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A day devoted to children who experienced loss

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Last Saturday, Sept. 22, was a day unlike any other for the 65 children and 50 volunteers, and all other Camp Soar attendees at Camp Tatiyee in Lakeside. This is the fourth year Accord Hospice has sponsored the camp, which is a day devoted to children ages 5-16 from our White Mountains who have experienced the loss of a significant loved one or a major change in their lives.

Referrals to the camp are made by varied sources: families, agencies, schools, and church groups. The day began with face painting which allowed children to request their own unique design from volunteers skilled with paint and fine brushes. No two faces looked the same. This also was a time attendees had the opportunity to meet one another and establish a connection with people they knew from previous camps or school. The youthful energy was refreshing in the auditorium where several representatives from the White Mountain Dinosaur Exploration Center presented a program about dinosaurs. The interest level was high and the curious children were excited to learn and ask questions. They had the opportunity to see and touch replicas of prehistoric artifacts.

Small groups were assigned to group leaders who accompanied the children to a room with crafts. Beads galore and other tables with yarn and all that was needed to make dream catchers and other items. Live puppies and larger therapy dogs were among the group with much touching, petting and gleeful interactions. I brought my cherished Benjamin who is a hand puppet that speaks only to me. Children enjoyed petting him, listening to some of his wisdom and asking questions. One 9-year-old girl became fond of him and asked us to join her during lunch time. Meantime, there was a scavenger hunt and archery.

Several corrals with goats, and horses that invited petting and questions. By lunch time the energy was at a heightened level with sparks of laughter, eyes filled with wonder and hungry children eager to talk about their morning with one another. Hot dogs, chips and fruit were rapidly consumed with more than enough for all. The nine year-old girl had saved a place for us and we had a chance for one-on-one time. She mentioned why she wanted to attend camp with her brother. She saw the camp flyer posted at a local store and told her Dad that since his mother (their grandmother) had died; they could benefit from attending. "Dad, we will let you know what we learn, and that can help you with your loss." I was struck by her sensitivity and maturity.

Throughout the day, I was amazed with the insight, thoughtfulness and caring which was expressed among the children. All of us, as human beings, have pressures and concerns which can be 'suspended' in a day where there is communing, conversing and a coming together in a shared venue with security and safety. The interaction among the various ethnic groups representative of our White Mountain population and with young and old, is also an opportunity to develop trust and cultivate understanding. We are more alike than we are different and that may be the most essential message of all, as we help children grow toward being caring, compassionate adults.

Attendees were invited to fill out messages they could select from several small writing pads. Choices included: 'I am Thankful For: 1) I remember 2) My special wish 3) Missing you and me 4) Just thinking. These were inserted into a helium balloon to be released later. By 3:30 the group assembled around the fire pit and those willing to share spoke about their day.....comments generally reflected what a great day it was to be with friends, meet new people and have fun. As the balloons were released there was a wholehearted, jubilant cheer.

With a whisper of autumn in the air, the day's activities ended at 4 p.m. People embraced amidst laughter and joy, saying 'good-byes' with wishes to see each other at camp next year. The courage and permission for children to be themselves throughout the day with their creative expressions and interactions was the lesson to be learned ...and for me, the big take away.

The late Mr. (Fred) Rogers (1928-2003) said: "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say it's not my child ... not my community ... not my problem. There are those who see the need and respond ...I consider these people my heroes."

Thanks to the numerous White Mountain businesses and agencies made Camp Soar possible with their assistance or sponsorship.

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