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The art of grieving

Fernside helps Liberty Township family cope with losing 4-year-old Charley

By Lori Kurtzman • lkurtzman@enquirer.com • October 14, 2008[Post a Comment](#) • [Recommend \(7\)](#) • [Print](#) • [Email](#) • Type: [A](#) [A](#) • [Click-2-Listen](#)

The two of them float through a surreal blue sky, tethered to parachutes, his green, hers red. Legs outstretched, she soars toward the sun, her brown hair whipping behind her. The boy stares up at his big sister as he falls to the earth.

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It's a dreamy piece of artwork, darkened only by two clouds. One hangs over the sun; the other hovers near the boy. Both are black and white and ominous, filled with words like "danger" and "guilt" and "dead."

Grace Ries pieced together this collage over a few days this summer at Fernside, a Blue Ash-based center for grieving children and their families. She was trying to show how she felt after that August day five years ago, when her little brother, Charley, died and the house suddenly got so quiet.

Her work will be part of a display of art created by Fernside children that opens Thursday in Walnut Hills.

"Some people think that it totally goes away," said Grace, 13, now an eighth-grader at St. Susanna School in Mason.

"But it doesn't."

She was 8 at the time. Charley was 4. He had dimples and shiny brown hair and loved hot-air balloons and parachutes. He refused to eat noodles. He was "all boy," said his mother, Sally Ries, but he would let Grace dress him up as a princess and the two would play make-believe in their Liberty Township house.

He died on a Sunday when everyone was home. He was playing in a playground and somehow became entangled in the cord to a set of window blinds.



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Grace Ries, 13, shows some of the artwork she created in memory of her brother Charley, who died five years ago. Her work will be part of a display of art created by children in Fernside programs.

About Fernside

Fernside, an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati, is the nation's second-oldest children's grief center.

The Blue Ash-based center provides services including support groups and camp to more than 900 children, teens and adults each year.

Rachel Burrell, who founded Fernside in 1986 after her son's death in 1982, died last year.

If you go

What: Giving Grief Form, an exhibit of art created by grieving children and teens at Fernside, including two works by Grace Ries, 13, of Liberty Township, whose younger brother died five years ago.

This is the first such exhibit presented by Fernside, with the help of KZF Design, a Finneytown-based architecture and engineering firm.

His death was caused by accidental strangulation.

It was the very definition of a freak accident - fewer than 20 children died in similar incidents worldwide that year, Sally Ries said. It left the family devastated.

"It was so sudden, so terrible," said Ries, who was pregnant with twins at the time.

It's tough enough to be an adult, to have experienced loss and love and the cruel tricks of the universe, and to find a way to absorb such tragedy. Children lack any of that history, said Vicky Ott, Fernside's executive director. Quite often, they don't know what to make of death.

"They don't have the same life experience and coping mechanisms," Ott said.

That's where art - like Grace's collage - can make things easier. Fernside workers will hand a child a blob of clay and ask him to sculpt it into his anger. They'll have children paint both sides of a mask, showing how they look on the outside and how they feel on the inside.

"When their words aren't working, the materials kind of help them speak," said Mary Schneider of Fort Thomas, a Fernside volunteer with a background in art therapy.

Grace never really struggled for words. The day after Charley died, she pretended everything was the same, that her brother was still alive. She'd talk to him, cutting through the quiet in their big house. When people at school offered hugs and condolences, she assured them she was OK.

Reality sunk in over the next few weeks. Charley was *really* gone. Heaven was no longer an abstract thought - it was home to her baby brother. Numbness gave way to despair, anger and guilt. Grace turned to her friends, but they knew as much as she did.

"Friends can only help you so much, especially at 8 years old," she said. "There was a time when I was really sad and cried a lot."

A month after Ries gave birth to the twin boys, Grace, her mother and her father, Jim, started attending group meetings at Fernside. Three separate people had suggested the center, which turned out to be a blessing. Friends and neighbors were of great assistance, mowing the lawn, bringing over food, offering their shoulders and ears, but the center gave the Ries family a chance to talk to others who were experiencing the same kind of grief.

For more than a year, the Ries family went to meetings twice a month. They ate pizza before breaking into groups, Grace with other children, Sally and Jim with the adults.

"It's painful to go there, quite honestly, but you can't wish it away," Sally Ries said.

Grace wasn't always eager to go to group meetings, but she grew to appreciate the experience. Through Fernside, she went to camp, planted forget-me-nots in Charley's memory and designed a Thanksgiving placemat for the empty spot at the table.

A year after Charley died, the family threw a party celebrating the boy's life. The theme was a big yellow smiley face, and friends read poems and shared memories. They launched black and yellow balloons into the air.

Weeks went by, and then months and years, and the pain became more bearable, the memories more fond than devastating. The twins, Harry and Joshua, grew to be Charley's age. One looks just like him, and the other acts just like him. Together they keep the family both exhausted and entertained.

Grace blossomed into a lovely teenager with long brown hair who cheers and dances at school, loves the German rock band Tokio Hotel and dotes on her rowdy little brothers.

She still thinks about Charley. She watches her friends' younger brothers play football and imagines Charley would have been out there with them. She sees a hot-air balloon pass over the field as she's cheering a game and wonders if that's Charley's way of saying he's with them.

The loss never goes away. But neither does the love.

"When I look at Grace's artwork, I see ... a never-ending connection between her and her brother Charley," Ries said.

When: Opens to the public Thursday (8 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays through Dec. 31).

Where: KZF Gallery, Baldwin Building, 655 Eden Park Drive, Walnut Hills



Information: <http://www.fernside.org>. A book featuring some of the exhibit's artwork will be available on the Web site or by phone, 513-745-0111; softcover, \$25; hardcover, \$40. All proceeds benefit Fernside.

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In the collage she put together over the summer, Grace filled the clouds with dark words - but she covered the parachutes in hope.

"Can soar" she glued to the canopy above the flying girl. "My hero" she pasted on the green chute, the one carrying her little brother through the sky.

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