



# Gerard's House Newsletter

Fall 2005

A Safe Place for Grieving Children, Teens and Families

Gerard's House is a non-profit grief support center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. We provide peer support groups for children and teenagers who are grieving the death of someone important in their lives. We also provide support groups for their parents and adult caregivers and individual grief support. All services are confidential and free of charge. For more information, please call us at (505) 424-1800.



## Aren't You Over That Yet?

### Debunking the Misconception of Linear Grief

By Katrina Koehler, Program Coordinator

Imagine a long car trip. You get on the road and speed along, heading straight for your destination. Finally you arrive, and your journey is over.

This is how many people in our culture have traditionally expected the grief process to work: linear, measurable and fast, with a definite beginning and a definite endpoint. According to this model, when someone important to you dies, you will feel bad at first, but each day will bring you a little closer to your destination—full recovery. At that point, your grief will be over, or, as we often say, you will be “over it.” If this sounds familiar, it’s not surprising, because we have all been affected in one way or another by the following unspoken but widely-held societal belief: *that grief is felt most intensely immediately after a significant death, and is followed by a steady and speedy recovery.*

Chances are, no one ever sat you down and said, “Let me explain to you how grief works.” Instead, our cultural paradigms about

grief are transmitted to us as we go through life. We get them by osmosis, as we watch how people cope with their own grief and respond to other people’s grief. For example, we learn that grieving people often receive a large outpouring of support around the time of the funeral, and that, generally, not much support is offered a few months later. Public praise is often heaped on celebrities if they appear to regain their composure quickly after the death of a loved one. Anyone who still shows signs of distress several months after a death is usually advised to “move on.”

We get signals about what grief should look like in a lot of other ways, too, but they are often based on the misconception that grief should be a quick and steady forward motion with a definite finish line. The reality, though, is that hardly anyone grieves this way. Instead, people of all ages tend to experience grief as a much more mysterious and complex process than this, with ups and downs, twists and turns, unexpected detours and sudden breakthroughs.

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Grief seems to have rhythms and waves of intensity all its own, and each person feels them differently.

Because of the strength of the old collective cultural image of grief as a linear progression, however, many grieving children, teenagers and adults feel pressured to grieve in a way that is socially acceptable, but unnatural for them. They may feel that they have to hide how they are really feeling from the world, or even from themselves. Have you ever felt like a “grief failure” because your grief process was different than the people around you expected it to be, or than you thought it should be?

Many people in our culture are moving towards a new paradigm of the grief process now, one that honors the cycles, rhythms and waves of grief, one that naturally fits *us* instead of making us fit into it. While each person's grief is different, here are some of the elements that this new grief paradigm includes:

**It may take time to process the finality of a death and all its implications for our lives.** Children, teenagers and adults often describe this in retrospect by saying that they were in shock or numb at first, that the first few months were all a blur, or that they knew in their minds that the person was dead, but it hadn't really “hit” them yet, not until two or six or ten months later (it's different for each person). In the meantime, people may re-experience grief each time the loved person isn't there. As this separation goes on, it can actually get *harder* to bear, at least for awhile, because the “goneness” of the person who died is becoming long-term, and at the same time, the shock is wearing off, so that everything is sinking in more deeply. Besides sadness, there can be relief, guilt, anger, confusion, fear, and every other possible emotion and combination of emotions. A death may profoundly change other things in people's lives, too, from family dynamics and daily routines to personal identity and self-image. It can take time for people



to process all of this and get their bearings again, and this is why grief often *intensifies* over the first few months after a death. Eventually, many people do feel better, but this may not happen within the first year.

**Throughout the grief process, many people swing through various emotional states on a daily basis.** Rather than steady progress towards feeling better, grieving people often describe an unpredictable, tumultuous cycle of feelings. It's quite common to have a happy week followed by a painful week. To make it even more complex, the happy week may have included many hours of deep heartbreak, and the hard week may have included a lovely, peaceful afternoon. Feelings can shift from day to day, hour to hour, and even moment to moment. In grief support groups, group members often talk about these unpredictable swings and how it feels like a roller coaster ride.

**Sometimes the pain of loss hits hardest many years after the death.** This can happen for children as they go through developmental stages and important life events. For people of all ages, the most intense grief can be put off for a long time when they are coping with a lot of responsibilities at the time of the death or are not ready to deal with it at that time.

