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LifePath Hospice extends 'campfire counseling' to caregivers

By Kathelyn Massarelli, Times Staff Writer

Published: May 5, 2017



LUIS SANTANA | Times

Manager Brooke Taylor speaks with the parents and caregivers at Lifepath Hospice in Tampa during their inaugural Caregiver Campfire Chat. More than 100 of their children are attending Camp Circle of Love, and annual trip for grieving children who have recently lost a parent, sibling or close relative. [Friday, April 28, 2017] [Photo Luis Santana | Times]

Music played from the loudspeakers in the front parking lot of the LifePath Hospice location on Azelee Street.

Children and teens, their parents and their guardians, reveled over the different activities and flooded the food stations. Many of the kids and well-wishers adorned superhero capes and costumes.

Smiles spread across the faces last month as they celebrated another year of sending a new set of campers to Camp Circle of Love, a LifePath Hospice weekend camp designed to help kids work through the recent loss of a loved one.

Camp Circle of Love celebrated 25 years this time around and it was the fifth year LifePath Hospice conducted the send-off event, but the events included a new component.

Caregivers said their final goodbyes to their campers with a few tears welling up in their eyes at the April 28 sendoff. Once the campers lined up and boarded buses for the campsite in Brooksville, the mood shifted.

Brooke Taylor, staffing manager for Chapters Health, LifePath's parent company, said in previous years, campers would come back rejuvenated. The caregivers, however, didn't get to work through their own grief.

"I overheard a mother saying the weekend while her child was away at camp was one of the hardest weekends of her life," said Liz Anderson, associate vice president for development at LifePath Hospice. "We realized we were missing that certain part of care for family. Kids need to come home to a new home."

So for the first time, LifePath offered the parents and guardians a Caregiver Campfire Chat. The chat was a way for caregivers to prepare themselves for what they could expect when campers came home and what they could do to take care of themselves over the weekend.

As caregivers filed into the room, coordinators didn't know how many caregivers would stay. The number choosing to fill the room shocked and pleased them.

Taylor started the chat by introducing a video the Hospice Women of Philanthropy helped fund. It documented everything a caregiver's child would experience over their weekend. Tears fell down some of the faces of grieving caregivers and faint sobs could be heard throughout the room as the vulnerability became evident.

After the video, Dr. Robert Bash of Chapters Health Palliative Care, shared his professional and personal perspective, having lost a brother at a young age.

"A lot of people believe the misconception that you're supposed to be strong for their child and I usually say to people that that's wrong," Bash said. "Would you rather have someone hold you and cry with you or be strong and not hold you."

Bash and Taylor stressed the need to take the coming weekend as a chance to care for themselves and other smaller children too young to go to camp.

The Hospice Women of Philanthropy filled self-care boxes for each caregiver with Publix gift cards, tissues, eye masks and other sundries. They also include stationery to write a letter (something the campers will do over the weekend) to their loved one or camper. They can choose to share it, keep it or throw it away depending on how they feel after writing it.

"We include a note to let them know we are thinking of you and that you are brave and strong," Anderson said. "It's brave to open the door of talking about grief. Grief is not a problem to be solved, but it is a part of love, the more you love the more you grieve."

Officials said LifePath Hospice and Chapters Health isn't there to just support a person dying, but they are there to support the entire family. The Caregiver Campfire Chat is just one step further towards their goal of putting families and patients first. A majority of the kids and caregivers grieving at the event had lost someone suddenly and didn't have a chance to say goodbye.

"Many may be thrown into it, but they have to choose to walk through and take the journey to go through pain and grief to get to the other side," Taylor said. "I hope they know they aren't alone and they are doing what's right for their family. Broken hearts do heal, even though they will always be scarred. The pieces come back together if you allow them to."

Contact Katelyn Massarelli at kmassarelli@tampabay.com.

>>UPCOMING EVENT

Home Runs For Hospice

Kerry Egan, a hospice chaplain and noted author (*On Living*) will be the featured speaker at the Chapter's Health "Home Runs for Hospice" Breakfast, from 7 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. on Thursday (May 11) at George Steinbrenner Field, 1 Steinbrenner Drive. Egan, a graduate of the Harvard University Divinity School, will speak about what she calls the "spiritual work of dying"— the work of finding or making meaning of one's life and the experiences contained. The breakfast will be presented by Regions Bank and benefits the affiliates of Chapters Health System: LifePath Hospice, Good Shepherd Hospice and HPH Hospice.