

# A Place of Comfort

The Caring Place offers solace, support for grieving children.

John Kajic

One out of 20 children will have a parent die before they graduate high school.

That's an average of one child in every classroom, on every sports team, in every scout troop or after-school club—more than 150,000 children in Pennsylvania alone.

And that does not include the children who experience the death of brothers or sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or close friends.

Yet, as many children as this is, a grieving child often feels isolated and alone, different from all of his or her classmates, friends and peers. Grieving children feel alone and afraid, heart-broken and devastated.

Brooke was 9 years old when her father, older brother and baby sister died in a car accident. Now 14, she spoke about what it was like trying to connect with her friends.

"Talking to my friends at school was hard because nobody had gone through that situation," she said.

"When my friends didn't want to talk about it, it made me not want to talk about it. I kind of felt shut down and like nobody was ever going to listen to me."

Brooke also found it hard to talk with her mother.

"There was a wall between us," she said. "We were struggling, and we both didn't know what to do. It's bad enough you lose somebody in your family, but to also lose such a

great relationship with somebody who you need the most at the time, that can be just as hard. We couldn't talk. We'd butt heads all the time."

When a family member dies, a child's life is turned upside down. The impact is shattering—nothing is ever the same. It is often the defining moment of their lives, as Brooke experienced.

"You just feel so stuck, isolated and secluded," she said. "It's like a new life where we had to pick up everything and then try to learn how to do everything, with just the two of us. That was hard to adjust to. When you have a loss of someone who's really close, it kind of feels like you're being sucked into a black hole. Like everything that mattered to you is gone, and there's no point in really doing anything. You feel really pulled into something that doesn't exist. And it's hard to try to find a way to climb out of it."

Children need help and support. Highmark's Caring Place is a safe haven where grieving children and families gather and join others who understand what they're going through. An essential community resource, the Caring Place offers services at no charge to grieving families from throughout the community.

"After my father died in the car accident, I couldn't contain or control myself," Brooke said. "And

then after the Caring Place, it kind of seemed like the Caring Place symbol—my heart was still broken but a butterfly was flying out of it. And that butterfly was just free and so carefree, and I knew how to be a kid again."

The Caring Place in Lemoyne, just across the river from Harrisburg, opened its doors in 2003. Facilities also serve families in Erie and the Pittsburgh region, where the first site was dedicated downtown in 1997. The most recent site opened in the Warrendale/Cranberry region last year. The Caring Place's focus is consistent across the facilities, regardless of geographical location—to make a difference in the lives of grieving children.

The Highmark Caring Place provides peer support, where the children who attend come to know that they are not alone as they share their feelings, memories and experiences.

Children and families get support and encouragement from each other, facilitated by a caring community made up of professionals, trained volunteers and other children and adults who also have experienced a death.

The larger mission of the Caring Place—funded by the Highmark Foundation with community contributions matched by Highmark Blue Shield—is to raise

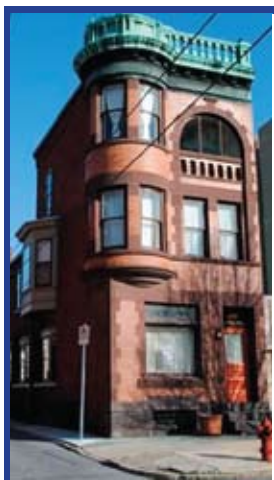
awareness in the community of the needs of grieving children and how to respond to them. Referral services, adult telephone support and educational programs and resources are also provided, as well as consultation services, educational presentations and resources for schools and other professionals in the community who work with children. Since opening the first Caring Place, the program has served more than 60,000 family and community members.

For more information about children's grief services or to volunteer at the Caring Place, 3 Walnut St., Suite 2000, Lemoyne, call 1-866-613-HOPE (4673) or visit [www.highmarkcaringplace.com](http://www.highmarkcaringplace.com).

John Kajic, Psy.D, a child grief specialist, is manager of the Harrisburg Region Caring Place.



John Kajic leads the Harrisburg Region Caring Place.



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