

# Our TreeHouse

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY KAITY TEER



As the talking stick is passed from hand to little hand, children share stories and memories. Sometimes they pass the stick without saying anything, listening intently. One child starts a sentence with, “Before my mom died...” and the group facilitator smiles. For the past seven years, Our TreeHouse, a non-profit featuring peer support groups, has helped children, teens, and adults who have lost a loved one. The grief process is different for everyone, program coordinator Jaymie Wakefield said, but it helps to have the support of others who are going through the same thing.

“Grief is unique, so we don’t have a goal in mind of what getting through it looks like,” Wakefield said. “Our goal is just that they have a safe place to be in it.”

Families come to Our TreeHouse through school and doctor referrals, brochures, and word-of-mouth. The non-profit does not reach out to families. “We want them to be in a place where they feel it’s the right time to reach out to us,” Wakefield said.

Under the guidance of about 20 volunteers, 15 to 16 families come together twice a month to share a meal. All volunteers and group facilitators are trained using a process modeled after the Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families in Portland, Oregon.

After dinner, everyone is excused by age group to start peer support sessions. Each group begins with a check-in. Facilitators encourage members of their group to lead the conversation, which will sometimes start with a themed question. If it’s close to a holiday, what was their loved one’s favorite meal or gift? When was a time they argued with their loved one? Memories can be good or bad, Wakefield said, but all memories are allowed.

Then the younger groups are free to choose their next activity. They can cycle between a punching bag in the big movement room, reading grief-based books in the quiet space, or engage in doctor play in the theatre room, among other things. Each activity helps them work through anything they need to. As the night draws to a close, everyone comes back together to join hands in a giant circle. A child starts the hand squeeze, which travels around the circle and comes back with a group cheer.

Families who have gone through the program have noticed a huge difference in their children, Wakefield said. Aggression between siblings seems to go down, fears are calmed, and the constant questions and anxiety surrounding death decrease.

During the non-profit’s main fundraiser in March—a formal dinner catered by Ciao Thyme—two past participants even volunteered to share their stories.

Families are with Our TreeHouse for an average of two years, but that timeline varies, Wakefield said. “We send them off, but they keep in touch because there’s a bond there,” Wakefield said. “They’ve become comfortable making this part of their story.” When families are ready to leave the program, a closing ceremony allows participants and facilitators to come together one last time to share memories and wishes for the future, a brighter future, thanks to the hard work of Our TreeHouse. ◀