

The Washington Times

Originally published 04:45 a.m., August 5, 2009, updated 01:23 p.m., August 5, 2009



Camp helps kids cope with loss

[Gabiella Boston](#)



Four children and six adults color toy wooden boats under a shady tree on a steamy August Sunday at an overnight summer camp near Annapolis. To the untrained eye, it looks nothing like a hard-core grief-therapy session. If you look a little closer at the participants' solemn faces, though, you'd know these boats are not just a random arts-and-crafts project - they're memorials to parents, siblings and grandparents who have died.

"I put these red flames on the sides because she loved the color red," 7-year old Messiah Douglas says about his boat and how it honors an older sister who died of cancer. He also has lost a grandmother, a live-in grandfather and an uncle; they, too, are memorialized on the boat.

Messiah, whose full lips and bright eyes look sad even when he smiles -- not that he smiles a lot; mostly he exudes nervous energy, drumming on everything from his chest to his knees to the ground -- is one of 55 youngsters, most of whom are black, spending a long weekend at a grief camp. Many of them have lost their parents to homicide, suicide or AIDS.

The camp is called Camp Forget-Me-Not/Camp Erin and is sponsored by the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing and the Moyer Foundation, started by All-Star Major League pitcher Jamie Moyer and his wife, Karen. (The Moyer Foundation has established 28 such grief camps nationwide. The goal is to establish camps in all 30 Major League Baseball cities.)

"This is a clinical camp," says Stephanie Handel, camp coordinator. "We weave therapy into each activity. It becomes far less threatening when it's woven through an activity."

Against that backdrop, the boat-coloring exercise makes sense. While the children talk about how and why they decorated their boats, they also are exploring and sharing their grief and loss.

Another 7-year-old boy, whose family doesn't want his name to appear in print, recently lost his father. The boy drew a basketball on his boat and offers: "I used to play basketball with my daddy everyday."



The boy's voice is mumbly and low, and his eyes are locked on the ground. Yet he doesn't cry when he adds almost inaudibly: "I love you, Daddy."

The heaviness of heart among the children is palpable, but there surprisingly few tears are shed.

The adults in the boat group -- aside from one mental health worker -- are all volunteers who have lost a loved one. Their role this long weekend is to buddy up with a specific child. The buddies also adorn boats and talk about their loss.

Messiah's buddy is Larry Kirk, who, at 15 in 1983, lost his father to cancer. In green marker at the bow of Mr. Kirk's boat is a big smiley face.

"I put that there because my father took me canoeing. He taught me," Mr. Kirk says.

To which Messiah says matter-of-factly, "That was very touching."

Once all have finished with their boats and have shared their loss, it's time to change gear to the more physical and fun. The grief group's leader, social worker Debby Rager, takes out a plastic bin full of Play-Doh.



"Take it and just smash it, hit it, whatever you want to do," Ms. Rager says. "Get that anger out."

Messiah and some of the others follow the instructions to a "T." They throw it on the ground, even talk to it. Messiah, for example, body-slams his orange clump and then follows that up by saying, "What's up punk?" and "Who's boss now?"

Apparently, getting the license to kick and hit -- while not hurting anyone -- can be liberating on both a mental and neurological level for these children.

Says Mary Owen, the camp's clinical director: "When you have anxiety, adrenaline accumulates in your extremities, and you feel like hitting and kicking. So, we try to teach the kids how to 'get rid of it' in a constructive way."

Just telling yourself "don't do it" or "stop having those feelings" or "I just want it to go away" is not going to work, she says.

Another step in the self-healing portion of the camp -- because much of it is about teaching the children to start helping themselves -- is to label what they feel. The tight feeling in my stomach? Maybe that's anxiety.

"It becomes a little easier when you can verbalize your feelings," Ms. Owen says.

Thirteen-year-old Diamond Colson, who in October lost her grandmother, with whom she had lived since she was 3 months old, does that. She journals regularly and says it helps settle her, bring her down from intense anger and sadness.

"After I write about it, I'm not as stressed," says the fresh-from-swimming, tankini-clad teenager with black-rimmed glasses and a round, sweet face.

But if you're too young to write?

"If you can't write, you can paint or draw what your day was like," Ms. Owen says.

Or maybe even drum about it. That seems to be a way of coping for Messiah, who later in the day, as the mosquitoes come out to feed, participates in an outdoor drumming circle offered by professional drummer and music instructor Jason Walker, a skinny white guy with a heavy groove.

Other therapeutic tools given to youngsters include breathing exercises and art instruction as well as meditation and relaxation techniques.

The camp also tries to involve the family at home. So, before sending the youngsters back into the real world, the camp provides recommendations to guardians about such things as mentoring and therapy.

"We want their families to continue the grief journey," Ms. Handel says, adding that the guardians are also encouraged to invite the children to share stories and emotions from camp.

"Give them permission to have their feelings," Ms. Handel says.

Because they won't be able to talk about those with their newfound buddy. Camp rules say those contacts must be severed so as not to burden the volunteer or hinder children's relationships at home.

At the end of the day, the 55 youngsters, their buddies and the camp staff meet at the assembly hall for the "launch" of the memorial boats made earlier in the day. (The launch was supposed to have happened down by the boat dock as the sun began to set behind the lake, but a rainstorm thundered through.)

It's a solemn moment. Kids and adults are quiet and thoughtful as one by one the children gently slide their boats onto a large blue tarp that's covering the floor while Ms. Handel reads out loud who is being honored and by whom.



She gets to Diamond's name.

"Diamond launches her boat in honor of her grandmother Glenda," Ms. Handel says as Diamond puts her boat -- adorned with "R.I.P. Grandma. You will always be loved" -- down along with dozens of others in a virtual sea of memories.

Diamond doesn't cry as she remembers the comfort of her grandma's love, her delicious fried chicken and coconut pie, her kindness and support. Because Diamond now knows she's not alone.