

## CAMP: Program is roller-coaster ride of emotions

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emotions. Over the next 43 hours, they are encouraged, supported, and nurtured by a caring staff as they give voice to their losses and learn how to incorporate them into their lives.

Social worker Amy Foster-Wexler explained, "In our Caring Circle, we help the campers tie together the loss they have experienced with the strengths they already possess and the new tools they learn at camp, to help them with their feelings when they leave here."

In the Caring Circle, campers talk about emotions that come up and establish a vocabulary for what they are feeling. They learn that feelings are not good or bad; they are simply human reactions to what is happening. They learn breathing exercises to help them self-soothe when things get difficult, sad, or scary. Staff help them self-identify what works for them, what they will need to take care of themselves.

Each camper receives a small leather medallion strung with three colored beads that represent caring, courage, and breath, to remind the campers of tools they have to help themselves through tough times.

At the Friday-night campfire, campers each receive their own soft teddy bear to hug when needed. When asked what his bear's name was, one little boy said he named it after his dad, who had died.

Campers also receive colorful pillowcases in cheerful children's prints, handcrafted by members of the East of the Cascades Quilters Guild. New this year were beautiful quilts which each camper received, made by female inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility.

Saturday is filled with activities to help the campers unpack their grief, experience their feelings, and learn helpful ways to cope with those feelings. There is a feelings fashion-show directed by Sisters resident Kit Stafford, one of the camp's co-facilitators. This fun activity encourages the campers to dress up in ways that help to outwardly display their feelings.

This year for the first time they also experienced the benefits of yoga with Jane Burkholder, a yoga practitioner from Sisters.

Saturday-afternoon art projects, led by Stafford, provide two more opportunities for the campers to process their grief. Power sticks are

crafted from tree branches painted and decorated with symbols representing the person the camper is grieving. There are representations of the person's favorite things or activities they did, what they represented to the camper, and how the camper wants to remember them. The power stick, which each camper takes home, is a reminder of the power of love and the intention of remembering the person who died.

Memory boats are constructed using large pieces of ponderosa bark that will float. Using all natural materials like pine cones, sticks, flowers, bird seed, and paper, each camper makes a boat in memory of their loved one. On Sunday morning, a procession of campers and counselors wend their way down to the shore of Lake Creek, while they sing about the flowing river and how "Mother Earth carries me back to the sea."

Each camper individually releases their memory boat to be carried down the creek to the river and onto the ocean, representing the circle and seasons of life. Following the boat release, campers gather to share their thoughts about the weekend while staff prepares them to return to their families.

Family members arrive late Sunday morning to hear about what their children have experienced while at camp. The campers sing their favorite songs for the families and everyone watches a slide show of the weekend.

A barbecue closes out the weekend and campers leave lighter, full of hope and memories made, better equipped to face not only their current loss but also those yet to come.

As Stafford reminded the campers, "We send each other out with such good feelings in our hearts."

Music is a large part of the weekend. It helps accomplish the transitions between the playful fun times and the deep moments of contemplation. Cloverdale resident Katie Cavanaugh, who is the other camp co-facilitator, provides music. The music ties the whole camp experience together, from the morning wake-up on Cavanaugh's fiddle to songs at meals and around the campfire. Campers learn the Camp Sunrise song, "Keep Me in Your Heart for a While," which opens and closes the camp as the camp flag is raised and lowered.

Cavanaugh told the families, "Your children can take the music with them in their hearts and minds."

Each year, the camp is an amazing roller-coaster ride of emotions, activities, fun and laughter, contemplation, new friendships, and tears. Campers discover they are not alone in their grief. There are others experiencing similar feelings of loss and sadness.

Camp director for thirteen years, Sisters resident Diane Kellstrom, the Redmond Hospice bereavement coordinator, shared her thoughts about the camp.

"I am always amazed, that given how scary this must be for the children to come to an unfamiliar place, alone, how quickly they open themselves to the counselors and support staff and other campers. How brave they are to share their vulnerability. They are just beginning to learn about life's challenges that lie ahead of them and we help equip them to face those challenges."

"Every year I come with the intention to give of myself fully, and when I leave to go home I am so moved by what I have received from the children," Cavanaugh said. Her thoughts were echoed

by other staff and counselors regarding why they volunteer for camp.

The campers seemed to like everything about camp, from the counselors to the s'mores to the candle-lighting ceremony to the memory boats and power sticks, and everything in between.

When asked what they would tell someone about camp, they responded, "You're going to have fun. Amazing. Delicious food. Fun to have the chance to meet other campers. Emotional. Epic. Awesome."

One family member, who had two children at camp, said, "This is an absolutely amazing program. I would definitely recommend it to others... This is the best way for them to start their summer... I'll be looking at volunteering here in the future, and my son wants to be a junior counselor."

This year the camp was smaller than usual, with 18 campers. Some years there have been as many as 40. For those 18 campers there were 12 counselors, 10 volunteers, and six cabins, each with three campers and two counselors.

Camp Sunrise was begun 18 years ago by Hospice of Redmond social worker Janet Whitney. In the early

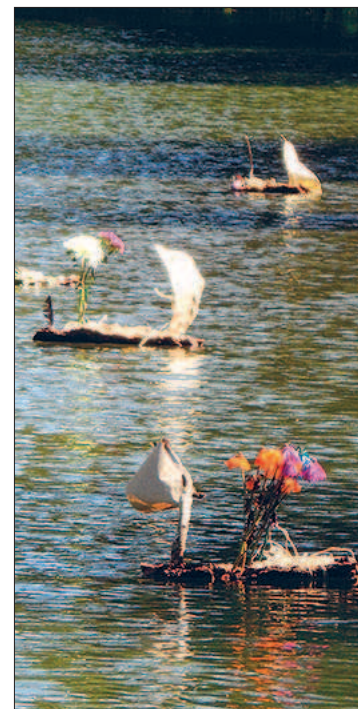


PHOTO BY SUE STAFFORD

Memory boats launched on Lake Creek begin their journey downstream.

years, the camp was a collaboration of Redmond, Hospice of Bend (now Partners in Care), and Pioneer Memorial Hospice in Prineville, but is now solely a program of Hospice of Redmond.

Camp Sunrise is made possible by donations, grants, and the proceeds of Teddy Bear Tea and the sale of the Camp Sunrise tree at the Festival of Trees held every December. All of the monies allow the camp to be offered every year free of charge for the campers.

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