

Grief camp helps y connect with other

Within a six week period, Erin Matthews, now 11, experienced the death of a beloved grandmother, followed by the death of a great-uncle. Her mother, Mary Matthews, said they were the first significant losses Erin had experienced.

"I used to play Yahtzee with my grandma, and do her hair," Erin said.

Erin had grown up driving three hours to visit her maternal grandmother and extended family regularly, watching her grandma whiz to completion on crossword puzzles and enjoying the comforting flavor of grandma's chicken noodle soup.

Following her grandmother's death, Erin became involved regularly at the Coping Kids program at the PATHways Center for Grief & Loss in Mount Joy, a weekly series that engages children and teens in groups of the same age with a variety of activities to help them learn to cope with their loss.

Erin was also encouraged to attend Camp Chimaqua, a weekend in June every year where kids ages 6-12 spend time having fun and supporting each other.

"My neighbor told me about camp; he went the year before and said that there were a lot of activities and it was really fun," Erin said.

Attending Coping Kids, Erin had been learning to process her grief with hands-on activities, from craft projects to talking with grief counselors and other children who have lived through the death of a loved one.

"We heard about the overnight grief camp from the Coping Kids counselors, and I felt very comfortable with it," Mary Matthews said. "Adult buddies are partnered with each child; they picked a good personality match for Erin and everyone at the camp was very welcoming."

Often the buddies have experienced a similar type of

Youngsters deal with loss and

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loss, and they provide constant companionship, support and supervision throughout the weekend. The camp spans two nights in June, this year slated for June 10-12, held at the YMCA's Camp Shand in southern Lebanon County.

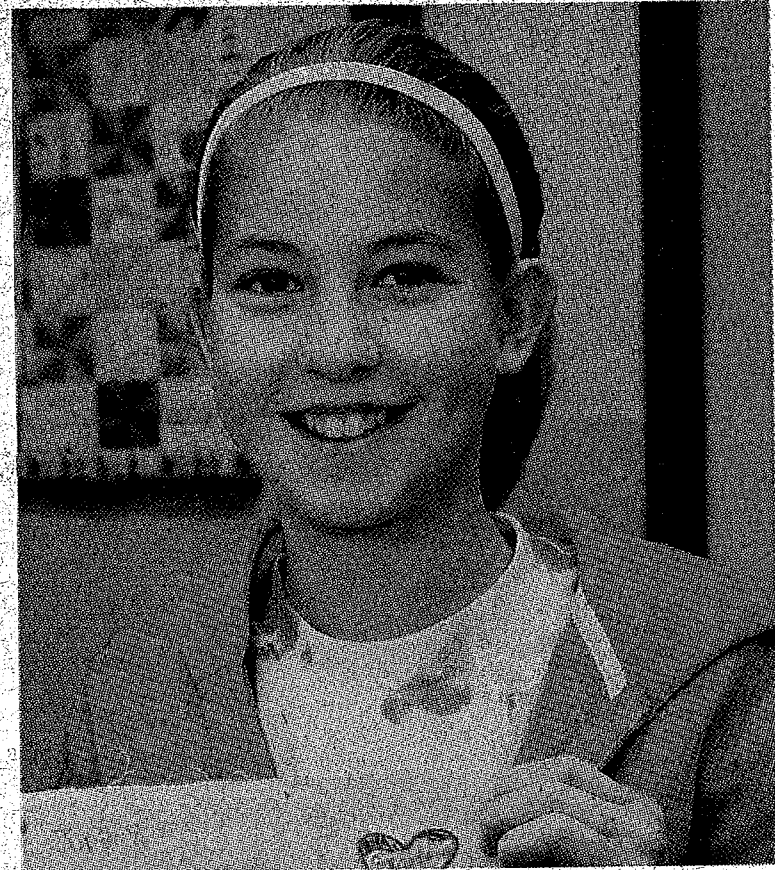
"It helped to talk to people about [my grandmother's death]; I knew I wasn't the only one," Erin said.

Camp Chimaqua isn't just about sadness, grief and loss, says Sonya Hershey-Velasco, grief counselor for the program. It also involves activities such as outdoor games, arts and crafts and making s'mores.

"My favorite part was the ropes course," Erin said. "And the nights at the camp fires, where we sat and talked."

Children learn ways to commemorate their loved ones such as making quilt squares in memory of the deceased loved ones, Hershey-Velasco says.

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Erin Matthews

Grief camp

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A particularly memorable event involves campers creating sailboats that they decorate in memory of loved ones and sail on the lake with lit candles.

"It reminds us that although our loved ones are no longer with us, they always remain in our hearts," Hershey-Velasco said.

The combination of relationship building with other children, having an adult buddy for support all weekend long and the interesting activities planned draws children from all over south central Pennsylvania to the camp each year.

"We could really see the change. Six weeks later when we found out Erin's great-uncle had died as well, she was already equipped to face the news and work through it. She had learned that it's okay to talk about how she feels," Mary said.

For a family that has had to spend months adjusting to these

significant losses, the PATHways Center resources have been immensely helpful for Erin and her family.

"When I first looked into Coping Kids [and Camp Chimaqua], I thought these programs would actually be too hard for her. Was I ever wrong — this was the best thing ever for her. Without the coping skills she learned, these losses would have been even harder for her," Mary said.

For information on Camp Chimaqua, please contact the PATHways Center for Grief & Loss at (717) 391-2413. Application deadline is May 20, 2011.

Because of the generous support provided by the Hospice Circle of Friends there is no charge for camp.

A registration fee of \$25 per child is requested, but financial assistance is available.