

# Heart Strings

SPRING 2015

A Newsletter to the Community from The Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas

## Free to Grieve

"It was a typical Monday morning in almost every respect," Deb remembers. "But it would be the last normal morning I ever had." This is how Deb Rich begins recalling the morning of November 5, 2012, when her husband, Chip, died by suicide.

Deb and Chip's two daughters said goodbye to their dad and loaded up the car for school. "Then I went to say goodbye to Chip, and noticed that he had cut himself shaving." Deb explained that he hated having a nick on his chin when he had to appear before a pool of potential jurors.

Since 2002, Chip had worked for the Bexar County District Attorney's office and most recently was named chief of the DWI Task Force. "He enjoyed his work immensely," Deb acknowledged. "But the onslaught of drunk driving cases in San Antonio certainly overwhelmed him at times."

"I wished him luck, gave him three quick kisses goodbye and told him I loved him," Deb added. "He said that he loved me and told me to drive safely. I went to work."

Chip took his own life that day in their home.

"He had planned everything fairly meticulously in order to ensure that the girls and I would not be the ones to find him." With support from her close family and friends, Deb was able to take care of the painful details of the obituary and funeral service.

"Our 20th wedding anniversary would've been a few weeks ago," Deb shared with tears in her eyes. "It was an amazing partnership; he was my best friend and most favorite person on this earth."

Within a few days Deb returned to work as a middle school English and Literature



Chip and Deb Rich with their two daughters.

*"...traumatic death is a great equalizer, and it quickly levels the playing field."*

teacher. "No fewer than three people mentioned the Children's Bereavement Center to me and encouraged me to contact them. I did, and shortly thereafter my daughters and I began attending group sessions."

"If I told you I looked forward to attending, I would be lying." Remembering her first meeting Deb continued, "I didn't talk at all other than to mention the loved one I had lost and the date of his death. Those who know me well find it shocking that I could sit in silence for that long. Honestly, I was scared to death. And I was very, very angry."

Deb shared how much pain she was in and the thought of sitting with a room full of strangers and listening to their brokenness and struggle was terrifying. Would she be like them... still broken after years had passed?

"I thought losing a spouse or loved one to suicide was the only thing I had in common with any of them, and it was, in many cases. But traumatic death is a great equalizer, and it quickly levels the playing field. Some of my colleagues in that room became my closest

confidantes—like Billy, whose colorful tattoos and fondness for skull jewelry would have frightened me in any other venue. And our amazing facilitators," she smiled, "like Allison—with whom I connected right away because she saw right through my tough as nails exterior."

People in everyday life are used to offering solutions to their friends' and family's problems, but death cannot be fixed; therefore, people usually do not have the words to say and unfortunately as a result, many avoid the bereaved. "Grieving people often feel indescribable isolation," Deb explained.

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To learn how The Children's Bereavement Center is involved in helping to prevent suicide see page 4.

To foster healing for grieving youth, their families and the community through peer support programs, counseling, training, education and outreach.



Children's Bereavement Center  
OF SOUTH TEXAS



## Staff Spotlight: Leslie Wood, LCSW Outreach Coordinator

We are thrilled to introduce Leslie Wood, LCSW, as the new Outreach Coordinator for the Center. You may see her in the community conducting presentations and trainings for schools and other organizations on the effects of grief in children. Leslie received her Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Studies from Texas Tech University and her Masters Degree of Social Work from Our Lady of the Lake University. Leslie possesses more than 15 years of experience in the field of child and adolescent therapy as well as having been an adjunct faculty member at various local colleges and universities. Her first introduction to the power of grief counseling and peer support groups was through her own personal experience five years ago. Leslie lost her husband, Jeff, suddenly to undiagnosed leukemia/lymphoma. She and her daughters found the Center to be an invaluable source of encouragement and support. Leslie shares, "There are no words for my appreciation and gratitude for the Children's



Bereavement Center in supporting my girls during such a difficult time. I am excited to represent this organization. As someone who has had the benefit of first-hand experience in services the Center provides, I hope to be a resource for other families who find themselves in a similar situation." Leslie has three daughters: Emma (15), Allie (12), and Meredith (7), who keep her very busy when she's not at the Center. Leslie is honored to be representing the Children's Bereavement Center and is eager to build partnerships in our community through education, training and reaching out to those in need. If you would like to connect with Leslie, please email her at [lwood@cbcbst.org](mailto:lwood@cbcbst.org).