**Once a person does feel some relief from an intense period of grief, it may come back in waves or cycles.** Sometimes this goes on for years, sometimes for a lifetime. How long a person grieves varies for each person and varies with each death, but the image that everyone should grieve for a certain amount of time and then “go back to normal” does not reflect

how people grieve. “How can I ever ‘go back to normal?’ ” one grieving man laughed. “That's crazy! My life will never be the same. I'm a different person now.” Another woman in an adult group said, “I keep thinking I'm finally getting over it, and then it hits me again. I still feel it, it just doesn't take over my life like it did in the first year.”

I think the old linear model of grief arose out of a desire to limit the suffering associated with grief. It's as if our culture has believed that by imposing a schedule and time limit on the grief process we could make it easier and faster. And yet, ironically, this linear model has caused *more* suffering—by pressuring us out of our natural rhythms when we are grieving, by subtly shaming us for the way we naturally grieve, by isolating us from others when we need support the most, and by offering false promises. As one teenage girl said, “Why did everyone tell me I'd be feeling better by now? I wish they hadn't said that, because it's been a year and I feel worse than ever!” Another woman in our adult support group felt alienated from her family because she was still feeling her grief strongly several years after husband's death. “My family doesn't even know I'm still grieving,” she said. “They assume I'm over it, but I'm not. And I don't tell them because they wouldn't understand.”

A rhythmic, cyclical paradigm of grief is not only more true-to-life than the linear paradigm, it also offers its own comforts: the comfort of knowing that even when you are in your darkest hour where there seems to be no hope, you might be laughing in a little while. The comfort of knowing that you may have an amazing day next week even if you're having a lousy one today. The comfort of knowing that no matter what your grief process is like—right now, at this moment—it can't possibly be wrong, that you are riding your own wave of grief in an ocean where there is no such thing as a “grief failure.”

## Four Years Later—How Gerard's House Changed Isaac's Life

Interview by Jayn Stewart, Executive Director

**Isaac Garcia was a ten-year-old participant in a support group four years ago. He is now fourteen and a freshman at Santa Fe Prep. He and his mother Emily spoke about their experience at Gerard's House.**

*Emily, what would you like to share about your experience?*

Gerard's House is not just for kids. In the adult group, it was important to me to just sit among other parents who could look in your eyes and share understanding. There is no value I can place on how *huge* that is...sitting with peers, sharing understandings and experiences. You can *trust* them in a very special way.

I see that, having walked through his issues with the help of Gerard's House, Isaac can more easily be compassionate toward others. He's giving back because he's okay. For example, he was able to tell his grandfather that it was okay to be sad about his aunt after her son died. *His wound has become a gift.*

*How was Gerard's House helpful to you, Isaac?*

Even now, if an issue about my dad comes up, it is helping me just knowing that a place is there to help me *in an instant* if I need it. It's calming to know that people are waiting to help. In our group, we'd comfort each other. At our school, recently, a girl's Dad died, and I could comfort her. I learned how to put myself in another person's place. Now it feels good to give back, to give in little things, like listening to another person.

At first I was hesitant, and even embarrassed, to go to Gerard's House because I didn't want it to be like going to a shrink. I didn't want to tell my friends what I was doing. But when I was there, I made new friends. We could hang out and have fun. There was no pressure at all. We could talk about our issues *gradually*. After awhile I was able to tell my friends that I was going to "grief group" because it was just like going over to a friend's house.

When I came to Gerard's House I was really angry. I was fighting with my mom *every day*. I got kicked out of school because of my anger. I went from dropping out of school to being an honor student. Gerard's House saved my life. If I hadn't gone there, I would probably be getting into fights with my friends and Mom all the time. I'd be running away and maybe would be into drugs and alcohol. I *know* I wouldn't be at Prep.

