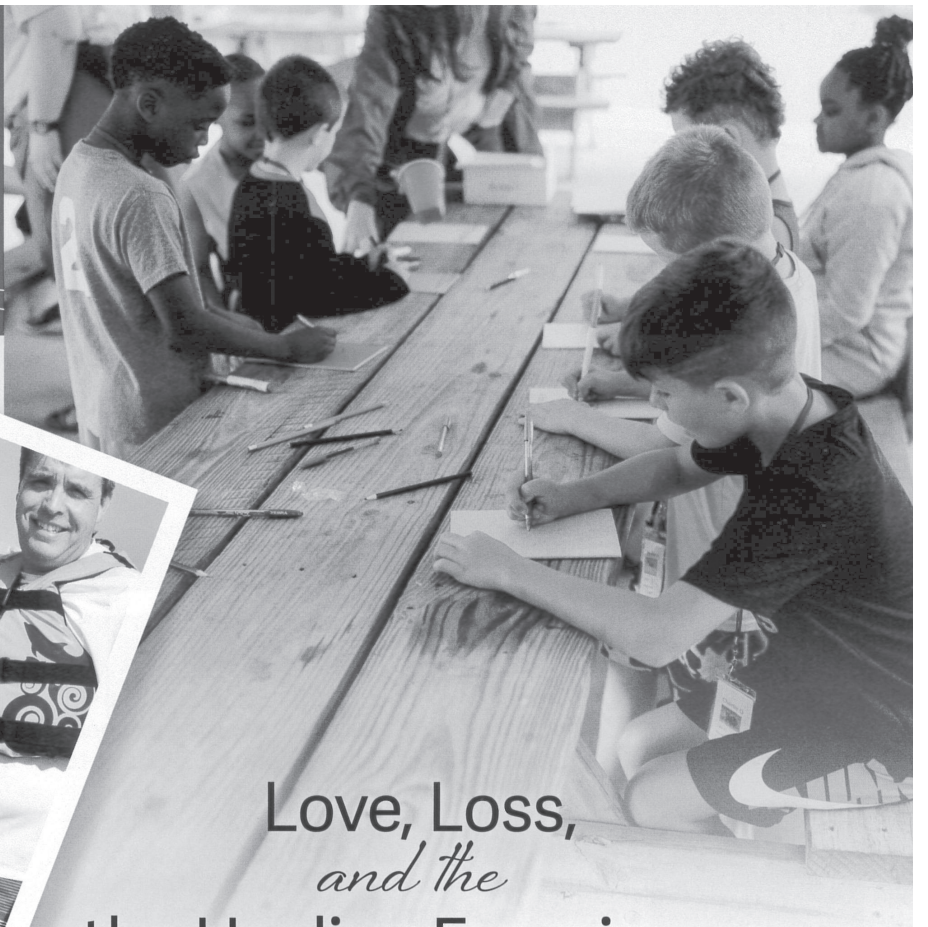


Circles of Care

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Charlie with his mom and dad



Love, Loss, *and the* the Healing Experience of Camp Courage

by Christina O'Leary

My husband Michael was 41 when he was told he had cancer, and he lived just nine weeks after his diagnosis. Roughly two weeks prior to his passing, when we were told nothing could be done for him, I made arrangements to bring him home from the hospital and we called Harbor Hospice. Our hospice nurse was incredible, really amazing. She made it possible for Michael to pass away peacefully in the comfort of home with his family by his side.

Our son Charlie was only eight when Michael died. That's a huge loss for a child to comprehend. I tried to help Charlie understand that God needed his dad more than we did.

A girlfriend of mine who is a pediatric physician's assistant in Fremont told me about Camp Courage, so I decided to do a little research on it. I wasn't sure how well either Charlie or I would do being away from each other for a few days, but I reassured Charlie that everything would be okay, and off he went.

I worried about him.

But when I picked up Charlie from camp, he was smiling! He was happy, and he said he wanted to go to camp again! For him to be able to sit with other kiddos who have gone through the loss of someone they loved helped Charlie see that death happens, and death is normal. Before he went to camp, he felt that losing his dad was something that had never happened to anyone else. He always had a lot of "why" questions. Going to Camp Courage gave him a different perspective—he knew he was not alone.

As parents, we don't always think about how death is going to affect a child. I learned a lot walking with Charlie through the months after Michael's passing. When a child loses a parent to death, they can form an anxious personality and completely attach to the other parent, fearful that they will lose that person, too. Sending Charlie to Camp

Courage showed him that it was okay if we weren't together 24 hours a day.

Those days with Charlie away at camp helped me, too. When you're taking care of a sick or dying family member, respite is so important. But I did not get a break. Michael wanted me by him 24 hours a day. After Michael died, it was just Charlie and me. I was constantly moving and never really had time to grieve. Having Charlie gone for a few days at camp gave me time to get my thoughts together and to breathe again. It gave me time to grieve, and it made me stronger. When Charlie came home from camp, I knew we were both going to be okay.

It's wonderful that Camp Courage is free, so parents don't have to worry about the cost. As a newly-single parent, I was trying to figure out my resources after Michael died. Knowing I didn't have to pay for Charlie to attend took a lot off my shoulders.

I have learned that going through the grieving process takes a lot of grace and patience between a parent and child. If the child wants to talk, we need to let them talk and let them work through their thoughts. Counseling is essential. Because Charlie was a little boy, he worked with a "play therapist." These counselors are skilled at using activities and toys to help young children express their loss and share their feelings when words don't always work for them.

Charlie and I are moving to South Dakota soon to live near Michael's parents. Charlie is their only grandchild, and I want them to be able to experience watching him grow up. I know life goes on, and it will be nice to make new memories. I hope to get involved with grief support in our new city, too. I'd like to be able to help other parents who are going through what I went through.

I am so grateful to Harbor Hospice for all that they do.



2024 Camp Courage campers and volunteers