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

# National Charity League

National Charity League is certainly staying true to their mission of helping change lives. These mothers and daughters gather at the Center each and every week to serve dinner to our families before they participate in support groups. They have contributed in other capacities such as decorating for holidays, bringing supplies from our wish list and even assembling notebooks for peer group facilitators. Thank you National Charity League for your continued support!

If you would like to volunteer at the Center, please contact Julia Anderson at [janderson@cbcbst.org](mailto:janderson@cbcbst.org) or visit our website [www.cbcbst.org](http://www.cbcbst.org).



Ricardo & Rachel Reyna



Michele Cadwallader, Alethea Bugg & Nel Belt



Gala Chair Mallory Ahl & her husband Stephen Ahl



Elizabeth Marceau, Emily Catalani & Nicole Johnson



## 14th ANNUAL HEARTS IN HARMONY GALA

The fourteenth annual Hearts in Harmony Gala was a memorable evening at the San Antonio Country Club. Chair Mallory Ahl led a phenomenal group of dedicated volunteers and raised over \$212,000 to support grieving children in our community. Deb Rich delivered a heartfelt and compelling message about the Center's impact on her and her daughters' lives after the unexpected death of her husband Chip. Advisory Board member and the evening's emcee, Laura Nell Burton, introduced the dynamic F. Michael Wood Family who was honored for their years of leadership on various boards, as donors, and as support group facilitators and volunteers. We would like to thank each and every donor and volunteer for making this successful evening possible. Because of this support, more than 1,500 individuals will receive the specialized grief services they desperately need in the coming year.



Laura Nell Burton is on the Advisory Board and served as the evening's emcee.

## The F. Michael Wood Family — 14th Annual Hearts in Harmony Gala Honoree



Mike, Michael, Elizabeth and Barbara - 1979

An untimely death left a wife without a husband and two children without their dad. The twin-engine turboprop charter plane that was carrying a group of friends headed home from a fishing trip crashed killing all seven people on board, including the President of Pioneer Flour Mills, F. Michael Wood, Sr.

This type of scenario is all too common and is repeatedly heard within the walls of the Center. Children are sadly left to cope without a parent, only the manner in which their loved one died is slightly varied.

Tragedy can do many things to a person. Many never recover. Some spiral out of control. Others seek opportunities to turn tragedy into triumph, and darkness into hope for another family. The story of F. Michael Wood's family is one such story of triumph.

After moving back to San Antonio, F. Michael Wood, Jr. stumbled upon the Children's Bereavement Center. After learning the mission of the Center, he knew he could make a difference. Soon he joined the Governing Board of Directors and eventually became Chairman, providing leadership and helping the organization become financially sustainable. Even after rotating off the Governing Board, he and his wife Jodi accepted roles as Co-Chairmen of the Advisory Board,

continuing to support the Center in many capacities. "My goal is if something ever happens to me, our kids would have a place to go where people understand."

*"My goal is if something ever happens to me, our kids would have a place to go where people understand."*

Mike was only seven when his dad died. Cherished memories of his dad are filled with hunting and fishing adventures. "It's so important to Jodi and me, that we do everything with our kids." Mike said frankly, "We want them to have memories if something happens to us."

"I feel like we got lucky," Mike shared, "but it was only because of the brute force of our mother. She was very involved, but not everyone is so fortunate. I don't want others depending on chance." Mike went on to explain that they also had the tremendous involvement of their grandparents. "We had such a strong support system, but when you're a kid, the best support system is being around your peers that can relate at your level."

This is where the Children's Bereavement Center comes in. Children are able to meet other kids who have had similar death loss experiences and are at varying stages of their healing journey. In the beginning,

children come here and get support and encouragement from other children. Eventually as healing begins, these children are able to give support.