*Did you know that we have a "Storm Room" now where kids can express their anger by hitting big pillows, a punching bag, and giant stuffed animals?*

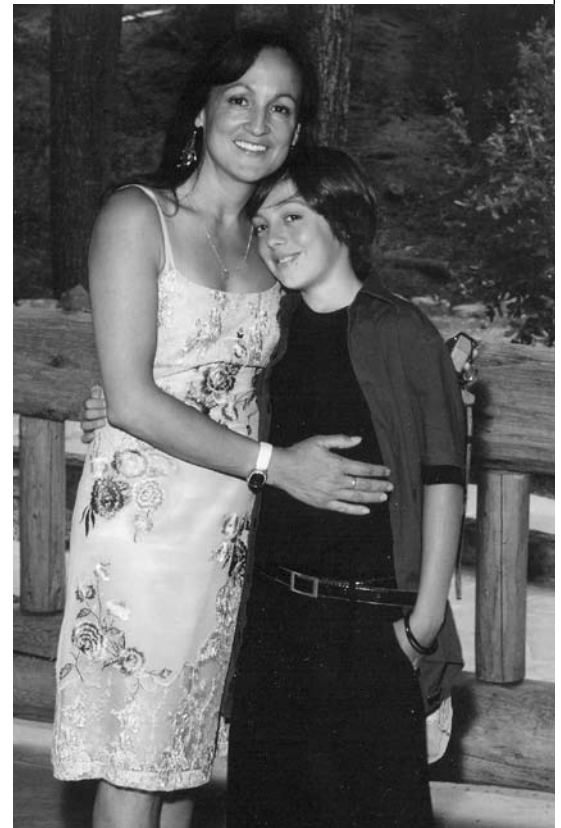
No, I didn't know that. I could use it sometimes now. I need a room like that at home.

*What did you learn about grief that you'd like to share?*

**"Gerard's House saved my life. If I hadn't gone there, I'd be getting into fights with my friends and Mom all the time. I'd be running away and maybe would be into drugs and alcohol."**

I *know* that grief is a natural human emotion. And so is anger. I would say to other kids that there *is* a way to deal with the hard times. Grief is not something to ignore or "get past." You can find a way to get through it.

At first I was afraid Gerard's House would tell me to forget about my feelings and move on, but they didn't. I didn't want to forget about my dad and they understood that. Gerard's House showed me that grieving wasn't *wrong*. I learned how not to ignore my feelings but instead how to use them, deal with them, handle them.



**Emily and Issac Garcia**

## A Weekend for Grieving Kids - Camp Rainbow 2006

Every August, Camp Director Suzy Bienvenu, Assistant Director Katrina Koehler and trained volunteers head out to beautiful Camp Stoney near Santa Fe to spend a weekend with children who have had someone in their lives die. Twenty campers from all over the state attended our 2005 camp.

### Let's Hear From Our Campers!

#### Three Interviews by Suzy Bienvenu, Program Director and Camp Director

This is my second year. The camp is really fun and it helps me a lot. I'm really comfortable here. I feel really safe. And I met a lot of friends.

It hurts sometimes, deep inside, and when I talk to counselors, it really helps me. I feel better about it. And I'm not sure when I'm *really* going to feel better, like when I don't need counselors no more, but until I'm ready to stop I want to come back here.

It helps. It really does. Especially when you get to have fun. And you can think about it, but you don't have to. So when you *don't* think about it, you feel a little better so it doesn't hurt so much. And when you *do* think about it, you want to

cry sometimes, or you want to be sad or angry or something like that, and you can.

*11-year-old boy*

Camp Rainbow is for kids that feel sad for people who died in their family, people who are really important that you love a lot. The thing I like about Camp Rainbow is that we get to do all kinds of fun stuff, and we get to light a campfire at night. We get to play all sorts of games, we go hiking, we can swim, and we do all kinds of fun stuff, and Camp Rainbow makes me happy! It helps me to be with other kids who have had someone die.

*10-year-old-boy*

We get to get stuff off our chest, and go swimming and hiking and talk about our feelings. It was great at camp. And it's good because you all have something similar about you. It was a great camp. It was fun!

*10-year-old girl*



### What Camp Rainbow Was Like For Me

By Gene Balicek, Camp Counselor

Being at Camp Rainbow in the Summer of 2005 was a very heartfelt experience. It held for everyone an opportunity to unite with those who have lost loved ones or someone close. It was a time and place where private memories and memories shared with others might heal, along with feelings. It was a comfort to share with those who would understand.

I was amazed, given the focus of Camp Rainbow, to see a range of emotion, freeing up feelings that might otherwise be lost, as the loved ones who died were lost.

As a co-facilitator and counselor for Camp Rainbow, I found surprising and unexpected relief in my own hidden grief through the inspiration of those that I came to help.

