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## Woman Offers Solace to Children Dealing with Grief

Local woman has dedicated herself to helping youngsters deal with death.

By [Deborah Bostock-Kelley](#) | [Email the author](#) | 5:59am

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What do you think of the work that Deborah Brooks has done for children? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

Deborah Brooks is a busy wife and mom, pursuing a master's degree and balancing raising a family. But, she still has time to be a lifeline to more than 250 children and caregivers at [Suncoast Kid's Place](#).

The nonprofit organization was founded in 2008 by Cheryl Jackson in a vacant house on the property of Van Dyke Church, and Brooks came to Suncoast Kid's Place soon after. The agency provides support for youngsters dealing with the loss of a loved one. The nonprofit's model was inspired by an internationally-known organization for grieving families in Oregon called [The Dougy Center](#).

Though they do not offer private therapy or counseling, Brooks and the staff and facilitators at Suncoast Kid's Place regularly provide completely free support groups at their location, Brandon Bell Shoal's Baptist church, local schools across the area and juvenile detention centers.

Locally, Brooks was instrumental in coordinating the art projects that would become the Hope and Grief art exhibit at Carrollwood Cultural Center, available for viewing there through November. Art supplies were given to the children to work on in a group, but also to bring home and work on in private or as a family project.

The exhibit includes posters and collages, some in the shape of hearts. Others are adorned with butterflies.

Todd Dunkle, marketing and development director for the Carrollwood Cultural Center said Brooks is dedicated to her work with kids.

"Deborah really believes in this program, but how would you not believe in a cause like that," he said. "We were so blessed to be able to draw attention to an organization doing so much good, and I don't know any other like it. It fills a need I didn't realize existed."

He said that more people have come in during the week to see the emotional exhibit than any other he can remember.

"When I read, 'I'm not Daddy's little girl anymore,'" Dunkle said, pausing, "I have a daughter and a son, and it really hit me."

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At Suncoast Kid's Place, Brooks, who is associate director, helps give children ages 3 to 18 a safe place to grieve and begin the slow healing process after the death of family member, caregiver or friend. Young survivors can share their experiences as they move through the grieving process.

Brooks, of Lutz, tells triumphant stories of older kids who didn't want to attend, who we support group, they were eager to return.

She remembered a young girl who was simply told to "get over it" after experiencing a

There was also a little boy who'd lost his mother. He was overwhelmed by having Broo

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"He said he was absolutely *not* OK with me leaving," Brooks said. "These children form a bond so quickly with someone that wants to just love and care for them."

You can see the pride on her face as she talks about how volunteers transform articles of clothing belonging to the deceased and stitch the fabric into permanent memories. It's something physical for the children to hold on to.

"Family members can bring in an article of clothing or their loved one, or if a baby died, they can bring in the baby blanket and someone will make a pillow so they can have it forever. We had some pretty amazing pillows made," says Brooks. "It's really, really popular with the children. They bring it back into group with them every time they come."

Brooks recounted a conversation with a child who was thrilled to have a canvas board to take home with her.

"She said, 'I'm so excited that we got to take that home because we can't afford art supplies at home.'"

Suncoast Kid's Place program coordinator Daniel Patridge said that Brooks has a way with words.

"Deborah always knows the right thing to say to a grieving family," he said. "You can see it their faces - that what she said was exactly what they needed to hear. She is an awesome person to work with."

To Brooks, every day is the opportunity to make a positive difference in the life of a grieving child.

"I love to see the smiling faces at the end of group, the little kids saying that we're so happy that we're here. We become their safe place where we tell them they can talk as much as they want to," says Brooks. "My favorite thing is we are working in afterschool programs in lower income populations. Very often, these kids miss out on all the services."

Brooks says being surrounded by death, immersed in helping children survive loss, has changed her perspective on life.

"Personally, I think of my life as, 'I need to live it now,'" she said. "I don't know what is going to happen to me, ever. Today, later, tomorrow - I'm not promised anything."

To learn more about the programs at Suncoast Kid's Place, to sign your child up for a peer support group, to volunteer or donate, visit [www.suncoastkidsplace.org](http://www.suncoastkidsplace.org).

To view the children's art, visit Carrollwood Cultural Center's upstairs Theater Room through the end of November. The Center is at 4537 Lowell Road.

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