

Hope is Offered at Family Camp

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For many years Schoedinger had yearned for a “company cause”, a genuine means of giving back to the community. In 2004, Michael Schoedinger went to the Ohio Funeral Directors Association to create a task force to research if there was a need for a grief camp for children. The state association determined there was not a need, so Schoedinger decided to set up the camp on its own. Camp Atagahi was a week long resident camp for boys and girls, ages 7 to 18, who had experienced the loss of a loved one. Most of the camp’s programming revolved around regular camp activities such as swimming, creative arts, hiking, canoeing/kayaking, nature exploration and outdoor living skills. Roughly 10 percent of the activities were structured to help the children through the natural grieving process. The camp also offered small-group sessions led by professional grief counselors.

A few years later, with the help of Renee Hawley (grief counselor), the grief camp moved to Marmon Valley Farms and began using equine assisted therapy to help the attendees heal through the use of horses. The camp was renamed **Camp Hope** and changed to a **weekend family camp**. The primary focus is still on children, but the entire family unit participates and experiences all of the healing activities.

Professional volunteers from many of the local hospices and from Schoedinger serve as “counselors” and facilitate adult and child small group sessions. The campers learn to talk about their feelings and experiences, do art therapy activities, and hopefully reconcile with the loss. There is an afternoon panel discussion (for adults only) with our facilitators to answer questions about parenting issues while parents and caregivers themselves are grieving. The session provides helpful tools for parents in a relaxed and confidential environment. There are still lots of fun activities like fishing, horseback riding, hay rides, campfires, making s’mores, hiking, and just relaxing in a natural setting.

Sometimes the reasons that brought these families to camp can be traumatic. Families and volunteers alike experience profound learning and healing during this weekend camp. One camper, while staring up into the trees, said *“I have never seen so much green. I have been a city girl all my life and I can’t wait to go back and tell my friends about this.”* Another camper told a volunteer *“I haven’t seen my daughter laugh like this in a very long time. What you are doing here is a wonderful thing.”*

Now in its seventh year, Camp Hope continues to be a wonderful experience for families coping with the death of a caregiver/parent or sibling. On Sunday morning, we end the camp with an opportunity for families to share what they learned and experienced at camp. Many talk about how much they needed this break in their routine. Others talk about the wonderful friends they made at camp. And others just thank us for creating an safe environment for their families to grieve and heal together.

All volunteers, facilitators, and staff are required to submit a background check to maintain the integrity of camp and provide a safe and confidential environment for all campers.

Visit our website to learn about the next Camp Hope date and watch the Camp Hope video at <http://www.schoedinger.com/grief-and-healing/camp-hope>.

