

FRIENDS INDEED

Providing support for
bereaved children and families
childhoodgrief.org.au

National Centre for Childhood Grief • Newsletter

The Long Haul

Dr Elizabeth Mann – Clinical Director

How long will it take? When will I be back to normal? Shouldn't I be over it by now? Questions we all tend to ask at times when we are hurting.

I have sometimes heard people compare grief to a marathon – a long, gruelling and seemingly never-ending journey. Grief is certainly much more like a marathon than a sprint, but unlike a marathon, there is no clearly defined finishing line.

Grief and the grieving process cannot be hurried. There is no quick fix - grief simply takes as long as it takes. Those of you who have personal experience of grief will know all too well that it is a long, unpredictable and arduous process. Just when we start to feel as if we are managing a little better, something unexpected will happen which brings all the pain and hurt into the foreground again, making us wonder if it is actually getting worse and not better. Many of us may lose confidence in our judgement as a result. Some lose hope of a better future.

The real but unsatisfying answer to the “how long will it last?” question might be a spontaneous response of “too long!”. The pain of grief can feel raw for so long that it tests the endurance of most people's support network as well as their own. Everyone longs for respite. But, as much as we may want the intense pain of grief to end, those longed for moments of respite can fill us with fear. We want to retain our feeling of connection to the person who died, to keep them close, and in some ways, pain can be comforting because it provides the reassurance we long for - that we haven't lost connection and closeness. Grief is often described as complex, although it might be more accurate to acknowledge that it is not really grief that is complex but ourselves.

The reality of the long haul – the slow and painful process involved in learning how to live with grief - is well understood by Mal and Di McKissock, and is one of the reasons they established 'A Friend's Place'. They believed (and still do) that our support service should be available for as long and as often as is needed, and those of us who continue the service they began have the same convictions. We all believe that free counselling for children is vital, so that financial cost is not a barrier to children receiving the level of care that they really need and deserve.

We also believe that there is no simple 'formula' for bereavement care that fits everyone, so with each new child who comes to our service, each new family, each new person or organisation, we ask ourselves a version of 'how can we best help in this unique situation?' How can we make sure that we can all endure the distance – clients and counsellors? How can we bring some necessary moments of lightness and joy into our lives, in the midst of sorrow? How can we contain our grief and vulnerability in public settings so that it can be experienced and managed at the right time, in the right way, in a safe place? How can we learn to control 'it' rather than 'it' control us? There is no simple answer, of course, and in the early days of grief, achieving this degree of control can seem an impossibility. Team work helps, and team work is one of the aspects of our service that we all value most – consultations with our colleagues and clinical supervisors; collaboration with children, parents, school teachers and counsellors, all of us working towards the same goal. That is, to help grieving children and their families live full and satisfying lives despite the pain of grief. We know that the process of achieving this goal takes time, love, creativity and endurance.

Our enduring group support program is observable teamwork in action. We model for the children how to stay with big feelings for a time, and to know when we all need to soothe distress by changing our activity and the focus of our thoughts. In every group session (and in individual sessions of course) we see and experience evidence of a child who is strengthening their ability to live with their grief, to endure the marathon of life, without their grief overwhelming them or defining who they are.

Our team members are often asked how we do such sad work, and how we keep from burning out. As already mentioned, team support, clinical supervision, encouraging each other to find our “joie de vivre”, and to make sure we keep balance in our lives, ensures that we can be here for the long haul for each other, and for our bereaved clients as they survive the long haul of their grief.

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The Long Haul (continued)

Dr Elizabeth Mann – Clinical Director

Laughter also helps, something that is heard often at 'A Friend's Place'. Children laugh. Adults laugh – all without fear of being told "it's so good to see that you're over it".

And appreciation helps. Every day I appreciate every member of the team, and the team work in action, here at 'A Friend's Place'. Without them, and their ability to work harmoniously together, this work would not be possible. I also want to acknowledge my appreciation of our amazing Board who all work tirelessly to ensure that we have enough funds to keep going. I also enjoy their intelligence, compassion and humour.

Finally, I cannot mention the long haul of grief without mentioning Mal and Di. They know better than any of us how to keep going, how to look after themselves and how to care for others as they face the long haul. We all thank you both for creating and sustaining 'A Friend's Place', for ensuring that we can continue to be here for those who are hurting. You have modelled for us what we are now able to model for others.

Our photo here is of Angela Webster, who despite dealing with her own grief, and supporting her young son, recently ran in the Sydney Morning Herald half-marathon, raising \$8000 for NCCG. You can read more about Angela's journey later in this newsletter. However, I want to personally thank her for her huge effort and support. It is very much appreciated. Thank you!



MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRMAN

Mark Steinberg

Welcome to the 10th edition of *Friends Indeed*, the National Centre for Childhood Grief annual newsletter. During this last year we have completed two successful Peter Coupland Adventure Weekends, with the latest Boy's weekend having just happened in June. These weekends provide children some time away from home, enjoying adventures and activities, as well as incorporating remembrance time for their loved ones.

