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WILDFLOWER CAMP FOUNDATION

Helping grieving children heal

By Cathy Brauner
cbrauner@wickedlocal.com

It was Aug. 17, 2015 and Dale Calverley, a boisterous, outgoing man from Wayland, who enjoyed volunteering as a Shriners Hospital clown, was on vacation in the Adirondacks with his wife Jen and their three kids. The family stopped to go swimming at



the base of Buttermilk Falls on the Raquette River, and Dale took 9-year-old Jack into the water on his back. The two were inseparable -- constant companions, Jen says.

It was their last day together as a family. Dale

was discovered floating face down in the water and although bystanders got him out of the water, it was too late -- he had drowned. Jack was pulled to safety.

It's one of those scenes that briefly grabs the newspaper headlines, then fades from vivid color to sepia as time moves on. But not for the family, which must deal not only with the immediate

trauma of the loss, but with the day-to-day struggles, including loss of income. Jen thought they had life insurance -- they didn't. She tried to return to her job as an artistic director for Supercuts -- a job that took her out on the road frequently, with Dale holding down the fort at

About Building Community

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CAMP

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found that to be unworkable. Her dad and best friend helped out, but “they needed me,” said Jen of Abigail, then 14, Morgan, 12, and Jack.

So they do the best they can to survive financially, and rely on their friends and faith to get them through the emotional turmoil. Wayland is a great community, she said. “I feel well supported.”

Like Dale, Jen is outgoing. But she points out that there are people out there who are very introverted and don’t do well making connections, “and they need to be cared for.”

“Our culture doesn’t take care of widows and widowers and their children well,” she said.

She discovered Jeff’s Place in Framingham, which offers comprehensive bereavement support services for children and families, and was alerted to a Wellesley-based organization called the Wildflower Camp Foundation by a woman from her church who, along with her husband, is a big supporter of the nonprofit.

Wildflower does not run camps. Instead, it makes it possible for children who are grieving to get away and have some carefree time during the summer. Its founder and president is former Wellesley resident Cyndi Jones, now of Weston, who herself was left to raise three young children alone when her husband died of a heart attack in 1989. Fifteen years later, when she remarried, she asked that any wedding gifts take the form of contributions to start the foundation.

As the Calverley children get older, college is looming. Fortunately, Wildflower “is expanding the breadth of our services to include help with the transition from high school to college since this is a very demanding process for all families, but certainly for single parent families,” Jones said.

It’s a welcome development for Jen Calverley. “I have every ounce of everything on my shoulders,” she said. “I want help.”

In Jen’s case, she was initially overwhelmed by even the thought of having to fill out forms for the camps so soon after her husband’s death. “I didn’t know which end was up, and [Wildflower] made sure the paperwork got done.”

Through the foundation, the three Calverley kids have been able to go to the camps of their choice, despite the financial stresses at home. The two younger children are going to a



From left, Abigail, 16, Morgan, 14, and Jack, 9, with their mom Jen when the younger children were dropped off at camp in New Hampshire this year. Abigail will be going to a camp in Colorado. [COURTESY PHOTO]



Dale Calverley “loved his kids immensely,” said Jen Calverley. “He would go to everywhere with them.” [COURTESY PHOTO]

Christian camp in New Hampshire where a lot of kids from their church go, and Abigail will go to a camp in Colorado, suggested by the Wildflower liaison.

Last year when the kids were away at camp, Jen found herself getting depressed. This year, she said, she is going to “seize the day” by taking a cross-country driving trip with a friend. She is also taking a course at a seminary in the fall, doing some public speaking — something that used to terrify her in college — and is starting to write a book.

The children, she said, are “healing slowly but surely...every kid processes grief differently.” It’s been challenging for them to keep their grades up. “Concentration isn’t easy for a kid who has lost a parent.” It’s made tougher by the fact that she is still grieving herself, but has to get out of bed in the morning and keep moving for the kids’ sake.

The kids can now joke about Dale and his quirks, she says. “They talk about him more freely than in the beginning.”

Wildflower Camp Foundation

Founder and president: Cyndi Jones

Established: 2004 in Wellesley. Five children were sent to camp the first year. The 2017 enrollment is 68 campers.

Mission: Nonprofit serving grieving children and families with a unique approach to helping these families rebuild their lives after loss.

Staff: Five part-time dedicated staff, including two program staff, an operations and finance manager, a director of communications and Jones, who donates her time as acting executive director

Budget: Most of the budget goes to the costs of the programs and scholarships. "One of the key strengths of our program model is our ability to create partnerships for the benefit of our families by negotiating for tuition reductions and finding partner agencies that provide additional funding on behalf of our families," Jones said. "As a result, we have been able to more than double our scholarship funds. This year, we are on track to awarding close to \$1.5 million of collaborative funding since our beginning."

Future plans: Because families are engaged with WCF year-round, the foundation is in process of expanding additional supportive services for children and families such as college and financial aid counseling. As they begin to launch for the new "Planning for College" program, they have already identified sources for pro bono college counseling and financial aid guidance.

Foundation's statement: Our growth has been deliberate as we strive to meet the evident need. Wildflower has grown steadily in the size, scope and capacity of our program. During that time, we have provided hundreds of summer camp experiences, often with multiple camps in order to ensure coverage for the entire summer. And we are still growing dramatically.

When a family experiences the devastating loss of a parent, children become at risk for long-term emotional and behavioral problems, altering the trajectory of their formative years and putting their future at risk. Grieving parents face the difficult task of moving forward while helping children to recover. They are at high risk for health issues, accidents and substance abuse. Early intervention is critical to the family's healing to offset the challenges caused by the trauma of parental loss.

By providing the life-changing experience of camp, the Wildflower Camp Foundation has become a key part of a powerful healing process which provides a much-needed respite for the family, positive role models, and a place for children to "feel normal" without the reminder of loss. Children begin to rebuild their lives based on new learning, increased self-esteem and resilience and the creation of new memories. Through a supportive camp environment, they rekindle their spirit, creativity and talents.

These special times for grieving children also provide a much-needed respite for the parent, including time to care for themselves while stepping away from the often-overwhelming pace of life and the responsibilities of caring for children while grieving. Wildflower also provides year round support to these families through their family liaison program which matches professional volunteers with human services background with Wildflower families.

Our original program support through our family liaison team has grown to our present team of 14 professionals who work directly with our parents helping to guide them through the often-overwhelming process of choosing camps that are the right fit for the children's interests and the needs of the entire family. Family liaisons also lend a listening ear, providing emotional and logistical support to the surviving parent as well as referrals to grief programs, counseling and other resources as needed.

Our services are greatly needed. We had a waitlist of families this year who have requested support who we were unable to serve. We believe that all grieving children deserve the best chance to regain the opportunities of life that may be taken from them through the untimely and tragic loss of their parent. We want to welcome additional families with open arms, ready to help them rebuild their lives after loss.