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New Pittsburgh summer camp joins others that befriend grieving children

By Rachel Weaver

This summer, Pittsburgh will become the newest home to a camp based on the idea that no child should grieve alone.

Good Samaritan Hospice in Wexford will join the nonprofit Moyer Foundation, founded by Major League Baseball pitcher and World Series champion Jamie Moyer and his wife, Karen, to establish Camp Erin Pittsburgh. The new camp is for older teenagers who have experienced the death of a loved one.

"Through the tears, they find hope, and hope is a beautiful thing," Karen Moyer said.

Camp Erin is named after Erin Metcalf, a 17-year-old friend of the Moyers, who died in 2000. It is a free weekend that combines traditional camping activities with grief education and emotional support.

Bereavement experts and trained volunteers will staff the camp, to be held at YMCA Camp Kon-O-Kwee Spencer in Fombell, Beaver County.

In past years, Good Samaritan Hospice, a mission of Concordia Lutheran Ministries, has offered Camp Good SAM for children ages 6 to 17. With its partnership with The Moyer Foundation, more children can be reached, and the camps will be able to focus their services. Camp Good SAM will assist children ages 6 to 12, and Camp Erin, those ages 13 to 17.

The expansion of Camp Erin to Pittsburgh is part of The Moyer Foundation's plans to expand nationwide to include one camp in every city with an MLB team. Now there are more than 40 camps in over 25 states and one in Canada.

"We're really excited to come to Pittsburgh," said Moyer.

Encouraging expression is a goal of the program. During camp, children write journal entries, interact with therapy dogs and participate in exercises designed to build trust.

In the South Hills, Family Hospice and Palliative Care in Mt. Lebanon also holds a free one-day program called Camp Healing Hearts each year for grieving children ages 6 to 12.

"There's not a whole lot out there to support kids with emotional needs of this nature," said **David Weirzchowski**, the hospice's spiritual care specialist. "We give them tools for how to handle things -- anger, frustration, sadness, what to do when they're just missing their loved one and feel sad."

Children participate in music therapy, expressive art workshops and interact with therapy dogs. They also beat a piñata, called the grief chest, which they paint with images representing their feelings.

"We teach good ways to get their feelings out," said **Allison Holst**, bereavement specialist at Family Hospice. "We teach it's not OK to hurt someone or destroy things."

She suggests children don't participate in the camp if the loss is not at least at six weeks behind them. Their grief is too fresh.

"Kids do get a little sad and need to withdraw for a moment," Holst said. "We foster that. We tell them it's OK to feel sad. We ask what they're thinking about right now. We accept all expressions."

Get in on fun

- Camp Erin will be held June 16-18 at Camp Kon-O-Kwee Spencer in Fombell, Beaver County.

Registrations will be accepted until early June. For more information, visit www.MoyerFoundation.org.

- For more information on **Camp Healing Hearts**, call 412-572-8829. Camp will be held on June 11 at The Center for Compassionate Care in Mt. Lebanon and on June 25 at Gentle Shepherd Church of the Nazarene in Hermitage. The camp accepts up to 25 children.