Dear Editor:

A child’s grief process is different from an adult’s. A child’s grief experience is not only shaped by his or her loss but also by the complex reactions of the adults in their life. Grieving youth crave normalcy and the opportunity to share and connect with peers or others who know what they are going through. It is essential for them to do this without judgment or fear of triggering sadness in their parents, other family members, or caregivers. Camp Blue Skies provides such an environment.

Camp Blue Skies is a week-long day program for children and teens ages 7 to 17 who have experienced the death of a loved one. The camp provides a supportive and understanding venue for children to connect with others who have also experienced loss. Grief counselors give tools to the children to help them address grief through a series of fun and engaging activities. Each day provides a new focus, location, and approach to working through grief. Since grief occurs in a familial context, caregivers are invited to attend two sessions: a family dinner night held prior to the beginning of camp and a remembrance ceremony on the final day.

The first day of camp begins with fun games and activities to help build connections between campers. By day’s end, campers have become comfortable with everyone and their initial anxiety and uncertainty have been replaced with smiles.

The second day involves a horse farm. Trainers and licensed counselors provide guidance and basic instruction as campers are assigned specific tasks involving horses. Through connecting with the horses, any fear and anxiety within each child is replaced with confidence, comfort, and trust. Campers learn that they must engage with their horse based on the animal’s needs or reactions. For example, trust is established when they are asked to lead a horse without a bridle and allows the child to practice being attuned to others and communicate with them nonverbally. In another exercise, the arena is set up with various stations that represent an environment the child often spends time in, such as home or school. Campers are asked to walk the horse through their day, visiting the various stations, and describing what obstacles they encounter as they guide their horse through them. This can lead to insight into daily struggles or triggers experienced by the camper.

The third day of camp takes place at a local park. Nature is incorporated into activities, including trail walks, yoga, scavenger hunts, drumming, and journaling. Skills and activities focus on coping mechanisms as well as the expression and experience of feelings. The remaining days of camp are spent at another farm that provides horseback riding, yoga, physical activities, and art interventions, with continued guidance and support by counselors.

Families are invited to be a part of the final day of camp. A theater troupe transforms personal stories, as told by the family, by reenacting them on the spot. A particular memory comes to mind. Rose, age 9, and Lily, age 7 (names have been changed), got to watch the funny yet touching story of how their father proposed to their recently deceased mother. According to the story, their father planned to kneel on a pillow during the proposal because of an injured knee, but each time he put the pillow on the floor she would pick it up and place it back on the couch. Finally, he grabbed her by the arms and said, “I’m trying to propose to you!” The reenactment created a wave of emotion as the room erupted in laughter as well as a few tears. At the end of the play, the father brought out the ring to show his daughters. The room was silenced by such a touching moment. The father was able to share this personal and meaningful experience with his children who had never heard the story before. This special evening helps teach children and their families that they are not alone in their grief, and that it is important to cry, to laugh, and to remember together.

Camp closes with the lighting of a floating lantern, a quiet but powerful reminder that the journey may have just started, but now they can cope as a family, wherever the journey takes them.

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