

A Club Nobody Wants To Join

Parents who have lost children find coming together to talk through their emotions helps conquer their grief.

By Yana Ginburg

Staff writer

The Rev. Richard Hicks had preached at many funerals. He was accustomed to helping people deal with loss and grief.

Then death struck in his own family.

Six years ago, his daughter, Melinda Hicks Pegram, was killed in a head-on collision as she was returning home after playing the piano at choir practice in Kernersville. She was 27 years old.

"I thought I knew a lot about grief until my daughter was killed," Hicks said.

Hicks' wife, Brenda, said it takes a long time to work through the grief. "My world forever changed," she said. "I blamed the Lord for a long time."

Found support

The Hickses lived in Winston-Salem then, and soon after their daughter's death, they found a group they could turn to for support: Compassionate Friends. It is a national organization whose aim is to help parents talk about the pain of losing a child.

The Hickses started going to meetings.

"It was helpful," Mr. Hicks said. "It helped get some of the rawness out." Mrs. Hicks re-

members that when she went to the first meeting, she couldn't go in. The pain was still too fresh.

The Hickses moved to Fayetteville in 1992. They found that Fayetteville didn't have a chapter of Compassionate Friends.

That will change Thursday, when the Compassionate Friends Fayetteville chapter will hold its first meeting. It will be at 7:30 p.m. at the Fayetteville Area Health Education Center on Owen Drive and will be open to the public.

The Fayetteville chapter held organizational meetings this spring. There is a core group of 15 people right now. They are hoping more parents will join.

Early this year, Mrs. Hicks got a phone call from Elaine Grindle, who lost her son Stewart in 1981. Stewart, 17, was hit by a motorcycle. Grindle had heard about Compassionate Friends and called the national headquarters in Oak Brook, Ill. Because Hicks had been in the Winston-Salem group, the national office had her name and number.

At the same time, Brenda Melvin, whose college-age daughter Talisha committed suicide, had called Fayetteville Observer-Times columnist Larry Cheek. She told Cheek she had been looking for a support group for parents who had lost children, but couldn't find one in town. Hicks read Cheek's column and called Melvin.

Together, Grindle, Hicks and Melvin worked to start the local chapter.

And even though group members describe Compassionate Friends as a "club we didn't want to be a part of," they all say talking through the emotions they feel has helped them

Chapter formed

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conquer their grief.

At first, it's difficult to open up. "You're in shock or denial. You can't talk about it for six or eight months," said Joan Konen. In 1992 Konen's son, John Jr., died of carbon monoxide poisoning at the age of 34.

Anger lingers

You feel a lot of anger and resentment, said Diane Lanier. Her son Ralph was killed in a car accident at age 15. "Even 15 years later, you still think Ralph didn't get to do this or didn't get to do that," Lanier said.

At the meetings, parents can share coping techniques, cry or just sit quietly and listen. They all take pictures of their children. Parents who lost children decades ago help parents who have suffered a more recent loss. There is a lot of Kleenex passed around. People can speak as long as they want or not at all.

"The grief has to be dealt with," said Grindle, who is president of the chapter. "A time comes when the grief no longer controls you, you control it."



Holding photos of their children are members of Compassionate Friends: front row, left to right, Hazel Smith, Jennifer German, Joan Konen, Elaine Grindle, Diane Lanier and Brenda Hicks; back row: Elaine Levesque, Mickey Smith, Jerry Strand, Brenda Melvin and Richard Hicks. Staff photo by Chris Hondros