The Children's Bereavement Center is a cause where the entire Wood Family has found their niche. Mike's mother Barbara became a generous supporter and now serves on the Advisory Board. His sister Elizabeth, who was only four years old when their dad died, joined the elite group of volunteer support group facilitators for the little hearts group, ages 3-5, and the sudden death support group. She also co-chaired underwriting for the gala for two years, the largest fundraiser for the Center.

F. Michael Wood's parents captured their only son's life in a biography in which they so eloquently stated for Michael and Elizabeth, "His tragic death ended his life on earth but will never end the legacy of love, kindness, and success he left for the two of you." We would agree that F. Michael Wood's legacy has certainly lived on in the thousands of families who have benefited from his family's generosity.



Wes and Elizabeth Bright, Barbara Wood, Mike and Jodi Wood



## Holiday Shop

GRIEVING CHILDREN ARE GIVEN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOP FOR THEIR SURVIVING PARENT

Our 7th Annual Holiday Shop, generously sponsored by Langley & Banack, Inc. and BB&T Bank was a great success. Gifts were available for children to choose something special, wrap it and present it to their surviving parent.

When one parent dies, there is often no one around to help shop and find meaningful gifts for the surviving parent. This event helps to keep the element of surprise, build excitement, and bring renewed holiday spirit to grieving families. In addition to shopping, our children and their families enjoy gift-wrapping, pictures with Santa, cookie decorating and much more holiday fun!



Fun holiday arts and crafts activities.



Helping clients wrap gifts for their surviving parent.

## Sisterhood Soirée

Annual open house event hosted at the Center



Christy Little, Amanda Gordon and Emily McMurray.



Co-chairs Ann Himoff and Stacy Smaistrila

*Join us for lunch!*

Tuesday, April 14, 2015  
11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Please join us for lunch to learn more about the

*Friends of the Children's Bereavement Center*

come meet our staff and current friends who are already helping to make a difference in the lives of the children and families we serve.

**Lunch is on us!**

RSVP to JULIA ANDERSON at [janderson@cbcst.org](mailto:janderson@cbcst.org)



## Seaching for Solutions to the Rise in Suicide

Do you know what the third leading cause of death is for people ages 10 to 24? Suicide.

Each year, about 40,000 people in the United States take their own lives. Marian Sokol, Executive Director of the Children's Bereavement Center along with Helen Loring Dear, President of Porter Loring Mortuaries set out to form a group of individuals dedicated to come up with a solution to this tragic, growing issue. More than 50 representatives gathered and as a result, formed the Alamo Area Teen Suicide Prevention Coalition. Read more about how this coalition was formed on our website [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org).



Jordan Elizabeth Harris died by suicide March 27, 2012 at the age of 22.

## Play Therapy

Play Therapy is a huge part of our approach at the Center to help grieving children. Using play allows children to tell their story in a safe, natural, and comfortable way. Play allows for many forms of expression-artwork may tell a story of loss, pain, or even show a child's hope. The use of play in both our movement and drama suites allow for release of stress, anger, or sadness. By confronting problems in the play therapy setting, children find healthier solutions. Play therapy allows children to change the way they think about, feel toward, and resolve their concerns.

At the Center, it is used in individual counseling and is a big part of our support groups, especially our Little Hearts (ages 3-5) group, where children are often too young to have the words to express what they feel. Although everyone benefits, play therapy is especially appropriate for children ages 3 through 12 years old. Teenagers and adults have also benefited from play techniques and recreational processes. Play therapy is a good healing technique that helps individuals learn to experience and express emotion in a healthy way, as well as learn new social skills and ways to strengthen the bond of a family.



The Center's support groups would not be complete without our volunteers who help facilitate grief support groups for our families. For more information on how to become a group facilitator, please visit our website at [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org) or contact Julia Anderson at [janderson@cbcst.org](mailto:janderson@cbcst.org).

# Art with a Heart



### Springtime Means it's Fiesta Time!

Get your very own 2015 Fiesta Medal for a \$5 donation. Order online at [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org) or email [fvelten@cbcst.org](mailto:fvelten@cbcst.org) for more information.

