

My Good Mourning Place Helps Children Cope With Loss

LAUREN ROACH
CATHOLIC HERALD STAFF

Artwork decorates the window sills. Paint supplies are piled in the open storage cabinet, spilling out of the small square cubicles at My Good Mourning Place.

Bob Mansell sits at the end of a mint green work table occupying most of the room. An hour later, adult volunteers and children participants will join him, as they do every Tuesday evening.

During the weekly sessions, the bereavement center becomes a safe space for children and teens who are grieving the loss of a loved one. The program is free and has been running out of a house operated by the School Sisters of St. Francis for 17 years.

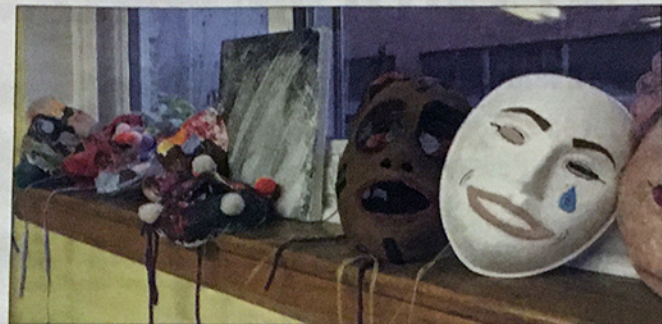
As one of the group facilitators for My Good Mourning Place, Mansell works with children who are grieving and aids volunteers who come to speak with and accompany those who are dealing with loss.

Professionally and personally, grief and loss are not unfamiliar territory for Mansell, a hospice nurse who grew up in orphanages in Philadelphia. A hospice nurse who accompanied his dying brother during the final days of his life.

Sometimes during the Tuesday night sessions, Mansell feels his own grief and cries. For the children burdened with handling the death of a loved one, this can be liberating — especially for the young boys who come and may not have seen an adult man cry before.

"They can tell that I am getting in touch with that emotion and so can they, whether they verbalize it or not, and express it," Mansell said.

While the simplicity of presence is something the adult volunteers offer, the way they model their own grief and



▲ On Tuesday evenings, children complete art projects, pictured here, as part of the bereavement ministry program offered at My Good Mourning Place.



emotions surrounding loss is just as crucial.

Sr. Connie Taylor, a registered nurse with a master's degree in grief counseling, explained that helping children understand the grieving process is fundamental to My Good Mourning Place.

"Kids have a tendency to want to protect the surviving parent," she said. "They don't want to make them cry, and so they tend to hold back and sometimes they feel guilty for laughing."

At My Good Mourning Place, the facilitators and volunteers help the children understand that laughter is not disrespectful, and expressing sadness is okay.

"Life has to go on. Of course, it's going to be different and you will always remember, but ideally the pain lessens and memories become more important, more happy things, and it's not their fault the person died," Sr. Taylor said.

Mansell added, "Children tend to be the silent sufferers. As an adult, our emotions are no different than a child's. It's just that as adults, we have more barriers that we put in the way that prevent ourselves from expressing our emotions, and children wear their emotions on their sleeve."

Adults have more filters, but children are raw and genuine in their grief; for them, "It is what it is, and there are none of those filters. And that has been refreshing for me," said Mansell.

During the Tuesday evening program, the children, their family members who accompany them and the volunteers first share a hot meal. After, the group splits into two groups both moderated by facilitators and staffed by volunteers: the children participate in an activity and the adults participate in a discussion.

The activity, often involving art, is a way for the children to express their thoughts and feelings surrounding loss, and an opportunity to talk with the volunteers around the table if they want.

At My Good Mourning Place, "they feel safe. It's a place to be themselves," Mansell said.

One girl in particular comes to mind when Mansell thinks about children impacted by the program. "She's just a whole different person," he said.

By creating a space for children to wrestle with their experience of loss and learn to communicate what they are feeling, the children are transformed — and so are the adults who volunteer and facilitate.

"Once you've experienced these kids and allowed them to be your teachers," Sr. Taylor said, "your life will never be the same."

And it's not always gloom and tears, Mansell described as he shared anecdotes of making paper footballs and throwing them around the room with some of the children.

"There is quite a bit of laughter that happens around the table, and that is important for us to let them know, too, that grief isn't always about sadness," Mansell said.

"It's anger, it's happiness, it's being scared, it's all of those things. It's just being a human being."