



“I could never say enough about how special our volunteers are”

October 25, 2015 By [Charmaine Dymond](#) 2 Comments



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“I was looking for something that really spoke to me. I'd had several losses in sort of a short time, so when I saw the posting for this it really seemed like something I could make a contribution to,” says Nicolle.

Alex's Safe Harbour (ASH) offers free weekly peer-led grief support groups in Dartmouth for families grieving the loss of a loved one. They depend on volunteers to facilitate these groups.

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“Going into it I thought I had the whole grief thing down pat – until I got into the training and realized I still had a long way to go,” Nicolle laughs.

Nicolle says she wasn’t even sure she’d be selected as a volunteer after the 30-hour training program, thinking that because she was still grieving she wouldn’t be able to help others.

But volunteers aren’t expected to be “done” with grieving. Trish Dominie, the founder of ASH, started the organization in 2009 a few years after her 10-year-old son Alex died. “I’m 10 years into my grief journey. I have a volunteer that’s 24 years into hers... we’re all still on this journey. You’re on this journey until the day you take your last breath. It just becomes part of who you are,” says Trish.

ASH and its volunteers don’t provide therapy. “We provide companionship. We talk about the fact that grief is natural. We can say that we’ve been there – so there’s a connection,” says Trish. “And everyone else in that room has a connection, because they’re all walking that same path.”

After Alex died in 2005, Trish’s daughter attended a grief support centre in Florida and she realized there was nothing like that in Nova Scotia. “There’s private counselling but that’s not always what people need. Sometimes they need somebody who’s been on the same journey,” says Trish, adding that at the time there was no free grief support for children, teens or families in Nova Scotia.

Trish decided to change that. At ASH, families meet on the same night but break off into age-appropriate groups where they do activities to help them process their grief and learn coping skills. “And they get to talk about their person which is the most important thing that helps them process their grief,” she says.

Beyond the obvious logistical convenience of having the whole family involved on one night – instead of mom going on one night, dad on another, etc. – Trish says having a family come as a whole means the parents are modelling for their kids that it’s OK to grieve. “It’s a wonderful example for parents to set for children. Death is a normal part of life. Grief is a normal part of life. We don’t need to be so terrified of our feelings.”

Nicolle is now in her third year of volunteering with ASH. “I feel like I’m actually doing something that matters because it really does matter to those people to see you there, week after week. They know that you’re not being paid, they know you’re there of your own choosing, to be there for them, and their gratitude is amazing.”

Though you might naturally think of tears and grief going hand-in-hand, Trish and Nicolle both say there’s also plenty of laughter during group time. “There are tears, for sure, but there’s also kids running through the parking lot to get to our building, with a smile on their faces, laughing and high fiving the volunteers, because they’re connected with them,” says Trish. “There’s laughter and tears but

it's all OK because it's a safe place to do it. And that's what our volunteers do for our families. I could never say enough about how special our volunteers are.”

To say that volunteers are an important part of ASH's work would be a grand understatement indeed. Other than Trish, who works part-time for ASH, everyone involved is a volunteer – be it folks working behind the scenes in the office, fundraising, helping out at events, facilitating a group, greeting families, or serving on the board of directors.

For Nicolle, being part of ASH has been life-changing. She's no stranger to loss – her father died when she was two – and her mother always told her that the hardest part comes after the funeral. It wasn't until Nicolle was older and dealing again with the death of loved ones that she really understood.

“You're supposed to go back to regular life and move on and yet that's when the real loss sets in. That person you're used to talking to each day or seeing sitting in that certain chair,” says Nicolle. “With our group, that's when there is someone there, for the hardest part.”

To find out more about Alex's Safe Harbour, [visit their website](#) and check out [their volunteer opportunities](#).