We also recently held our second Open Day at the Centre, which was a wonderful opportunity to show our supporters, existing and prospective, what goes on behind the scenes. I was proud to be able to watch Liz Mann and the NCCG team share their experiences and insights into the clinical world of the Centre.

Last year we welcomed two new Board members, Emmanuelle Delannoy and Heidi Coupland, who along with Robert McRobbie, Andrew Marchant, Liz Mann, and me

make up our Board.

We continue to be supported by many remarkable people, including Valda Tucker and Annette Gurr, who run the Centre so efficiently, along with our counselling and clinical staff – including two new staff members, Manny and Belinda, who we are happy to welcome to the team. Our co-founder, Dianne McKissock OAM, continues to supply us with new resources to use with the children at the Centre, her latest 'Talking to children and young people about suicide'.

The donations given to the Centre ensure that we can continue to care for grieving families, and we would like to thank all the individuals and companies who have supported us. Your donations are vital to our work and we appreciate your contribution.





Belinda Dunn

Adults Counsellor

My interest in bereavement counselling was sparked after watching a video by Mal McKissock about grief and loss during my training as a Lifeline telephone

counsellor some years ago. I have a Post Graduate Diploma in Counselling from the Australian College of Applied

Psychology and have been fortunate to complete both the adult and children's bereavement courses at NCCG. I volunteer as a support worker in one of the fortnightly children's groups and have this year joined the team as an adult's bereavement counsellor. I feel very privileged to be a part of the NCCG team.



Emmanuel Kassiotis

Children's Counsellor

Emmanuel (Manny) Kassiotis has a Bachelor of Social Work (UNSW) and a Master of Arts (Theology). Manny has worked in the areas of disability, guardianship, missing persons and child protection since 2000.

Manny has child protection experience in both Scotland and Australia, having worked in child and family teams and the DoCS Helpline. Manny has extensive experience in delivering counselling interventions and planning and facilitating group work services.

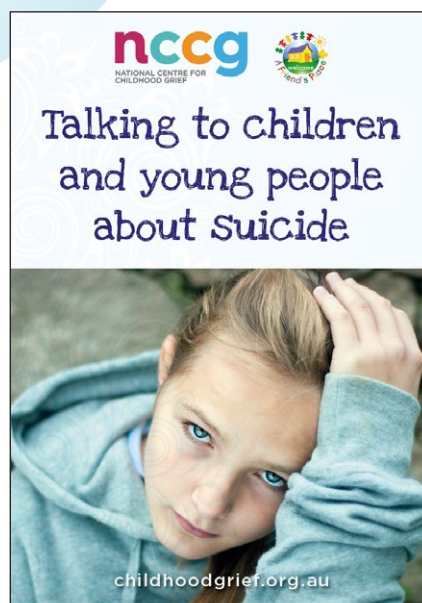
Between 2008 and 2013, Manny was the coordinator and co-facilitator of the bereaved sibling group of *The Compassionate Friends NSW*. Manny has worked at Cara House since October 2013 providing group work services and as a counsellor and group work therapist. Manny has many years of experience in supporting families facing difficult, challenging and life-altering situations. Manny works within a human rights, social justice and child protection framework, with a particular emphasis on supporting those affected by grief and loss.

Manny is a member of the Board of Directors of CaraCare and now a valued member of NCCG.

NCCG Resources

Dianne McKissock's latest resource for the Centre, 'Talking to children and young people about suicide', is a valued addition to our collection. The stigma associated to suicide brings particular complexities. This booklet provides helpful support and guidance, including examples on useful responses, on how adults can approach this manner of death with children and young people. The new edition of 'Coping with Grief (Fifth Edition)' by Mal and Dianne McKissock is also now available.

To purchase, go to our website childhoodgrief.org.au or call the Centre directly on 1300 654-556.



Betty Davies and Tom Attig visit NCCG

Dianne McKissock OAM – Cofounder, Patron and Clinical Consultant

Towards the end of last year, we were fortunate to participate in an in-service workshop presented by two internationally renowned contributors to the field of dying, death and bereavement – Betty Davies and Tom Attig. Betty Davies is now a semi retired Professor of Nursing and Tom Attig is a semi retired Professor of Applied Philosophy. Conveniently for us, they happen to be married to each other, were holidaying with the McKissocks, and were very happy to share their professional experience with counsellors at the NCCG. It is impossible in the space allowed for this article to do justice to the content of their individual sessions, so I will simply try to capture the essence of what they shared with us.

Betty first. As a young, newly qualified nurse, Betty worked for a time with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and was later inspired to specialise in paediatric oncology and palliative care. Her best known books – *Fading Away: The Experience of Transition in Families with Terminal Illness* and her later book *Shadows in The Sun: The Experiences of Sibling Bereavement in Childhood* are an invaluable contribution to the field. Betty is a co-founder of Canuck Place, a residential facility for children with cancer and their families in Vancouver, Canada, and the images she shared with us left us somewhat envious of the resources available in that unique and beautiful house. Betty also shared her own experiences of family grief and their impact on her personal and professional life, encouraging us all to examine the impact of early grief on our own lives.

