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Program helps kids express emotions

■ Sacred Heart's Courageous Kids service lets children talk about their worries

By Allyson Taylor
for the Emerald

The tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, can be scary and difficult for children to understand. For some, it can bring emotions they have not yet experienced. For others, feelings of loss from a previous tragedy in their lives may be triggered. While it is important for young people to deal with their fears and feelings, there are very few places children can turn to talk about their feelings with others their own age.

Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene has such a program. Hospice nurse Kathy Neussbaum founded the program, called Courageous Kids, seven years ago when her children's grandfather died and there wasn't a place they could go to talk to other children about their loss. The program provides young people a place to meet other young people their age in a nonthreatening environment who are dealing with similar emotions.

Executive Director Cheryl Coughran said it is very important for children to be able to have a "safe space to express their grief, and that is what this program is all about."

"Children usually know what is going on, and it is important to be honest with them and to ask them about what they are feeling and help them to express their feelings," Coughran explained.

Coughran explained that feelings of loss can be retriggered by tragic events such as what happened in New York and Washington, D.C., and children need to be able to express those emotions and at times grieve again for their previous loss. Coughran also said the feeling of loss the second time around may not be as intense, but it is something children still need to deal with.

In an address to the nation on Sept. 11, first lady Laura Bush urged parents of the nation to reassure their children "everywhere in

our country they're safe," something Heidi Pool, a teacher at Montessori Willamette Valley School, agrees with.

"The children here are quite young, and they have not voiced any concern," Pool said. "But if questions were to arise, we are prepared to handle them."

At Courageous Kids, children have the opportunity to draw pictures, make clay sculptures and paint to deal with what they are feeling. After the art activity, the children talk about what their picture or sculpture represents. Coughran explained that children usually won't voice what is bothering them, so the art helps them put their feelings into words and share it with the group.

"Children usually know what is going on, and it is important to be honest with them and to ask them about what they are feeling and help them to express their feelings."

Cheryl Coughran
executive director,
Courageous Kids

According to Sacred Heart's Public Affairs and Communications Director Brian Terret, the program is not meant to take the place of one-on-one counseling, but rather to provide a chance for children to talk about their feelings with their peers. The program has helped 450 children in the seven years since it began, and Terret has not only seen the children heal, but also return to volunteer their time to help other children.

Throughout the school year there are three group sessions that run for 10 weeks. The first session is for elementary school children in grades one through five and began Sept. 18. The second session will be a teen session and is open to middle- and high-school age children grades six through 12. This session will begin Oct. 2.

In addition to the year-round groups, the program offers a four-day camp in July. The camp is called Sky Camp and is hosted at Willamette Pass. This four-day period can substitute for a regular ten-week course normally held during the school year. The children interact in small groups and participate in activities designed to help them heal and deal with their problems.

Coughran said there are sand trays where the children can make a village scene of their choice. A picture is then taken of the village scene and goes home with the child as a memory of their healing experience. Children also have the opportunity to paint a pot with acrylic paints and then plant a plant as a memory of their lost loved one.

The camp is run by volunteers who participate in a vigorous 20-hour training session in the spring. Students are encouraged to volunteer, and those who are interested in the program should contact Coughran at Sacred Heart at 461-7693.

Allyson Taylor is a freelance reporter for the Oregon Daily Emerald.

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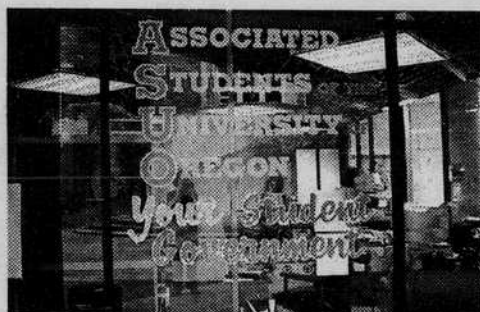
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