

Hope House offers warm 'HUUG' for bereaved kids and families



Illness and death are difficult subjects for anyone to talk about, particularly youngsters who might not be able to fully comprehend what it means – but Sunny and Smooch are here to help York Region kids and their families cope with the unknowns.

Puppets Sunny and Smooch, along with their human, Child Life Specialist Julie Zinn, are now in place at Hope House Community Hospice, to help the Aurora-based organization give the community a warm hug in the form of HUUG – Help Us Understand Grief.

The HUUG model originated at Hospice Mississauga to support children and family members experiencing life-limiting illness and bereavement so they don't have to go alone on this difficult journey. The local program, which is open to all York Region families free of charge, will be formally launched at a special open house set for this Thursday, June 20.

‘My role as a Child Life Specialist is to really empower or equip children, youth and their families to have a sense of agency or control over the situations that are otherwise kind of not really within anyone's control, and promote coping, expression, and give the tools and just know that they're not alone,’ says Zinn. ‘One in 14 kids will experience the death of a parent or a sibling before they turn 18, so these kids aren't alone and they do need support. Being able to bring them together to support each other, but also receive support from myself and our Hospice, is really what we're hoping to share with the community.’

Kids, says Zinn, often experience what they describe as ‘puddle-jumping’ when experiencing grief. In one moment, a child can ‘experience big emotions like anger’ related to their grief and, very quickly, go back to playing and having fun.

‘We see they jump out of the grief ‘puddle’ and then they jump right back out to what they were doing. It's this natural, beautiful tendency that kids have, but it is also because they can't tolerate that big emotion for too long. As adults, we don't really have this beautiful tendency as much as it might be helpful and it is like a river that we're wading through. People don't necessarily realize [that and wonder] if they should be worried about their children. I think that can be an eye-opener, and it's also about supporting kids in that; if they are in the puddle, you can meet them there, hear them and support them there – and allow them to express openly what they're feeling.’

Hope House Hospice is bringing the HUUG program to the local community thanks to a two-year grant.

Heidi Bonner, Executive Director of Hope House, says that while they have offered child and youth bereavement programs in the

past, being one of the first in Ontario to do so, the HUUG program brings new skills and tools into their arsenal.

‘There has always been a need for kids whose parents have been diagnosed with illness – we call them ‘young carers’ – trying to support them through the process, trying to support the parents to help them support their kids and what to expect, and what medical equipment or procedures might look like to be able to explain those pieces to a child or youth in ways they understand,’ says Bonner.

‘I think that’s where the expertise of a Child Life Specialist comes into play. It’s a really important piece of support that we will be able to provide with Julie and the HUUG program. These young carers, kids who are coping with a parent or grandparent that are facing serious illness, will be able to provide a really great program, empower them, and make things less scary.’

Since the Pandemic, Bonner adds that their sector is seeing more ‘complex’ needs when it comes to grief support. Not being able to be with a loved one who was at end-of-life at the height of COVID, and not having that support network in place, has ‘changed the environment in terms of grief and bereavement support’ and the need for counselling, as well as group and peer support, has increased.

Being a Child Life Specialist is a newly-emerging field, but it is growing across the hospital and hospice systems. It wasn’t only designed to give kids more ‘agency and control’ over the situation, but to cut through medical jargon or what Zinn describes as ‘people talking down to you on what you’re experiencing.’

‘It brings the child to the table and helps advocate for them and have them advocate for themselves and just offer preparation for what they might see, hear, feel, smell, and how do they want to express [themselves],’ she says. ‘It’s moving into community settings like hospices, schools, other community agencies, to provide those same sorts of supports.’

It lets kids have a say in matters that concern them, find ways to articulate how they are feeling, how to cope, and it offers services through ‘a family lens’ as well, she adds.

And, if kids are not comfortable talking face to face to a specialist like Zinn, the cuddly Sunny and the furry Smooch, have strong listening ears – even if the ears are hard to spot!

To find out if the HUUG program is right for you, come out to Hope House Hospice (350 Industrial Parkway South) on June 20 from 3.30 – 6.30 p.m., to meet Heidi, Julie, Sunny, Smooch and the rest of the team.

The open house will feature hands-on craft activities, exercises on what ‘hope’ means to each individual, and opportunities to reflect on loss. Thanks to the Children’s Grief Network, Hope House will also distribute specially curated Grief Kits free of charge, each of which contains ‘items to assist children and youth in their grief journeys.’

In addition to this week’s Open House, Hope House will also offer a HUUG Kid’s Summer Day Camp for bereaved children between the ages of seven and 12 from July 15 – 19.

‘It’s an opportunity for community members, for professionals who are working in the medical field and working with teens and children, to see what we offer, but there will be an experiential component as well,’ says Bonner. ‘If there are children who are coping with the death of a loved one or with a serious illness of a loved one, there will be opportunities to dip their toe in and see what it’s about, meet the puppets, and maybe get familiar with the space so if they were to come back and participate in a program they will have already been here and know familiar faces.’

‘It’s open to everybody and there will be opportunities for them to feel supported and less alone.’

For more information, visit hopehousehospice.com or call 905-727-6815.

By Brock Weir