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Ariana Vigiano, 7, above, and Melody Fonville, 8, attend a day of fun yesterday sponsored by the Hospice Care Network, a bereavement support organization.



Caring for kids' hearts that are broken

■ **Bereavement group
Hospice Care Network
holds annual event for
youngsters who have
lost a loved one**

BY SOPHIA CHANG
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Sierra Panzner, 12, and her sister Kaitlin, 14, sat at a wooden table yesterday, busily applying markers and glitter to a dozen clay hearts labeled "Mom" and "Dad."

It was an exercise in using your heart to deal with grief. Their father, Walter Panzner, died in a car accident in April 2004. Their mother, Anne, died

in January of breast cancer.

But despite the circumstances that brought the East Islip sisters together with 57 other children from Long Island and Queens who have lost a parent or relative, Sierra's spirits were high.

"I like the games, and the arts and crafts are fun," the seventh-grader said, smiling. "I made six hearts. I guess I like to draw."

For the past 11 years, the Hospice Care Network, an end-of-life and grief support organization, has held an annual day of games and activities for youngsters who participate in their children's bereavement program at their Bay Shore and Woodbury facilities. The Coleman Country Day Camp in Freeport donates its facilities

every year for the program.

This year's theme was based on "The Wizard of Oz," with its poignant story of a perilous journey fraught with uncertainty.

"The beauty of the message is that they're on this search, but they have always had what they are looking for," day camp founder Mary Gravina said.

Gravina, of Brightwaters, who is the organization's assistant vice president of counseling services, transformed herself yesterday into the Cowardly Lion.

The children, divided into three age groups, traipsed along a plastic tarp substituting for the Yellow Brick Road and found Gravina. Leading a workshop on courage, she had the kids describe their loved ones' bravery.

Ariana Vigiano, 7, told Gravina about her father, New York firefighter John Vigiano. He died at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

"Mommy told me that when he died, he helped people get out," Ariana said. Her uncle Joe Vigiano, a NYPD detective, also died at Ground Zero.

Ariana's sister Nicolette, 10, said she has attended the camp four times and it has helped her cope with her father's death.

"At first I was just really confused. I didn't know what was going on," said Nicolette, who lives in West Islip with her sister and mother. "But I came here and we made crafts. We talked about our feelings, and we played games and laughed . . .

" . . . It got out all my feelings," she continued. "It doesn't hurt as much."

In a grassy field, the Scarecrow spoke about using the mind to overcome grief.

"What are some of the problems of having a brain?" said the Scarecrow, played by counselor Donna Charielle.

"You think too much," said one boy in a black sweater.

"On the difficult side, it's hard, it's painful, and it might make us cry," Charielle said.

At lunchtime, the kids sat under a rainbow balloon banner for a group photo.

"Cheese!" said the photographer. The children stopped squirming and smiled, their faces turned to the sun.