

Hospice Center of Santa Cruz Provides Support



Tree Dunbar and JoAnn Siemsen of the Hospice Center.

by Summer Lopez

The loss of a loved one often brings a myriad of emotions upon the soul, among them shock and grief. Very few people experiencing these feelings know where to seek shelter until their lives and hearts may be mended. But at the new Drop-in Grief Group offered by the Hospice Center of Santa Cruz, Mondays at 6 pm, Executive Director JoAnn Siemsen helps create a healthy healing atmosphere for group members.

The Drop-in Grief Group serves as convenient relief for those dealing with pain of loss but who are unable to devote much time to a support group. "We also have another Drop-in Grief Group Wednesdays at 4 pm, but many people are still at work until 5:30 or 6."

The groups which include 10-12 people, are facilitated by a peer counselor of bereavement at no cost. In the program's third year, Siemsen cites the growth of the group as well as its busy schedule. Hospice also combines its efforts with Dominican Hospital in order to serve Medicare clients on an in-patient basis. Siemsen is currently working to increase the connection with Dominican but says, "It's too early to talk about the results of [the meetings]."

The existing program has been in operation for four years, and Siemsen feels it has been an asset in cases that require more patient specialization. "Some people are afraid of extra tests and [hospitalization through Dominican] allows for more patient control," she explained.

Siemsen came to Hospice eight years ago as a volunteer drawn to "the Hospice philosophy because I had just lost both of my parents. It just felt right to me."

Now as the executive director, she reflects on the extraordinary changes the program has gone through. "I've seen Hospice through becoming a licensed agency... developing bereavement groups open to the community as well as to members of Hospice families... outreach programs in the schools... work with the Santa Cruz AIDS project."

The Grief Busters program, started by the Monterey Hospice Center, has spread to the Santa Cruz area as an outreach to students in elementary and secondary schools experiencing grief. Siemsen says she tries to work closely in conjunction with Family Services and Suicide Prevention when going into the schools to spread

the Grief Busters program.

"We are also very pleased to have been working with Santa Cruz AIDS project," says Siemsen. Hospice offers an AIDS support group for adults who have lost someone afflicted with the disease. "Many people still are afraid to talk about it if their child or relative died of AIDS," she explains.

October 29th will bring the AIDS Walk to Santa Cruz, and along with Salud Para La Gente, Hospice will be one of the groups benefiting from the march.

Fundraising accounts for over 50 percent of Hospice's income. The auxiliary group for Hospice, Friends of Hospice, sponsors a main fundraiser every year called OctoberFest. Last year the group reaped a surprising \$30,000, but Siemsen still hopes for an increase on that sum for this year.

The event, to be held on October 6, includes an oral and silent auction as well as food and music. "It's a family festival at La Selva Beach Community Center from Noon to 5pm," says Siemsen, who urges anyone who supports Hospice to join in the fundraising events. □