

Donna Smith



Leading a program for children

Helping others deal with grief and loss in so-called “normal” times is a challenge for healthcare workers. That challenge is often compounded when a child is lost, or a young person faces the death of a family member. But facing those challenges in a pandemic adds another layer of complexity to the task. To help meet those challenges, Capital Caring is tapping the talents of Donna Smith, a veteran counselor who led The Children’s Room, a groundbreaking non-profit organization designed to help grieving children and families.

Smith has been working since April at Capital Caring Health, the largest non-profit provider of elder health, advanced illness, hospice, and at-home care services for the Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. area.

A midlife change

Donna came to her role as a counselor after a midlife career change. At 35 she lost her mother, then five years later, her father died suddenly. After some introspection, Smith decided to leave her career in business. Armed with a degree in accounting, she had worked in small businesses in a variety of roles, but had found herself gravitating away from the numbers side of the business to the personal, working in human resources. Following her father’s death, she reevaluated her working life and decided to pursue a job totally focused on helping people.

She decided to become a counselor, and she gravitated to helping families cope with loss. Her path led her to a part-time job at Children’s Room, the Arlington, Mass. based non-profit that provides grief support services for families and children up to age 19. The project had begun in 1993 as a single room within a hospice care facility set aside for the needs of children either housed in hospice care or visiting family members there. Smith went on to develop her part-time job into a full-fledged role as program director, serving in that role from 2005 to 2010, and then took over as executive director of the non-profit. When she stepped down in 2017, the Children’s Room team hailed her service and her leadership. She was credited with developing programs like Parenting While Grieving and the Teen Program during her tenure.

In March, 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic began to take hold, Capital Caring hired Smith to develop programs to help children deal with the crisis. The children's program was set up within Capital Caring's hospice care program where a teamwork structure is well matched to the new task, Smith says.

Building on experience

Smith is drawing on her Children's Room experiences in her new role as a grief counselor. A key hallmark of the work at Children's Room was flexibility, the need to adapt to each child's specific needs, and she is applying that in her new mission. For example, Smith cited the case of a mother and her two children, a 10-year-old son and eight-year old daughter who had been home when their father suffered a fatal heart attack. The family came to Children's Room for support, but the daughter felt like she bonded more with adults rather than a children's group. So after becoming a familiar face in the Children's Room community, she was allowed to join a teen group with older children who had come to know her. One of the older members of the group was a Harvard student whose parent had been killed in Oregon. They bonded and together created a theater piece, a project that helped them both. The little girl would go on to form a performance group as a teenager, and later she became an art student. That bonding at Children's Room "had an enormous impact on her," Smith says. It shows the "difference you can make if you are grounded in the community, and not giving time limited services."

As the Capital Caring hospice staff members find themselves working with more children who are losing family members to the virus, the challenges are mounting. Creating community has been difficult in the current situation, given social distancing and the necessity of communicating virtually. The program also has developed family circle times, bringing multiple families together, and setting up break out rooms with activities for children. To encourage communication about their feelings, Smith says the program has been using what she calls "question balls" - beach balls for each family labelled with fun questions about the person they have lost. "Nobody's ever asked these questions," Smith says, "(its') amazing the discussion that comes after them."

The resilience of children

One thing Smith has learned in her work, a lesson that has been underlined during the pandemic, is that children know how to work through grief, and often can talk more honestly about it than adults who sometimes are hampered by their reluctance to discuss their loss. The overwhelming burden of dealing with covid has made many people not wanting to think about the potential loss and that leads to avoidance. We are "so death avoidant in this culture," Smith says. But for Smith and her fellow hospice workers they are "reminded every day that life is short," and that spurs them to help families cope with the crisis.

"The work that I do is so life affirming," Smith says, adding that she feels "privileged and inspired to witness kids who went through something really, really hard and went out the other side even stronger."

In her personal life, she draws comfort and support from her own two adult children and three grandchildren. When not at work, she spends a lot of time with her family, and as an "outdoorsy person" recharges by walking, running and hiking. An avowed explorer of new things, she also enjoys reading and cooking. But it is the teamwork and the resiliency of children that she finds in her work that also bring her joy.