

By Creating a Camp, She Turned a Loss Into a Support System for Others

Lynne Hughes, whose parents died when she was a child, founded Comfort Zone Camp as a way to help grieving children.

By Shivani Vora

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This article is part of our Women and Leadership special report that coincides with global events in March celebrating the accomplishments of women. This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Lynne Hughes, 59, a Detroit-area native, lost both of her parents by the time she was 12 years old. When she was 9, her mother died from a blood clot, and three years later, her father followed when he had a heart attack. Without any grieving resources for children to turn to for support, Ms. Hughes, who now lives in Richmond, Va., said that she coped with her loss largely alone.

Following a series of jobs after graduating from Michigan State University with a communications degree, including hospice work, she looked to her own story as the impetus to start a bereavement camp for children, Comfort Zone Camp (CZC). Now in its 25th year, CZC is a free three-day camp for children and young adults 7 to 25. It is offered in 12 locations across the United States including in Virginia, New Jersey and California, and is held throughout the year at venues such as YMCA camps. Since its founding, CZC has served more than 24,000 children.

How did the loss of your parents inspire Comfort Zone Camp?

After my parents died, my three siblings and I lived with my stepmother for four years, who made it very clear that she didn't want to raise us. Then we moved in with an aunt and uncle, and my uncle's first words to me were, "I will never love you as a father or uncle, nor should you expect me to."

It was hard and lonely. Right after my mom passed, I attended a two-week summer camp and loved it. It allowed me to get back to being a kid again, even temporarily, and in college, I worked as a camp counselor and continued my love. As I got older, I thought, "Wouldn't it be amazing to combine my love for camp with helping grieving kids?"

I founded CZC when I was 35. My goal was to create a place where kids could meet others just like them, feel validated in their experiences and gain tools to help them navigate their grief journey — all in a fun and supportive environment. I wanted the camp to be free so that all grieving kids could have access.

Can you explain Comfort Zone Camp's grief support model?

As soon as they arrive, campers are paired with a "big buddy" who serves as their anchor for the three days. They participate in activities such as our healing circle, which consists of small support groups where kids are divided by age and share their stories, do trust-building activities and learn coping skills.

But they also engage in traditional camp activities like kayaking, archery, arts and crafts and bonfires with s'mores.

What outcomes have you seen?

I've seen kids who didn't want to come or talk transformed as they shared their stories, comforted others and read poems at our closing service.

Also, many alumni campers are coming back as big-buddy volunteers wanting to pay forward what was given to them. Currently, one-third of our volunteers are former campers. And many former campers have gone into healing professions as therapists, school counselors and teachers. They are bright lights of understanding grief, resilience and mental health.

Tell me about the stigma that exists surrounding grief.

Our society at large is death and grief-avoidant — it makes people uncomfortable. This is why so many individuals choose to shy away from it. People want to believe it won't happen to them.

However, there has certainly been progress in normalizing and destigmatizing grief. From Dan Levy's "Good Grief" film to Anderson Cooper's grief podcast "All There Is," the conversation around grief is now mainstream.

Are there any key moments in CZC's journey that you're especially proud of?

I am most proud of our pioneering spirit and ability to respond. After the Sept. 11 attacks, we were aware that there were no grief resources in the New York/New Jersey area. We brought our program there that November to offer one-day and weekend camps to children who had lost a parent.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, we responded by offering our camps on Zoom. We also created in-person Covid-specific camps during that time and a camp for overdose loss in 2023.

What are your future goals for Comfort Zone Camp?

The need for helping grieving children has only increased. Approximately six million children in the U.S. alone will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the age of 18. We plan to continue to grow and incorporate technology to develop new resources to support grieving children. We are currently running 30 camps a year. We would like to add more and build our own facility one day.

Shivani Vora is a New York City-based travel writer who considers herself a very savvy packer. More about Shivani Vora

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