

Common Ground Grief Center

Compassion and Support for Grieving Children and Teens



Children at the Common Ground Grief Center in Manasquan prepare for the start of their group.

Jonathan Suska

While we may wish otherwise, death is part of the human experience. Dealing with the loss of a loved one may be extremely challenging, but for children and teens, who grieve differently from adults, such an experience can be terribly traumatic, negatively changing the course of their lives.

Located in Manasquan, the Common Ground Grief Center's mission is to provide support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can come together and share their experiences as they begin the journey through the grief process.

Common Ground's founder and executive director is Lynn Snyder, LPC, ATR-BC, FT, a licensed professional counselor who specializes in the field of childhood bereavement. Snyder saw a lack of ongoing support services for grieving children and teens in a time when a series of teen and young adult suicide deaths rocked the Jersey Shore. Her desire to provide a nurturing and caring place where children with similar experiences of loss could come together and begin to heal by sharing their stories led to the center's birth.

"When I first began the center, it was a dream and a passion," Snyder said. "We started with just three kids in the basement of a local church." After outgrowing that location in the first year, Common Ground settled at its current site on Taylor Avenue in Manasquan. The program grows larger with each passing year.

"We now offer thirteen support groups with nearly sixty volunteers to help facilitate those groups, and serve over 160 children and teens each month who come from various parts of Monmouth and Ocean Counties," she said.

Common Ground provides support groups for children and teens between the ages of six and eighteen, as well as a group for young adults ages nineteen to thirty. Groups are comprised of similarly aged youth and teens who have experienced losses due to illness, accidents, suicides, or homicides.

Snyder explained, "Most children and teens who have experienced the death of their parent or sibling need to feel understood and less alone. They typically don't know many kids who have had a parent or sibling die. The power of connection and of looking around the room at a whole

group of kids who 'get it' is somewhat of a relief to them."

Oftentimes, while family units grieve together, each member of that unit grieves in his or her own way, which can leave children feeling isolated. "Surviving parents are often in the throes of their own grief, and at times, can be emotionally unavailable for their grieving child," Snyder said.

Common Ground's peer support programs provide an outlet for their feelings to be validated and to be heard. "They are in a room full of kids just like them and are among caring adults that know how to listen," she said. "They know it's a safe space to express any and all feelings, especially the really hard ones. They can grow and thrive through adversity, given the proper outlet and support systems."

Groups meet every other week for ninety minutes. Children engage in talking circles, art, play, sandplay, and games to assist them in coping with their grief. Snyder explained that the organization views their program as "prevention" in mental health care, meaning that children and teens who keep their feelings hidden can be pre-disposed to challenges such as depression, poor academic performance in school, anxiety, and substance abuse. "Helping kids process their loss and those very strong feelings within the safety of their group and with those who really understand helps them cope in a positive way," she said.

Snyder noted that grief can sometimes be more challenging for teens as they face many milestones in high school that can be constant reminders of their loss, such as shopping for a prom dress, learning to drive, searching for the right college or post-high school opportunity, and most importantly, looking out in the audience at graduation and not seeing their loved one who was supposed to be there.

"I think people are always sur-

prised at how long kids utilize our services,” she said. “Some children begin the program in the six to twelve age group and then move to a teen group and stay through high school graduation. Many say that Common Ground is like a family to them. One of the important reasons that kids stay in the program for a number of years is that kids understand their loss differently as they grow.”

She went on to say the six-year-old who is attending their program understands their loss differently than the nine-year-old or the teen, and that the processing of that loss emerges on a deeper, more insightful level as kids grow.

Snyder loves seeing when youth who went through the program go through the facilitator training to become a volunteer to help the next generation of kids like them because they received so much from Common Ground.

However, the most rewarding part for Snyder is witnessing the transformation of the thousands of young people and families they have helped since first opening their doors in 2009. “I see them come in for an orientation so sad and broken. Being with people who listen to them without judgement and allow them to express their innermost feelings helps them to heal and reinvest in life again. It is a beautiful and deeply moving experience to witness.”

Snyder also explained the so-called “five stages of grief” (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) were originally developed by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross while working with dying patients. “Somehow, these stages got attached to those who were grieving,” she said. “The problem with these stages is that they are linear, going from point A to point B. We know that grief is cyclical, meaning those grieving revisit their feelings over time.”

Hence, the five stages can set people up for failure when they think they are supposed to go through all five stages and in that order. Some people never feel the anger or go through depression. “We do a lot of education concerning the stages of grief. Unfortunately, when someone experiences a loss, it is one of the first things they will search on the internet,” Snyder said.

Snyder recommended that one of the best things anyone can do when they are with a grieving child, teen, or adult, is to be a good listener. “Listening with love, without judgement or advice, and being fully present with that person is one of the best gifts you can give them,” she said. “We tend to want to take away their pain or say something to make them feel better, when in fact, we don’t need to have answers. We just need to be a really good listener.” That can be a very difficult thing for



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Teens at Common Ground enjoying a moment of light-hearted bonding.

most people to do, but the facilitators at Common Ground are trained to be active listeners without judgement or providing advice.

“The power of connection for those hurting is profound,” Snyder said. “We love what we do and are honored and humbled to witness healing in the face of insurmountable pain.”

—Jill Ocone

As a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Common Ground does not charge families a fee for its services. Instead, the organization relies on contributions from individuals, corporations, and foundations, as well as proceeds from their fundraisers.

Common Ground’s largest fundraiser is their annual Clambake, which will be held this year on June 22, 2023 at Martell’s Tiki Bar on the Point Pleasant Beach boardwalk. The event, which will run from 5:30 PM to 9:30 PM, will feature entertainment by The Eddie Testa Band. While Martell’s provides the majority of the food, this year will include a few chef-inspired tastes from local restaurants. There will be a cash bar, 50/50 raffle, and a floating lantern vigil along the edge of the ocean at 9:00 PM.

In November, Common Ground hosts their Light of Life - Walk of Remembrance fundraiser where the public can purchase luminaries. The luminaries are lit with electric candles and placed along Arnold Avenue in Point Pleasant Beach or Main Street in Manasquan.

In addition to monetary donations, Common Ground offers a number of volunteer opportunities, including maintenance and upkeep tasks, assisting with programs and special projects, fundraising helpers, and volunteer facilitators, which requires four days of training.

The Common Ground Grief Center is located at 67 Taylor Avenue in Manasquan. For more information about volunteer opportunities, monetary donations, or to purchase Clambake tickets, call (732) 606-7477 or visit www.commongroundgriefcenter.org and www.facebook.com/commongroundgriefcenter.



Children write messages to their loved ones on wooden leaves, which are added to a tree mural.

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