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Richmond camp for grieving children expands focus to foster care system

By SARAH KLEINER Richmond Times-Dispatch 13 hrs ago



MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

Sisters, l-r, Sunny Archer, 17 yrs. old and Victoria Archer, 16 yrs. old get their gear from the car after arriving at Comfort Zone Camp in Goochland County VA Fri. March 31, 2017. The girls are campers.

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Sonya Archer has a hard time remembering to be a kid.

As she and her siblings struggled in a neglectful home when they were toddlers, Sonya filled a motherly role for her younger sister, Victoria.

The inclination to nurture never quite left her, even as they wound up in foster homes and were finally adopted.

"Everyone needs that certain level of care until they get old enough to care for themselves," Sonya, 17, said this week. "My sister didn't get that adult female role model to help her, so I felt it was my position to step in and help her out when I could and how I could."

This weekend, Sonya and her 16-year-old sister, Victoria, are participating in a first-of-its kind camp designed to help youths who have been through the foster care system cope with grief and connect with others who have lost their birth families.

The Archer sisters and their older brother were taken from their home in Georgia when they were very young and wound up in the foster care system for two years.

All three were adopted by Brad and Jennifer Archer in 2006, and the family moved to Virginia in 2007.

This weekend, the sisters are in Goochland County attending Comfort Zone Camp, which typically caters to children who have experienced the death of a family member.

For the first time, the camp is partnering with United Methodist Family Services, a Richmond-based nonprofit that finds foster homes and helps at-risk children.

"Now we're able to look at grief in other ways, not just bereavement," said Jessi Schmale, national community facilitator for Comfort Zone Camp, which was founded in Richmond in 1998. "Grief is a vast ocean, and bereavement is a small part of that."

Grief of all kinds — including that experienced by foster children who have lost their families and friends — affects the way children develop and their ability to be resilient, Schmale said.

At camp, each participant is paired with an adult mentor. The goal is to leave them with confidence, coping skills and memories of a time when they were allowed to have fun with others their age who have been through similar situations.

"Oftentimes, grief is isolating," she said. "It can make you feel alone and different."

The first Comfort Zone Camp was attended by about 30 children, Schmale said. The nonprofit has expanded to the Northeast and to California and last year served 13,000 children — all free of charge.

Participants range in age from 5 to 21. They can attend camp each year to re-engage with their grief, Schmale said.

"Grief is not something that we get over or that goes away, but it's something that you are able to learn to manage," she said. "Those that have had loss and grief in their life, they need to have permission to be a kid again."

"Oftentimes, they have to grow up very fast and face very adult situations."

Jennifer Archer, who adopted Sonya and Victoria Archer, said she believes her daughters will benefit from interacting with dozens of others who have been through the foster care system.

"I think both of the girls have recognized that life is full of comings and goings, and people are in our life for a reason, and that doesn't always last forever," Jennifer Archer said. "But hopefully we gain from each person we interact with."

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