

## Children's grief camp teaches kids to cope with loss

By CHARLY MARKWART

*Princeton Times*

PRINCETON — The experts at Princeton's Hospice Compassus deal with death often, and they know that when loss occurs, children experience the pain and grief just as deeply as adults do.

That's why, last weekend, the organization hosted its first-ever children's grief camp, a daylong affair called Camp Journey. Hosted at Deliverance Temple Church, in Brushfork, the camp offered children aged 8-17 a series of craft activities, games and support sessions designed to help them realize that while everyone deals with grief differently, they aren't alone in the pain they're feeling over the loss of a loved one.

"Knowing and realizing that children experience loss just as adults do, we felt like this would be a good way to give back to our community and just provide a day to let these kids be kids and have fun," said Hospice Compassus Bereavement Coordinator Sharon Blackwell, who organized the event. "We're really trying to let them see that they aren't in this journey alone, and that there are other kids in their community experiencing loss, too."

A dozen Mercer County youngsters took advantage of that unique offering May 15, taking part in activities such as a journaling session, a memory pillow craft, a group counseling session and an obstacle course designed to

help the children come to grips with the changes that occur with the loss of a loved one and to understand that it's normal for them to experience grief differently from their relatives or peers. Later, the children's families joined them for a special balloon release in honor of their lost loved ones.

"All of the activities were intended to help them learn how to deal with the overwhelming challenges and changes that come with loss and grief," said Blackwell. "A lot changes when you lose someone you love, and it is a tough challenge having to deal with going on without that person. Grief is different for each child, but today we offered them a chance to share their personal experiences and talk about the feelings that they may have been keeping inside."

According to many of the 16 Hospice volunteers who helped operate the camp, several of the young attendees opened up throughout the course of the day and took advantage of that comforting opportunity to share. As the children made new friends and found refuge from their loneliness in the compassionate care of the camp leaders, it seemed clear that Camp Journey was achieving its purpose.

"A lot of the kids came in here really quiet this morning, and now they just seem to be having fun with one another, and they're more open about things, so I'm glad

to see that," said volunteer Mary McKinney. "I think the workers are all so kindhearted that the kids feel comfortable around them, and they're able to share what they're feeling."

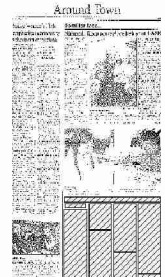
Blackwell agreed.

"I really do think they're getting a lot out of this," she said. "One little boy in the journaling session just really wanted to talk about his mom, and it was so good for him to be able to do that. Every child that I've asked 'Are you having a good time? Is this working for you?' has answered positively, and you can tell as you talk to them that it's coming from the heart."

Those hurting hearts found some healing at Camp Journey, and Blackwell says Hospice Compassus staffers and volunteers plan to build on that success next year, making the camp a yearly affair. When that happens, McKinney hopes those future campers find the same dose of heart help and hope that this year's attendees took away.

"All of the workers and volunteers are Christians, to my knowledge, and I think it's important that we give them that hope that they'll see their loved ones again," she said. "I think this was just a very valuable experience for the kids."

Five percent of Hospice Compassus' sources come from volunteers, and the organization is always in need of volunteer help. To get involved or to receive more



# Princeton Times

Date: Friday, May 21, 2010  
Location: PRINCETON, WV  
Circulation (DMA): 1,957 (150)  
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (W)  
Page: A5  
Keyword: Hospice Compassus

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