

Charlotte's Gift

By Karin Gillespie

What do you do if you are a child and lose someone you love? You grieve in whatever way makes you feel better—from crying and anger to silence and withdrawal. For seven-year-old Charlotte Cax from Valrico, Fla, grieving through writing works best. What started small—as an essay about her father's death and how she will remember him—has grown into something very big: a book by children for children about death.

Charlotte's book, which she calls *Kids Comforting Kids*, is a work in progress. With help from Traci Dyer, a professional writer, Charlotte is collecting letters from grieving children all across the United States. Whether the letters are faxed, mailed or e-mailed, Charlotte responds to each one, a task that is often very difficult. "Each time we receive a new letter, Charlotte returns from the post office in tears," says Robin Cox, Charlotte's mother and a fourth-grade teacher at Valrico Elementary School. "She enters into that child's pain. I once suggested that we stop this project since we had just received an upsetting letter from a little girl in Arizona who had lost her brother in a plane crash. When we talked about what we should do, Charlotte was adamant about carrying on with the project. 'Mom,' she said, 'I've got kids counting on me ... I'm supposed to do this.'"

Filling the Void

Working on the book has given Charlotte a roadmap for her journey through grief. For Charlotte's older siblings—a brother and three sisters—the project has also been a source of security and a validation of their feelings. "Reading the letters together, and helping Charlotte respond to them, binds the family in unspoken ways," says Robin. Yet Charlotte's purpose for her book goes far beyond the bounds of her own grief. "I took this on because I want to help people," she explains. "I want children to have a place to see that others have gone through similar experiences, and that they are not alone."

Adults too learn from the book. Charlotte's pediatrician lost a son to brain cancer and—in her own grief—has closely watched the process. She encour-

ages Charlotte, telling her that she needs a book like this to share with her young patients who have experienced the death of someone close. "Our hope is that *Kids Comforting Kids* will offer one more avenue of healing for these children," says Robin. "The letters are something they can read over and over again." Once completed, the book will include a resource section that will recommend books, websites and organizations "that we have found helpful in dealing with our grief."



Helping Children Grieve

Charlotte has learned a great deal from other children's stories. What do they talk about most often in their letters? "Heaven," says Charlotte. "Kids need heaven. Heaven is a big part of grieving for children. I learned this by their words and the way they wrote about it—how careful and sensitive each person was. It was unexpected. I didn't know they would need heaven in the same way that I did. They need to know what happens next. It can't be a big unknown."

For adults working with and helping grieving children, Charlotte has some words of advice: "Try to understand the situation for each child. It's different for everyone. Let them talk about how they feel. It helps if they can talk to someone who has also lost a special person."

Moving Forward

More than 30 children—from places as far away as Alaska—have written to Charlotte. While her project has received both national and international press coverage, including a story in the *Tampa Tribune*, collecting the letters has still been an unexpectedly slow process. "When we sent out the first press release, we started receiving mail," says Robin. "I expected a deluge, thinking, 'Doesn't everyone want a place to tell their story?' But we learned that telling such a story has a price, just like reading them does."

For a child to send us a letter takes courage. They must trust that the receiver will cherish their story so that they are not hurt further. Grief is a big hurt."

The slow pace and the arduousness have not dulled Charlotte's enthusiasm for her book. "I want to help children heal," she says. "People really want me to finish this book so that they can use it to help others."

Children 12 and under who are interested in sharing their stories with Charlotte can write to her at "Kids Comforting Kids," c/o Charlotte Cox, PO Box 702, Valrico, FL 33595-0702 or e-mail her at ftpaches@aol.com.

Karin Gillespie is a member of the Last Acts communications team.

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