

Live Longer Better



Galford makes healing possible

Rena Galford draws on personal experience to help grieving children

Life's experiences prepare us for many things. Sometimes we don't know how until years later.

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Rena Galford, volunteers at The Caring Place in Erie, where children make quilt squares (in the background) to honor loved ones who died.

Rena Galford, a representative in the Erie service center, knows that her childhood experience has prepared her to help children deal with grief.

She recalls the loss of her grandmother and how she experienced it, and that helps her understand what grieving children go through.

"Most people think children grieve for a few weeks and then get on with life, but it can be much more traumatic," Rena said. "The loss of a loved one can affect them in so many ways."

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Rena was 9 years old when her grandmother died after a heart attack that left her in a coma for several months. She was not allowed to see her grandmother at the hospital, and that contributed to her grief. "I felt guilty that I didn't say goodbye, or if I would have visited her in the hospital I would have been able to awaken her from the coma," she said.

Rena plans arts and crafts and other activities to help children deal with a loss.

When she joined Highmark in July 2000, Rena decided to put her experience and perspective to good use. She began volunteering at the Erie Caring Place as a facilitator for a peer support group.

She has seen children's responses to grief take many forms, from anger and aggression to depression.

Often, children have nowhere to turn for help, she says. Their friends — and often the adults in their life — don't know how to deal with their grief and difficulties. Through The Caring Place, Rena offers help.

Planning activities to help children

The Caring Place program helps children understand their loss and learn that what they are going through is normal.

Working with children age 9 through 12, Rena plans activities designed to help children deal with their loss. By sharing their feelings, memories and experiences with a group of their peers, the children recognize they are not alone in their grief. They begin the healing process.

The activities include:

- Role-playing situations that children may experience in school — some children have been teased or excluded because they have lost a mother, father or sibling
- Arts and crafts to form pictures of the children's grief or feelings centering around the loss of a loved one
- Making quilt squares honoring the person who has died
- Journal writing to put thought into words and on paper
- Making memory boxes (in which cherished items are kept).

The groups meet biweekly for 10-week periods at The Caring Place in Erie to talk and engage in activities that offer encouragement and support.

"Everyone experiences death at some point," Rena said. "Children need to know that hope and healing are possible."

Through The Caring Place, the children experience the help they need. They also give something back.

"The children I have worked with through The Caring Place have given me so much," Rena said. "I truly feel honored that they allow me to listen to their stories. They have taught me a tremendous amount about the importance one single life can make as well as the value of enjoying every single moment each of us are given and how important those around us are."

The Caring Place is a safe place

The Caring Place has locations in Pittsburgh and Erie. It is dedicated to children, adolescents and their families who have lost a loved one. It is a safe place where children and their families can:

- Know they are not alone in their grief

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- Share their feelings, memories and experiences in an atmosphere of nonjudgmental acceptance
- See that what they are going through is normal
- Know that hope and healing are possible.

One child in 20 will have a parent die before he or she graduates from high school.

"We couldn't do the work we do at The Caring Place without our volunteers," said [Sheena Shannon](#), director of volunteer services at The Caring Place in Pittsburgh. "The volunteers, people from all different backgrounds, become a part of the community for these families, and they help us to serve a very diverse group of children and adults. The volunteers are the heart of [The Caring Place](#)."

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For more information about volunteering at The Caring Place contact [Andra Lauriar](#), (888) 224-4673 in Pittsburgh or (866) 212-4673 in Erie.