

\$2 | SUNDAY, OCT. 11, 2009 | NASSAU EDITION

Workshop helps children to cope with loss

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Capes fluttered in the wind as children dressed as superheroes charged excitedly around the Coleman Country Day Camp in Freeport yesterday.

The cheerful costumes belied the reason for the children's presence: They were attending an annual bereavement workshop to help kids who have experienced the death of a loved one.

This year's theme was finding their inner superhero and in turn, their strength to endure pain.

"It's up to us to find our talents," said Emma Stern of Bellmore, who was 4 years old when her father, Andrew, died in the Cantor Fitzgerald offices in the

World Trade Center attacks.

Like all of the workshop participants, she has attended counseling sessions through the Hospice Care Network, an end-of-life and grief support organization based in Woodbury and Queens.

Counseling taught her how to move forward from her father's death. "I understand I have to live through it," said Emma, now 12 and a seventh-grader.

Her friend, Bridgette Walsh, lost all four of her grandparents to illness and natural causes around the same time. She found comfort in being around children who have had similar experiences and can talk together about their feelings.

"It's sad, but you get past it after 20 minutes and you say,

"We have to make the best of it," said Walsh, 12, a seventh-grader from Baldwin.

"We help them realize that they're their own heroes," said Mary Gravina, who founded the day camp workshop 15 years ago and serves as the hospice network's assistant vice president of counseling services.

For Derek Nelson, the workshop and counseling sessions helped him articulate what he couldn't say after his baby brother Alec died in 2004, when a sport utility vehicle driven by an elderly relative backed over him in Dix Hills.

At first, "I sat in my room and cried and didn't talk to anyone," said Derek, 11, a seventh-grader. "But if you don't let it out, it gets bottled up and you'll go insane."

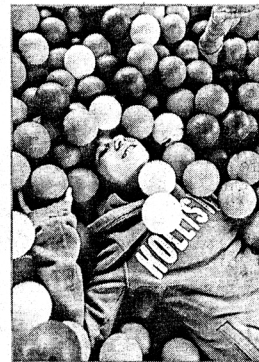
The accident spurred his family to lobby for safety improvements in cars to prevent deaths from nonaccident situations. They also organize Alec's Run, an annual race in Dix Hills that raises money for charities.

The workshop, with its crafts, skits and games, also helps the kids to just be young again.

"My mom died about four years ago from cancer. Coming here calms me down," said Julia Knapp, 14, a freshman from Bay Shore. "I like it. Everyone understands. Each of us had a loss."

She clambered into the playground's ball pit and hurled brightly colored plastic balls at her friends, laughing.

"I feel like I'm a kid again," Knapp said.



Emma Stern, at the Coleman Country Day Camp in Freeport yesterday, lost her father during the attacks on 9/11.