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A safe place for grief

New KARA program provides emotional support for children who lose a family member

by Pamela Olheiser

For Andrea White's 6-year-old son, Sam, the nightmares began sometime after Oct. 13, 1993. For the White family, that was the night when many dreams died.

Sam's father, Jay White, known as "Jim" to friends, worked at the British Banker's Club on El Camino Real in Menlo Park for 10 years. That October evening he was visiting his former co-workers and drank heavily. Before heading home to Pacifica, he spoke with his wife on the phone. She begged him to stay at the bar, but her pleas went unheeded. He attempted to drive himself home. He never made it.

She found her husband beside his overturned truck at Interstate 280 and Bunker Hill Drive near San Mateo. Over her own grief, her worries for her two sons, Adam and Sam, began there.

"I was fearful for my children because they were left without the nurturing from their daddy," she said. "I remember Sam once asked me, 'Mommy, who is going to be the daddy?'"

One evening in desperation, Andrea, suffering from a throbbing headache, sought emotional support for herself and her boys. A friend gave her the number for Kara, a Palo Alto-based non-profit that, among other services, offers counseling for those coping with the loss of a loved one.

Kara had expanded its services in June 1993 to offer a program specifically to help children deal with the loss of a parent, sibling or friend.

According to Jorge Abich, director of the program, the response has been overwhelming. Since its inception, three groups have been formed: one for children 6 to 12 years old, one for teens who have lost a parent and one for children who have lost a friend or a sibling. The program now serves 63 children from around the Bay Area.

When White first mentioned Kara to her boys, 11-year-old Adam was reluctant because he was afraid to face his feelings, she said. "They have really helped him grieve," she said. "He knows now that they care about him."

Kara seeks to demonstrate to children that they are able to grieve safely, Abich said. Volunteers do not ask many questions, but allow children to tell their own stories. Abich stressed that children express their grief through play--painting, drawing, talking and letting out their energy in an area known as the "steam room."

According to his mother, Adam will never cry at school, but he often wakes up in the middle of the night with his pillow damp. "I know I don't drool," he said. "So I know I must have been crying."

A child may refrain from grieving at school because fellow students are not emotionally equipped to deal with death, says Abich. And the child may feel that grieving at home is unsafe because a parent may also be trying to cope with the loss. Children often feel guilty for providing the parent with any more

suffering.

White also is going through counseling at Kara. She said she is striving to be courageous for Sam and Adam. "Deep down I know that they have to grieve," Andrea said. "So I have to live in the present--for my children I have to do this."

From the looks of his sunny office in the Westminster mansion at 457 Kingsley Ave. where Kara makes its home, Abich's concern for children is clear. Toys of many sorts surround him. A large brown bear is propped in a corner, its tongue sticking out. A Calvin and Hobbes cartoon is pasted on a wall. But among these playful items is a reminder of the seriousness of his job. A box on the floor contains a flier that reads, "Saying Goodbye."

Saying goodbye forever is a different process for a child than for an adult, Abich said. A child may go to a funeral in July and in October think his deceased mother or father will come back. Because children do not have a cognitive understanding of permanence, they are confused about death, he said.

"They need to know that dad is dead and that he is not coming back," said Abich.

The children's program consists of helping the kids through three phases. In general, the first phase, Abich said, consists of supporting the children with the realization that the parent has died.

Things get emotional during the second phase, when children, after coming to terms with the death, allow their feelings to erupt.

The third stage is less frightening than the second, Abich said. The children becomes empowered and they have a focus on the future.

"It is like we cut away a part of them that is incapacitated," Abich said. "They discover that they have something to help them heal."

Since its founding 18 years ago by a group of people at Stanford University who recognized that grieving should be considered a normal part of life, Kara has remained a volunteer-based, non-profit service. It now boasts 21 volunteers and has served more than 5,400 people.

The volunteer facilitators at Kara have themselves experienced the death of someone they loved.

This is an appealing quality of the program, White said. She said she relates to the volunteers because she knows they have felt pain similar to hers.

Abich emphasizes that Kara does not offer any psychiatric treatment. The volunteer facilitators at Kara are available for support and care, and their goal is to create a healthy atmosphere for those who are grieving. But they do not counsel.

The children's program began as a pilot project in 1992 that was modeled after a similar program in Portland, Ore.

In its infancy, volunteers brought in art supplies, pillows and carpets to the fellowship room at the Westminster mansion and ran the program there. But as the children's project evolved and grew, Kara came up with the money to donate for the use of two rooms at the First Baptist Church on North California Avenue in Palo Alto.

On alternate Wednesday nights, those children who come together in an upstairs room at First Baptist share one thing in common--the death of a parent. Sitting in a circle on floor pillows decorated with Indian prints and bright patterns, they talk to volunteer facilitators trained to support children who are grieving.

