

# RAINBOWS CARES FOR CHILDREN EXPERIENCING LOSS

Most adults who experience the loss of a loved one find ways to cope through relationships they have developed throughout their lives. Other family members and longtime friends and neighbors help ease the grief by offering emotional support. But what about a child who experiences a loss that is also being felt by those who care for him? When a child loses a parent, a grandparent, a guardian or a sibling they may have no one to turn to for the

principal at Holmes Junior High and Jill Young, school psychologist, applied for and received a grant from Sears to begin a Rainbows program for District 59 at Holmes. Upon the successful completion of this initial program, Mrs. Young took steps to establish Rainbows at John Jay School. In 1996, with funds received through a grant from Target, another Rainbows session was made possible at John Jay. Soon thereafter, Forest View and Juliette Low established

Students attend Rainbows once a week for twelve weeks during their school lunch/recess period. District 59 staff members become Rainbows facilitators by attending Rainbows training on their own personal time. These staff members volunteer their time and services to students who have entered the program through self-referrals, staff referrals and/or family referrals. Parents must give written permission for their children to participate.

Since a child's grieving process is different from that of adults, the Rainbows program trains adult volunteers to understand how children perceive loss and how to help them get beyond it with play-based activities. Children participate in age-appropriate activities, games, and rituals that help them process their feelings when they don't have the words to describe their emotions. One of the greatest benefits students who attend Rainbows receive is the knowledge they are not alone and that there are other kids experiencing the same feelings of loss and hurt. Students help each other express their feelings and know they have caring listeners in the adult leader as well as each other.

On September 28th two District 59 students and alumni of the Rainbows program spoke at the Rainbows Champions for Children breakfast in Medinah. Ten-year-old Alex told the story of her parents' divorce followed by her father's death and her separation from her siblings. Alex joined Rainbows while in the third grade at Clearmont School. Alex told the breakfast attendees her "favorite part of Rainbows is talking about my feelings" and "I like to know that others have problems like I do". Eight-year-old Robby spoke to the audience about his parents' divorce and how he missed his dad. He joined Rainbows while in the second grade at Salt Creek School and said: "I love Rainbows. It has helped me a lot. It helps me talk about my feelings."

Robby and Alex are just two of the thousands of District 59 students who have benefited from the Rainbows program, thanks in large part to the efforts of school psychologist Jill Young. Jill lost her own father when she was fourteen and remembers: "I had no one to talk to about it so my grief reached all the way into my adulthood. I feel that if kids can learn to talk to each other, it doesn't have to hurt forever." Thanks to the Rainbows program and District 59 staff volunteers, students are being given the opportunity to help each other to heal.



Jill Young (right) poses with Alex and Robby outside the Medinah Country Club following the *Champions for Children* breakfast.

emotional support they need. The very people these kids count on are also grieving and may not be emotionally available to help them.

Rainbows, founded by Suzy Yehl Marta in 1983 right here in the Chicago area, helps fill the void for children who have experienced a significant loss in their lives by death, divorce or other painful transition. Rainbows is a nonprofit, nonsectarian and nonpolitical organization that offers peer-support programs to kids throughout the USA and in 16 other countries. Rainbows strives to restore hope to kids by helping alleviate depression and anxiety, by reducing emotional pain and suffering and by strengthening their problem-solving skills.

In 1995, Jane Paterala, then assistant

Rainbows at their schools with funding provided by the District 59 Educational Services Department. In addition to the elementary schools that feed into Holmes Junior High, Clearmont School joined the ranks of schools offering Rainbows support to their students.

Four years after the Rainbows program was introduced into School District 59, the Board of Education and then Superintendent Robert Howard offered start-up funding to any District school that was interested in having a Rainbows Program established at their school. The Rainbows program has now expanded to eight District 59 schools and serves about 250 of our students each school year at no cost to their families.