### This Newsletter is Dedicated to the Following People

#### In Memory of Andrew Paul Armijo

Donation made by Georgiana Armijo

#### In Memory of Robert Bienvenu

Donation made by Joyce Bienvenu

#### In Memory of Brandon Bow

Donation made by Christi Schackel

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#### In Honor of Jayn Stewart

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#### In Honor of Lynn Zeck

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### Endowment Fund

We are pleased to announce that Gerard's House is establishing an endowment fund, which will be managed by the Santa Fe Community Foundation. We have already received \$5000 towards the \$10,000 required to create the fund, helping to ensure Gerard's House will be here for many years to come. If you can help us meet our goal by the end of this year, call our Executive Director at 505-424-1800, ext. 21.



### Share Your Story

If you or your children have attended groups at Gerard's House and you would like to tell your story for upcoming articles, please contact us at 424-1800.

## Ways You Can Support Gerard's House

Since all our services are free, support from our friends is essential. Here's how you can help!

**Permanent Home** for our children's groups. You can donate an entire house! or contribute toward a permanent Santa Fe home.

**Volunteer** as a grief support group facilitator or help with fundraising and community outreach. See the back of this newsletter for facilitator training. Call us for more information.

**Make a donation in honor of someone or in memory** of a person who has died. (See the gold slip in this newsletter.)

**Sponsor a child** for one year for \$1000; for six months, \$500; for one month, \$100. (See gold slip.)

**Sponsor a group** for a month for \$2,000.

**Sponsor a child at Camp Rainbow** for \$250.

**Pick up an Albertsons Community Partners Card.** Albertsons will make a donation to Gerard's House every time you shop. (See the back page of this newsletter.)

**Other contributions.** We welcome financial and in-kind donations. Our wish list includes a digital camera, video camera, art and craft supplies, snacks and drinks, books on death and grieving, portable TV/VCR, DVD player, DVD writer, and office supplies.

**Endowment Fund.** Your gift will have a long-term impact toward our financial sustainability.

**All donations are greatly appreciated. No contribution is too small!**

## Thank You to All Our Supporters!

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Jackalope	Walgreens
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**Thank you to all our volunteers. We couldn't do it without you!**

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Ross Chaney	Karma Lama	Paige Thompson
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**Special Thanks**

Cathy Apodaca, Kristine Baker, Sarah Bienvenu, Ross Chaney, Arlene Einwalter, Jim Ellegood, Emily & Isaac Garcia, Anita Hitts, Anna and Sarah Isenberg, Dana Knee, Norm Koppel, Cathy Lamoreux, Joe Meyers, Ernest Sanchez, Terese Sanchez, Nick Schoenfeld, Judith Shotwell, Devon Skeele, Susan Tungate, Ella, Carlos, John, Facundo, and Michelle at Camp Stoney, and all the volunteers for the Common Bond Breakfast, Hope for the Holidays, and the Looney Tunes Cartoon Festival.

**Camp Rainbow Counselors**

Gene Balicek, Ross Chaney, Anthony Chavez, Ruth DeLay, Diane Fessenden, Steffie Grow, Doris Haller, Diana Heil, Hunter Krestan, Lisa Martin, Laura Michaels, Kevin Myers, Terese Sanchez, Nick Schoenfeld and Matt Vrablik



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**Gerard's House  
PO Box 28693  
Santa Fe, NM 87592  
Phone: 505-424-1800  
Fax: 505-424-7547  
www.gerardshouse.org**

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A Safe Place for Grieving Children,  
Teens and Families



**Gerard's House Staff**

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**Program Director**

Valerie Carpenter, MA, LMHC

**Program Coordinator**

Katrina Koehler

**Office Manager**

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**ALBERTSONS COMMUNITY PARTNERS PROGRAM**

An easy way to support Gerard's House is to get an Albertsons Community Partners card and have the cashier scan it every time you shop at their stores. Gerard's House receives a percentage of each sale. To obtain a card, call Katrina at 424-1800.

**FACILITATOR TRAINING**

Facilitator trainings are offered twice a year to teach volunteers how to companion children, teens, and adults on their journey of grief. The four-day training takes place over two weekends. Volunteer facilitators then meet once a week with a particular age group. No prior training or experience is required.

**Dates for our next training: November 18-19 & December 2-3, 2006**

**2006 Training dates to be announced**

Participants can receive 23 CEUs for Counselors & Therapists, 27 CEUs for social workers.

**Please call Katrina at 424-1800 if you are interested.**