

Cherishing the Journey helps parents heal heartbreak

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Last February, Rebecca Wood suffered the sort of heartbreak no parent should have to face: Her daughter was stillborn. Before she left Health First Holmes Regional Medical Center, she was given a "memory box" filled with items, including pictures of the child.

"It was very helpful," Wood said. "I want to remember her."

Wood now volunteers with Cherishing the Journey, a locally based nonprofit organization that donates to grieving parents containers filled with photo albums, hand-print kits, materials with which to cast tiny hands and containers in which locks of hair may be preserved, as well as teddy bears, blankets, beaded bracelets and scented candles.

Formed to offer comfort and guidance to parents who continue their pregnancies after receiving negative prenatal diagnoses or whose babies die soon after birth, it originally was aimed at local families, even assisting with funeral costs.

But word about Cherishing the Journey has spread quickly in its first two years. Founder Jennifer Harden and her volunteers now send memory boxes to parents across the country.

Each costs about \$50 to make. Funds with which to assemble them will be raised Saturday at "Cupcakes to Cherish," a baking competition at the Heritage Isle clubhouse in Viera.

Many of the area's best-known professional creators of cupcakes, as well as talented amateurs, will vie for honors. Children will be invited to decorate their own cakes, and a balloon artist will be present. Face painting, a photo booth and sellers of cupcake-themed merchandise also will be on hand.

The point, however, will be the cause.

'Precious' time

While pregnant in 2009, Harden and her husband, Josh, were told by doctors that their son, Matthew, was diagnosed with a pulmonary valve defect. Attempts to have in utero surgery were declined. By the time Harden had carried the baby 18 weeks, Matthew was deemed to have little or no chance of survival, yet the Hardens refused to abort her pregnancy.

"I wondered how I would make it through an entire pregnancy, knowing we would lose him in the end," Harden said. "But my time with Matthew was precious."

While Harden was pregnant, she "received a little bag with items in it to help me remember him," she recalled. "I was so moved by it that I thought other moms should share this experience."

Thus, Harden was inspired to start her organization, which, from its little donated headquarters off Sarno Road, sends kits to six hospitals in Brevard and Indian River counties, as well as out of state. The organization is working on 95 bags.

"When it happens, you're very scattered and in shock," said Wood, a Port St. John resident. "Cherishing the Journey helps the hospital help the parents ... who are left grieving."

Luanne Hope, a registered nurse at Hospice of Health First, facilitates a support group for parents who have lost newborns or who have had stillbirths or spontaneous abortions. She called Cherishing the Journey "a godsend."
"It lets these grieving parents know they are not alone," she said. "Loss of a child can be very isolating, because most people (around the parents) do not know how to handle a situation like that. They don't know what to say or do."
Grief, she added, should be expressed and can be permanent.
"Yes, absolutely (reminders are positive)," she said. "Everyone wants to help, and some people urge you to (move on), but they don't realize that you remember all the time. I don't think there's such a thing as too much grief."
Loved ones go through the famed "five stages of grief" -- denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance -- as defined by the famed author-psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in *On Death and Dying*, explained Charles Stevens, who has a psychology practice in Satellite Beach and has taught the subject at Florida Institute of Technology, the University of Central Florida and Eastern Florida State College, formerly known as Brevard Community College.
"You get to acceptance through closure, and there needs to be some ceremony (in the psychologist's sense, not necessarily literally) for closure to occur," he said. "This (Cherishing the Journey) may help provide such ceremony."
Mourning, Stevens added, is for the mourner.
"We know that the tears shed after death are not for the individual who dies, but for the ones he or she has left behind for ourselves. You know you've gotten over this stage of grief by thinking of the loved one in a positive way. We encourage people to keep the memory of a loved one alive, to remember the individual and smile through the tears."
Though a sense of loss may be permanent, mourning should not go on forever, he added.
"The individual who feels the loss needs to push past it. ... You need to bring closure to it. The type of grief felt by someone who has just lost a loved one does not need to go on for years -- maybe a month or two months. Then, you remember, but you're not (prostrated) by it."
Branching out Harden has more goals for her organization.
"I'd like to add a bigger focus on perinatal hospice ... and I'd like to branch out to the Orlando area," she said. "We've heard nothing but very good things about Cherishing the Journey, and parents are so excited to have something to remember their babies by."
What helped her and Wood will continue to help others. "I love what I do. It helped me get over my grief," she said. "The more families we can help, the better we all are." Saturday's event
Local bakeries, including Merri Cakes, Cake Krush, Signature Desserts, Sweet's Revenge, Pink Apron Confections, Carla's Cakery, Cupcakes on Main and Banana Blossom Cakes, as well as amateur bakers, will participate in the Cupcakes to Cherish competition from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday at the Heritage Isle clubhouse in Viera.
A silent auction will take place, as will cupcake decorating for children, balloon art by Michael Van Ness, face painting, photos and a "Cupcake Boutique."
Tickets are \$12 for each adult at the door or \$10 in advance. Tickets for children ages 3 to 12 cost \$5 each; children 2 and younger are admitted free. Visit cupcakestogether.com.
For additional information about Cherishing the Journey, visit cherishingthejourney.org.