Guests were invited into our "Home with a Heart" for the much anticipated unveiling of our 2015 Fiesta Medal. Each attendee received their very own to wear during the beloved spring festival held each year in San Antonio. Each detail of the medal was crafted with deep meaning as artist Enedina explained the process behind each color and placement. "White represents the purity and innocence of the children who have lost a loved one so young." She also explained

a solid gold butterfly was placed in the center of the medal to represent what the Children's Bereavement Center is for families. "The Center is solid and the 'center' of each child's healing journey".

**For more information on Enedina Vasquez, visit her website at [www.eneart.com](http://www.eneart.com)**



Mary Alice Cisneros, Enedina Vasquez and Richard Perez

### Healing through Glass Blowing

Close friends of the Center were given the unique opportunity to see artist Gini Garcia and her talented staff from Garcia Art Glass, Inc. demonstrate a glass blowing and firing of a large butterfly in memory of Jasmine Garcia. Gini spoke on the topic of art and healing and how glass blowing helped her heal. Just as the Center uses shards of broken glass for glass art therapy, glass blowing begins the same way. Gini explains, "The broken pieces represent the brokenness of ourselves after we experience a death loss." Those pieces are exposed to heat and are altered into something beautiful, just as the difficulties experienced after a death loss can transform each of us.



Gini Garcia



Jasmine Garcia is pictured with the one-of-a-kind butterfly that was made in her memory and donated to the Center's gala auction.



**CHILDREN'S BEREAVEMENT  
CENTER OF SOUTH TEXAS**

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[www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org)

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The Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas and its programs are supported solely through the contributions of participating families, individuals, corporations, foundations, religious institutions and the community. We receive no state or federal funding. Donations are tax-deductible to the limit established by the IRS.

We are a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

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Free to Grieve

*“When my girls and I came to the Center, the sense of isolation began to dissipate.”*

“We aren’t sure how we should act. Survivors of suicide in particular unwittingly make other people feel terribly awkward.”

“When my girls and I came to the Center, the sense of isolation began to dissipate,” Deb revealed. “Everyone we met had experienced the same type of loss we had endured, so the pressure to behave a certain way, to say or not say certain things, or to ‘grieve the right way’ all disappeared. Coming to group meant we were free to authentically engage with those who shared our grief. It sounds simple, but it really isn’t. Having permission to express the anger and confusion we all felt—but could not share with our families, friends or acquaintances—was an integral part of our healing. Saying what we felt, and feeling heard by people who can honestly say ‘I understand’—gave us support in a way no other counseling could have.”

People who attend peer support groups at the Center are all at different points in their healing journey. Some have been coming for years, while others are just learning what it’s like to experience life without their loved one.

Deb explained how the girls started talking about the new people who were trying to make sense of the chaos this loss had brought. “I clearly recall the moment I realized my purpose in attending the adult group—I needed to be there to help another shocked, young widow who never imagined she would face a future without her husband and partner, and who is just trying to get through the day. I met her not long after, and I saw myself in her immediately.” Deb revealed, “Just like my girls, I started to appreciate how far I had come, and I discovered I could be an instrument of healing for someone I might never have otherwise met. And that’s what the Bereavement Center does. It connects people who desperately



Deb with her two girls, Ellie and Kate

*“I never imagined that my family would need the services of the Center, but now I cannot imagine coping without them.”*

need to know they aren’t the only ones. There is help and things will someday be okay.”

“I’m so proud to say my family has arrived at someday. We are better than okay,” Deb proclaimed. “We are thriving, living and celebrating. We cry sometimes, and still miss Chip in a way that is impossible to describe. But we talk about him with warmth on our faces and in our hearts, not with sadness or bitterness that he is not here. The Bereavement Center helped us create this new normal life without Chip, and I am so grateful. You see, families like mine means something different now. I can’t claim that my family is still untouched by tragedy or loss—but I can claim that we are stronger for having endured the sudden loss of my husband. We are not ‘over it’—and we never will be. But we have rebuilt ourselves and healed. We embrace the depth of our grief as a reflection of the depth of our love for him. I never imagined that my family would need the services of the Center, but now I cannot imagine coping without them.”

**Grief Education Institute**

Would you like to learn more about grief? How about how to help a grieving student or building resilience in children?

