy McCallahan**

BROOKS COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS  
542 Westport Avenue, Norwalk, Connecticut 06851  
(203) 949-1600

©New Canaan News-Review

MediaNews Group