Paste, scissors, construction paper and pens and crayons sit on shelves next to a window. Through painting and drawing, the children are encouraged to express any confusion and puzzlement they may feel. In the padded room, known as the "steam room," they can let out feelings of anger that can't always be expressed at school or home.

A typical Wednesday evening session offers both structured and unstructured times for the children, who range in age from 6 to 12 years old.

During the more structured portion, children sit on their pillows in a large circle. They pass around a "talk stick" and each holder of the stick tells his or her own story, an American Indian tradition.

Each child tells his or her own name and who died. The volunteer facilitators are available to help with the process but do not counsel the children in any way. It is up to the child to speak.

The second part of the Wednesday night at Kara is unstructured. Children have time to play in the "steam room" where they use large padded sticks, "battakas," and playfully club a stuffed yogi bear and Bart Simpson which are there to be a source for their energy and aggression.

Often Adam comes to Kara exhausted from a hard day at school. When he comes out of the steam room he is energized again, he said.

"We support them in getting in touch with their feelings of grief, which are expressed in sound and movement," Abich said.

Adults sometimes forget that children express themselves through play, Abich said. Their healing process does not happen continuously, but in bits and pieces.

One day, Abich said, Sam was not joining in the activities with the other children in his group. Abich approached him and asked what was troubling him.

"I'm sad," Sam said. "My dad died and I feel sad."

To Abich, this was a positive sign that Sam was comfortable in his grief.

Kara volunteers place much importance on honesty and acceptance of suffering, both of which they say are integral.

Grief is different for everyone, Abich stresses. The duration of grief changes from person to person and is dependent on many factors, including age.

White said Sam is now using Kara well. He talks often about his feelings and he is in the final phase of the program. However, she said certain things may still cause grief attacks.

For example, Sam became upset when he remembered going to get doughnuts with his dad, who was a true doughnut connoisseur.

These grief attacks are upsetting, White said, but they show that her children are dealing with their

feelings properly. She even allows Sam to play games that will keep the memory of his father alive.

Recently, when the three were at the beach she suggested that Sam pretend that the waves crashing on the shore were his father trying to chase him.

"Sam really loved that," White said. Through Kara, Jan Busa and her two children have learned personal growth. On a hot day, under an umbrella on the patio of her San Mateo home, Busa talked about how Kara helped her realize life is still important to her, even with her husband gone. "You can't go burning your days," she said.

As her children jump in and out of a sprinkler, Busa explained that it was about nine months after her husband died from two malignant brain tumors that she and her children went to their first Kara meeting. She was concerned her daughter was not addressing her feelings.

"She is such a normal and controlled child, you never would think that she lost her father," Busa said.

Like both the White children, Lindsay, 11, and Tim, 9, feel safe conveying feelings and emotions at Kara. Lindsay, however, said she is uncomfortable showing her emotions about her dad's death at school.

"If I have to cry, I will go to the bathroom by myself," Lindsay said.

Recently her teacher was reading the book, "Bridge to Terabithia," to the class. During an emotional part of the book when a girl dies, Lindsay said she wanted to go to the restroom but she couldn't. It was already occupied by a fellow student. So she put her head down on her desk and cried.

She often feels alienated at school because everyone else has a dad, she said.

Her father, Gary Busa, was a high school English teacher, an articulate man who enjoyed the outdoors and loved to share his life with his children, his wife said.

"To think that his influence would not be there for my children is devastating," Busa said. "I was fearful that they wouldn't be healthy after losing their dad."

The Busa children have attended Kara meetings for 11 months. The program has helped in their grief process, Busa said. Because the atmosphere has encouraged them to cry, she is no longer afraid that her children are somehow denying their father's death.

Busa said she benefits from meeting other bereaved parents while the children talk and play among themselves. She finds this reassuring because she can monitor her children's grief process by speaking with other parents. She also has the chance to discuss her own pain and grief with parents who have lost a spouse and are struggling with single parenting.

"Kara normalizes the grief process," Busa said. "We have learned that our grief is a necessary part of life."

Tim was shocked and confused when he found out his dad had died, Busa said.

"He looked like a little deer caught in a headlight," she said.

Lining the walls of the children's room at Kara are painted images of what they think heaven looks like or their favorite memory of their deceased parent. Tim's painting is titled "Puzzled," and his mother said it shows his confusion.

Tim conveys signs through his art that he is grieving normally. Another of his paintings he completed at Kara is a family portrait. He is shown standing near a castle with his mom and his sister, and on a cloud above the castle stands his dad.

"He is really moving along in the program," Abich said. "He does not miss a thing and he retains knowledge."

White and Busa both say that realizing the importance of the present is crucial in the grief process. If she is not living in the present and experiencing life's moments in their fullness, White said she could miss the joy life may still offer her family. She is hopeful for their future and said Kara has given her much of that hope.

"I want to protect my children, but then something like this happens and I realize that sometimes things like this were meant to be," she said. "But I know we are not alone."



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