The 2015 Grief Education Institute schedule is online! You can learn about these topics and much more by visiting our website [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org)



**Leave a Legacy to  
Heal a Hurting Heart**

Ordinary people can leave a legacy. Your planned gift will help secure the future of the Children's Bereavement Center so we may continue our mission of healing grieving youth, their families and the community through specialized grief support. For more information, please contact Denise Rizzo at [drizzo@cbcst.org](mailto:drizzo@cbcst.org) or 210-736-4847.



*Save the Date*

**Mark Your Calendars!**

**Beyond Violence: Building Resilience in Children**  
September 10, 2015

**Speaker: William Kellibrew, IV**  
*Whitley Center at the Oblate School of Theology*

Kellibrew faced immense challenges, trauma and victimizations in his childhood and throughout his life. He is going to speak on his pathway to hope, healing, rebuilding, recovery and how resilience can be achieved with the help of mentors, professionals, teachers, friends, and family members. Please join us! Visit our website to register at [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org). CEU's are available.



**Going Green!**

Help us reduce printing, postage and other mailing costs by receiving paperless updates! Visit our website at [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org) and click on “Get Updates” icon at the top of the page. Stay up to date on exciting news and events at the Center, as well as trainings and other opportunities available.

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO  
MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN  
THE LIFE OF A CHILD?**

We are looking for 20 volunteers to dedicate a few evenings a month to help work with children who have lost a parent or sibling.

Please contact Julia Anderson at [janderson@cbcst.org](mailto:janderson@cbcst.org) or visit us online.

*How far would you  
run to make a difference  
in the life of a child?*

**1<sup>st</sup> Annual Brew-Ha Roundup**  
benefiting the Children's Bereavement Center  
October 31, 2015  
Tejas Rodeo



**Our Newest  
Addition**

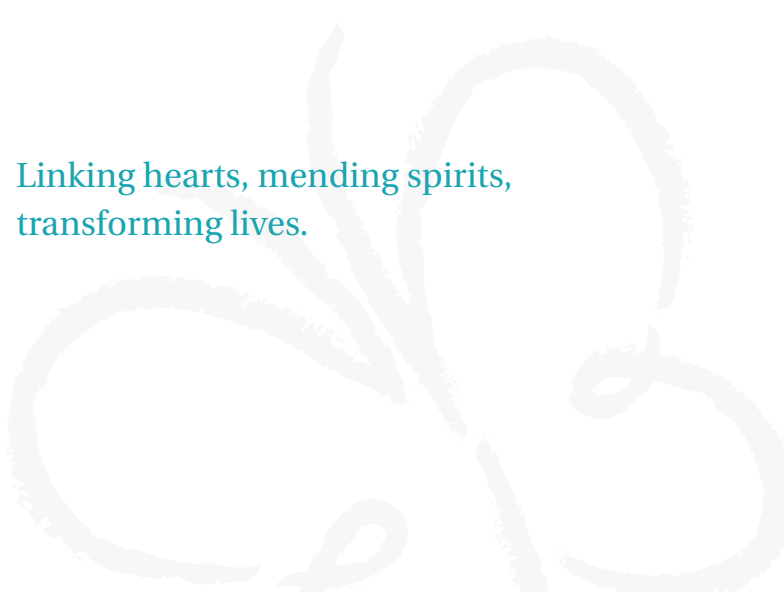
Once only a dream is now a reality. A beautiful mural has been painted that spans the length of the Expressive Arts Wing, covering both sides of the hallway and ceiling. The concept is that as you walk down the hallway, you move from darkness to the light, just as one travels through their grief journey.

JOIN US FOR  
*Tour of the Heart*  
at 11am on the first  
Friday of each month  
at the Center.

For information on these events and much more, visit our website at [www.cbcst.org](http://www.cbcst.org)



Linking hearts, mending spirits,  
transforming lives.



@CBCST



The Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas



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**1st Annual Brew-Ha Roundup**  
Saturday, October 31, 2015

**Beyond Violence: Building Resilience in Children**  
Thursday, September 10, 2015

**Spring Luncheon**  
Tuesday, April 14, 2015

**Tour of the Heart**  
First Friday of Every Month

*Save The Date!*

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SPRING 2015

