



Photo by Monique Schoenfeld, Town Crier

CJ Rudolph, 10, holds a photo of her mother who died in 1998. She and her father, John, in the background, benefit from grief counseling offered at Palo Alto-based Kara. The non-profit group offers services free of charge.

Family partners in grief

Non-profit Kara offers one-on-one grief counseling, support groups

By Joanne Griffith Domingue

Town Crier Staff Writer

When her mother died, Christiana Jewel Rudolph ran to her own room.

"I threw up," she said. "I was screaming out loud, 'Why did my mom die?' I was saying things to her. I wanted her to answer my questions," said the Los Altos 10-year-old known as CJ.

Kathryn Ann Rudolph died at home of breast

cancer on Valentine's Day in 1998.

Now, "whenever we go through a tunnel, I say, 'Make a wish.' I wish my mom was in our house on the couch waiting for us."

Kathryn was diagnosed in 1996, following a routine mammogram.

At first, "We didn't think it was that serious," said CJ's father, John Rudolph. "But it was very aggressive." She had a mastectomy. She had chemotherapy.

At school during third grade, "One person (a third grade friend) said my mom was like a man because she didn't have any hair," CJ said. "And I didn't like that."

When the cancer showed up in Kathryn's lungs, "We talked to Christiana," Rudolph said.

"I heard his worried voice," CJ said, and it frightened her.

On the day of her mother's funeral, "I cried so much it was scary for me," CJ said.

In the weeks following Kathryn's death, "you think you're going crazy. I couldn't concentrate. Work piles up," Rudolph said.

Rudolph grew up in Los Altos, graduating from Los Altos High School in 1969. He moved back to Los Altos in 1981 and built his current home in 1994.

He is president and CEO of Rudolph and Sletten, a Foster City-based construction business. His company built the Monterey Bay Aquarium, did the interior at the San Jose Tech Museum, and has worked on projects at Intel, Sun and the new Stanford Museum of Art.

"CJ got worried about me," Rudolph said.

"I don't really like it when he cries," she said.

"The trauma of getting through the illness and Kathryn leaving us. It was hard to talk about it," Rudolph said.

"But I made a goal that I'd do the work that it takes" to work through the grief, he said. "I've read it's really hard for a girl to lose her mom, especially if her dad closes down. It's hard later to make attachments. It's a pattern I didn't want to have."

A family physician referred Rudolph and CJ to Kara.

Kara

Kara is a Palo Alto-based non-profit organization that offers one-on-one counseling and grief support groups for those "moving through the pain and isolation of the grieving process," according to Kara literature.

The word Kara is the Gothic root of the word, "care." It means to reach out, to care, to lament, to grieve with.

The five full-time staff and 90 volunteers worked with 400 clients in 1998, said Michael Lydon, executive director of Kara, including Rudolph and CJ.

There is no charge for Kara's help. "We ask a client to make an annual donation or pledge," he said. The average gift is about \$100. The non-profit's annual budget is \$400,000.

"Kara has been a great organization for us," Rudolph said.

On their first visit a few months after Kathryn's death, when they pulled into the parking lot, Rudolph realized it was "the same building where Kathryn and I first met. I pulled Kathryn's picture out of my wallet, and the counselor said, 'how beautiful.' I started crying," he said.

"Children worry about the remaining parent. They don't want to see the other parent hurting," Rudolph said.

"But we need to get it out. That was the beginning of the grieving process," he said.

When CJ joined the children's group, "I cried every time I had to say my name and who died. But I like it now," she said.

The Kara counselors call the room where the children meet the "Steam Room" because it's a

place where they can let off steam.

"This is a safe haven," said Margaret Evans, one of the staff who works with the children.

"At school, children feel different," said Nicholas Ross, who also works with the children. "Some would rather lie than say a parent died. It's almost a stigma," he said.

During an opening circle, the children sit on the floor with pillows and stuffed animals.

"They usually leave laughing," Ross said. "But they shed some tears. It's important to give our children more ease with death."

All the kids in CJ's group have lost a parent to illness, Rudolph said.

"We do art, but art about the one who died," CJ said. She talks of one project where "we had a paper strip and we write on it what you want to say to the parent who died. Then you put it in the sun and the words disappear. You know the person got it," CJ said.

While the children are together at Kara, the parents meet separately.

"It's a huge relief to go every other week," Rudolph said. "It's really important to reach out to talk to people while going through the experience. There's no right way to grieve. It really helps to have other people around who are supportive and have gone through some of the same things.

Since his wife's death, "the best way I've taken care of myself is to go to this group," Rudolph said.

In addition to support groups, a key component of Kara is the one-on-one counseling that is offered. The counselors are trained volunteers who know how to listen. Most of them have lost a loved one, too.

Judy Brigham said she has counseled dozens of people in the 10 years she was a volunteer with Kara.

"The goal," said the 31-year Los Altos resident, "is to provide a safe place for people to be comfortable with death so they can heal. You acknowledge their feelings and accompany them through the process."

She became a volunteer in 1988, two years after she'd lost her father and two friends to cancer.

She worked with most of her clients for two years, seeing each once a week, usually at the client's home or at the Kara office.

"Experiencing a loss throws your whole life out of balance. You need a place for those feelings. Most people stuff them and move on," she said. Brigham is now a member of the board of Kara.

When someone contacts Kara for the first time, there is a one-hour "intake interview," said Adrienne Ammen, who conducts the interviews and works to match the client with a volunteer who has experienced a similar loss. Her last question is to ask what their goals are,

she said.

People tend to seek help anywhere from a few weeks to several years after the loss. "The timing is different for everyone," she said.

"There is a lot more unresolved grief than we realize," Ammen said. "Lives are changed forever with a loss. It is especially hard with the loss of an adult child. The worst is suicide," she said.

"You don't ever get over it. But you will heal. Gradually. Grief is one of the most isolating emotions," she said.

Many clients ask how long the grieving process will take.

"It takes as long as it takes," Ammen said. For many in Silicon Valley, time is an issue. "But you still need to process this grief," Ammen said.

The Rudolphs are beginning their second year with Kara.

"It's not therapy. It's support," Rudolph said.

CJ offers advice to other kids.

"It's OK. They didn't mean to die. It's going to be hard, but you'll get used to it," she said. "It's OK to cry. The person will always be in your heart. You can dream about them, and they're there. It's OK.

"I had a parent die, too."

For more information, call Kara at 321-5272.

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