

Run for the Cove celebrates life

By Lisa Reisman
Special to ShoreView

The brisk air and sparkling blue skies made this past Sunday a typical October morning. But it certainly wasn't your typical road race.

As the roughly 300 runners jogged in place near the starting line at Hammonasset State Park in Madison, Renee McIntyre, a tall, slender woman with piercing blue eyes and grey hair streaked with blue, climbed onto the flatbed of a truck. Her voice carrying over the PA system, she asked the crowd to pause for a simple prayer and a moment of silence.

McIntyre, along with Jim and Mary Enswiler, co-founded The Cove in 1995. Mingling with the runners were the direct beneficiaries of this organization: children with printed stickers on their T-shirts reading IN MEMORY OF. Below these stickers, written by hand was the name of a parent or sister or brother.

With eight sites around the state, including Guilford and New Haven, the Cove Center is a grassroots program that provides a safe haven for children and adolescents to learn how to cope with the death of a loved one by coming together and sharing their stories and feelings. It also teaches parents and caregivers how to help their children while bearing their own pain. In 2006, the Cove Center launched the "Good Grief" School Program in an effort to double the number of children and adolescents it reaches. The Urban Program is in the works.

There's no charge for the services. As the Cove brochure reads, "we can't afford to turn any child away." Instead, the Cove, a non-profit organization, depends on individual donors, as well as corporations and civic organizations, to support their programs.

The Run for the Cove, an annual five-kilometer road race, is the Center's biggest fund raiser. But the donors aren't just businesses. Among the kids in the crowd was Nicole Sapko, a seventh grader, who recently lost her father. The twelve-year-old went door to door in her Berlin neighborhood equipped with a wheelbarrow full of homemade potpourri and a metal coffee can. Some people bought her potpourri, she said. Others just contributed. In all, she raised about \$250.

Nicole described some of the activities at the twice-a-month meetings she attends at the West Hartford branch. There are worry beads, she said, where "you take your worries and mold them into clay." On other nights, kids put down any regrets on a piece of paper and then feed it through a shredder. Then there's the Memory Meal during which families prepare the favorite dish of the member who's died as a way to show how that person has left an impression on their lives.

Christina Herrick and her family raised more than \$6,000 in memory of her husband Jeff, who died suddenly in 2004. Her children Evan, 7, and Phoebe, 4, who attended programs at the Guilford site, took part in the memory walk earlier that morning, a two-kilometer course for families and friends.

According to census data, nearly six percent of children 18 and younger have lost a parent. In Connecticut, that means about



At Hammonasset State Park Sunday, children who are grieving the loss of a loved one share in the fun at the annual Run for the Cove benefit sponsored by the Cove Center, a grassroots program with eight sites around the state.

30,000 children are grieving. "Grief has a huge impact on people's overall functioning," said Linda Nickerson, a race volunteer. "If it's not addressed early on, you're looking at pretty serious long-term effects." At the same time, according to Pam-Tobin Sachs, a child clinician who works at the Guilford site, "thanks in part to programs like the Cove, it's become more acceptable to grieve publicly. The more we can raise awareness of the Cove program, through community events like the race, the better."

The whole morning — the runners and friends on the sprawl of green grass, the memory walk, the kids with their stickers playing on the sidelines — was, as several volunteers expressed,

a celebration of life.

Which is precisely what Renee McIntyre's words on that flatbed truck eloquently conveyed:

Yesterday is history
Tomorrow is a mystery
Today is a gift
That's why they call it the present.

And with that and a moment of silence broken only by the errant bark of a dog and a baby's cry, the runners were off.