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Septem

Fathers find needed solace

By RYAN TRARES
Staff writer

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One by one, the men shared their family tragedies.

A son killed by a drunken driver. A teenage boy who collapsed inexplicably on the bathroom floor. A college student who was murdered after giving some men a ride home.

The stories vary but share a key similarity: All are told by fathers who have lost children.

"We can come here and throw our burden on the table. When we leave, you don't feel as heavy," said Chuck Findley, a Center Grove area resident. "It's a safe place to laugh, cry, whatever you feel."

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The men are part of an Indianapolis-based grief support group for fathers. In weekly gatherings, they share their pain and work through the anguish that comes with the death of a child.

Findley has been part of the group for more than two years. His sons, Travis, 9, and Jake, 12, were killed in 2007 when the vehicle they were riding in was struck by a train.

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Mark Fritz, Jon Pavey, Dav Nathan, Adolf Hansen and Evans on Southport Road in share their stories about the children. The group is an northside grief support group
Sept. 2, 2009
PHOTO BY SCOTT R

GRIEF GROUP FOR
Tuesday With the Da
at 7 a.m. Tuesdays o
northside and 7 a.m.
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450.

He appreciates the openness of the members. Findley said he had been hesitant to fully reveal the depth of his grief with other groups he had participated in.

"It wasn't until I met these guys that I felt like I was able to talk, to have people understand what I was going through," Findley told the group.

When a father talks, the rest listen attentively.

The group has no set rules other than courtesy: Give those who want to talk the chance to, be quiet when you're not speaking, share only what you want to share.

Their eyes welled up with tears listening to the stories going around the table.

Jim Nathan of Indianapolis was attending the group's meeting for the first time. His son, Kevin, was killed by a drunken driver in 2001.

He described learning that his son had been in an accident and later seeing him in a hospital bed, his jaw trembling slightly as he spoke.

His gaze grew steely when he switched subjects, to the driver who hit Kevin's vehicle. Nathan nearly spat the words from his mouth as he recalled the trial for the man, who received a lesser sentence.

Nathan said later that the group made sharing his story easier than he expected.

"Nothing is private. It gives you a chance to go ahead, speak your feelings, and everybody else lets you know, 'I've done it. I'm there with you,'" Nathan said.

After Nathan told the group his wife won't pump gas because the fumes remind her of the accident, Findley shared a common reaction.

"For me, it's not driving across the railroad tracks, it's when I hear a train," he said.

They call their gatherings Tuesday Mornings With the Dads. The meetings originated in 2004 as a northside support group that met on Tuesdays.

Original members Adolf Hansen, Mark Fritz and Jerry Baker, all of the northside, had attended grief groups with men and women, but none felt comfortable sharing his inner turmoil. All three attended church together and connected through their shared loss. The men found they bonded in a way they hadn't with other groups, Hansen said.

A first meeting turned into a second and soon was a weekly occurrence.

Over time, more dads started to show up. Fritz estimated about 35 fathers have drifted in and out of the group, with a steady attendance of 16 to 18 men.

With such a large group, at times there were multiple discussions going on and little cohesion among the members, Fritz said. Some of the fathers from the southside, including Findley, formed a second group that meets closer to their homes.

At a recent gathering of the southside group, news of upcoming foundation events or scholarship benefits established in memory of children come up. The men shared anecdotes about other children or grandchildren.

"We're a fraternity that nobody wants to join," said Jay Marks, a Bargersville resident who lost an infant son, Jay Jr., in 1988.

The bond among the men extends beyond group meetings. A contingency of members from the southside drove to the northside for a church ceremony in honor of Fritz's son. Three northside members were in Greenwood when Findley dedicated railroad crossing gates where his sons were killed.

When one member, Joe Leonard, died in 2007, a majority of the group attended his funeral. In a sympathy card given to his family, the group wrote, "We love you like a brother."

The gatherings have become part of their healing process. Many members say they need the regular release of grief each week.

"If you miss a (meeting), it feels like something is missing," Findley said. "This is a safe place to laugh and cry, a safe place to be."

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