# The Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp: An Innovative Approach to Healing

Claire Grainger, LCSW and Kathy Nugent, LCSW



A weekend bereavement camp can provide a safe environment to nurture the healing process for families who have experienced a death through cancer. The Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp affords children, teens and adults the opportunity to connect with others who share the pain and suffering of a loss.

Age-appropriate therapeutic interventions and traditional camp activities help families celebrate the memories of their loved ones, develop friendships and reclaim hope for the future.

The experience of a death in the family can be devastating and life-changing for both children and adults. Immediately following a death, family, friends, and community often gather around the grieving family to offer condolences and support. Yet, after just a few short months, those rallying around the bereaved family have resumed their lives, leaving the grieving children and adults feeling alone and different from others in their circle of friends and community. These feelings of isolation can result in increased pain and suffering. Providing a "safe" and nurturing environment to allow for conversations around grief can help in the healing process. Such a place is the Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp.

## **Logistics and Screening**

**Location:** The Malibu Dude Ranch, Milford, Pennsylvania **Choosing a theme:** example, Butterfly **Outreach:** recruitment for camp families, volunteers and staff

## **Assessment of Families**

#### **New Families:**

- When did the loved one die? (MM/DD/YY)
- Where did you hear about the Healing Hearts Family Bereavement Camp?
- How long was the loved one sick? How long did the children know about the illness?
- How did the children cope with the illness of the loved one?
- How did the children grieve the death of the loved one initially?
- How are they coping with the death now?
- What are they looking to get out of the camp?

#### **Returning Families:**

- Date deceased
- How long was the loved one sick?
- How long did the children know about the illness?
- How did the children cope with the illness of the loved one?
- How did the children grieve the death of the loved one initially?

- FREE PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES

  CancerCare\* helps individuals, families, caregivers and the bereaved cope with the bereaved cope with the emotional and practical challenges of cancer. Our services include counseling, support groups, educational workshops, publications and financial assistance. All of our services are provided by professional oncology social workers and are offered completely free of charge. To learn more, vist www.cancercare.org.

  CONNECT WITH US

  FACEBOOK
  www.cancercare.org.

  CONNECT WITH US

  VOUTUBE
  Woww.outdbe.com.chancercarelic.

  VHERE IS IT?
  Malibu Dude Ranch
  Milford, PA 18337
  www.malibududeranch.com

  WHO CAN ATTEND?
  Families with children/teens who have lost a loved one to carning the cancer within the past two years.

  ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

  Horseback riding, fishing, swimming, games, and a campfire and remembrance service. Activities begin Friday night and end Sunday afternoon.

  REGISTER BY APRIL 15, 2015

  FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT
  Claire Grainger, LCSW, at 800-813-4673 ext. 6811 or ograinger@cancercare.org

  Kathy Nugent, LCSW at 800-813-4673 ext. 6809 or knugent@cancercare.org

  This program is supported by
- How are they now coping with the death?
- Have there been any other deaths in the family or with close friends?
- What did they like about the previous camp?
- Any suggestions or things they would like to see this year?

Registration forms are mailed to the families with the understanding that campers are not accepted until the registration forms are returned.



# Camp Programs and Schedule

#### **Friday evening**

Families have an opportunity to meet each other, staff and volunteers. Theme is shared, and weekend rules are provided. Families share dinner and socialize together.

#### **Saturday morning**

- Following breakfast, families gather for family project:
   Collage. Families work as an individual unit on a symbolic memorial tribute to their loved one. Upon completion, families share their stories and display them as a unified group.
- Groups divided by age. The children and teens are divided into groups according to their ages for the morning activity. The activities are created, understanding the developmental life stages of children and teens and how the stages impact their adjustment to loss.



#### "MUFFIN THE CARING BUNNY" (CHILDREN 4 – 10)

- Theme: Encourage children to talk about their feelings and the use of appropriate behavior in expressing them.
- The children will be encouraged to share how they cope with their feelings using "Muffin" the therapeutic bunny
- They will learn ways to cope with feelings of sadness, anger and other difficult feelings using Muffin and how bunnies respond to threats, fears, etc.



as a motivator.

# THROUGH MUSIC (TEENS AND TWEENS, AGES 11 AND UP) Theme: Foster emotional expression

**Theme:** Foster emotional expression, encourage mutuality & team-building through music and song.

- The teens will be encouraged to reflect on their loss and share their feelings, and thoughts. Words such as anger, pain, fear, hope, and love will be suggested.
- The teens will work with musicians to create a song of Hope and Healing, reflecting their feelings and thoughts about their loss.

#### SUPPORT GROUP FOR PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

Adults and guardians are separated into one of two support groups, each facilitated by an LCSW to process their own loss while simultaneously addressing raising children who are coping with loss. Family members are offered the option of attending the same support group.

#### LUNCH

Community tables allow our families to "break bread" together, and share their stories over the family-style meals that are served in a fun and friendly atmosphere.

#### **FREE TIME**

Free time allows our families to bond within their unit as well as with others. The children and teens especially revel in their new friendships and parents have the opportunity to reduce their isolation. Camaraderie flourishes during this time. Activities can include fishing, horseback riding, swimming, and arts and crafts.

Social workers are available for individual emotional support throughout the weekend.



#### MEMORIAL PROGRAM

To create a peaceful and beautiful atmosphere while calming music is played:

- Burning floating candles are placed in the pool to represent each deceased loved one.
- Each family will be given a tapered candle upon entrance.
- Families will light their individual candles and form a large circle around the pool.
- Reflections and meaningful essays are shared.
- The names of each deceased loved one will be read.
- A bell will ring after each name, and the flames will be extinguished.
- The teens perform their created song, "Fly Butterfly Fly," at the conclusion of the service.





#### Saturday evening

At this point, the families have connected. Many of the children and teens have created new friendship circles and can be seen chatting together, and settling into comfortable companionship. Following a family dinner, families are entertained by a wild west show, campfire activities and dancing.



These "fun" events solidify the concept of "fun as acceptable."

#### **Sunday morning**

#### TRANSITION PANEI

Recognizing the healing power of time, a panel of individuals who have survived the traumatic loss of their loved ones share their stories of hope and resilience.

Past panels have included:

- A 22-year-old college student whose father died when he was 6.
- A 13-year-old high school student whose mother died when she was 6.
- A 50-year-old radiologist whose father died when she was 3.
- A father, raising two children, whose wife died when the children were 6 and 4. He is now remarried, and spoke about raising children and rebuilding his family.

This is a very powerful activity in our camp, as those newly grieving will hear from others who lived with loss, but created fulfilling and successful lives.

#### **BUTTERFLY RELEASE**

Families join together for a symbolic butterfly release as they metaphorically compare their loss and transition to that of the butterfly. English proverb: "Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over...it became a butterfly."





#### **FUNDING**

Healing Hearts is made possible through generous corporate, individual and in-kind donations. It takes many hands, donations and funding to create this unique and healing event.