Tom's session was titled "A Dozen Good Things About Grieving". It's hard for most of us to come up with one thing that is good about grief, let alone a dozen, so we were all ears. We wondered what might be different about the way a philosopher understands grief to the way we as grieving folk or clinicians might understand and describe our experiences. As a clinician, and someone who has experienced a lot of personal grief, I find myself unable to resist the temptation to add a proviso to Tom's ideas. That is – I think the perspective he describes is more likely to be accessible once the rawness of new grief has passed – possibly after the second anniversary, when we are familiar with the intensity of our experience. That said, I'll endeavour to encapsulate the essence of his thoughts. Grieving is (or can be) a hopeful process. As we

learn to transcend suffering we can reach for new meaning in life and find things to look forward to. We can choose not to be passive victims of grief; we can learn how to live in a world transformed by loss by choosing our responses and the meaning we give to our suffering. Learning how to live is not a new process – we have been learning how to live since the day we were born, each in our own way. We can draw on our resilience by recognising what is not broken – our intellect, creativity, ability to solve problems, our ability to love and be loved are still there, even if hard to access for a time. We can draw on our capacities for courage, faith, hope, perseverance and search for understanding to create order out of chaos.

We can learn from our emotions. They are not our enemy but our friends – an early warning system, cries for appropriate attention. When we reach past the pain of being reminded of separation, we can remember the value of what we still hold in memory. Learning to love in separation is something we have been doing since infancy. We don't spend every moment of every day with people we love – we are all engaged in many separate activities and it is the memory of connection with those we love that gives us security. We need to learn again how to use those memories when separation is permanent. We can share, collect, recover, record, add to, value and explore the meanings of cherished memories and in doing so, we can fulfil the deepest desires of those who have died – to be remembered and cherished for what they have given us, and continue to give us even after they have died.

At heart, grieving is a labour of love.

Tom has written many books and articles including *How We Grieve: Relearning The World*.



Open Day

Annette Gurr –
Coordinator of Counselling Services

The NCCG Open Day was held in April this year at 'A Friends Place'. It's a special day, as we open up our Centre to the public enabling those who come, to directly experience what we are about. Our bereavement counsellors shared many special stories with visitors, describing the important and necessary work we do here. The main message being, that like adults, children do grieve. Like adults, children will grieve 100% and no less. Like adults, how grief presents will be unique to each child. A huge thank you to everyone who attended the Open Day. Being able to connect in with many in the community and reach out to raise awareness of our services is always worthwhile. An extra special thank you to the Rotary Club of Eastwood-Gladesville, for staffing the BBQ lunch and for being a voice in the community that promotes our services and continually acknowledges the significant work we do.



Peter Coupland Adventure Weekend: Girls

Mary Ashton – Group Facilitator

It is understandable that people who know me well were surprised to hear my name and the word 'adventure' used in the same sentence. However, those at 'A Friend's Place' know that I would never pass up the opportunity to participate in a Peter Coupland Memorial Adventure Weekend. Peter Coupland was a much loved counsellor and group leader at the centre who died far too early at the age

Once again a metaphor – your dead parent is present with you, we invite your stories and memories of them to hang around all weekend.

The girls had a wonderful time making memory scrapbooks. When describing some of their artistic pages to the group, they shared poignant stories about their deceased mothers and fathers. The girls said the exercise made them feel like



of 49. Peter left a lasting impression on everyone he worked with. Peter's memorial weekends include outdoor activities, lots of honest and open communication and a tremendous amount of fun – the same words I would use to describe Peter.

On November 3, 2017 we waved goodbye to the parents and siblings standing in front of 14 Hollis Ave to begin our long haul to Yarrabin. From the beginning of the weekend I was struck by the many metaphors which mimicked the journey of grief. Our young female bus passengers were bravely travelling on a journey. They were sitting next to people they didn't know, heading to a place where they had never been and were going to be challenged to try activities which were new to them. Nothing was certain, everything was unknown.

After we arrived then settled into our cabins, a craft activity was organised. Each girl decorated a big paper heart with their dead parent's name. The hearts were pegged on a high clothesline in the main lounge room. We walked under it all weekend.

they were given the opportunity to introduce their parents to each other and their new camp friends.

The highlight for many of the girls was the horseback riding. Most of the campers had never done this before. Each girl was fitted with a helmet, given clear instructions and had a horse specifically matched to her ability. Despite all these safety precautions, it was still a scary challenge to mount and try to control a horse many times their size. One by one the girls stood on the flat platform and met and mounted their horses. And then another long haul for these brave

female warriors, as they rode down the hill on rocky terrain, over fields, through some woods and returned an hour later feeling understandably proud of the difficult task they had conquered.

There were delicious meals and more activities. There was swimming, a barbeque, a trailer ride, ping pong and a memorial ritual under the stars. Two young ladies who attended the centre when they were young came along as junior camp counsellors. Their plan to give back to bereaved children and offer



hope and support was a huge success. They conducted a make-over session where each girl had their nails, hair and make-up done.

By coincidence, Peter Coupland's good friend, Mark, lived close to Yarrabin. He and his sons arrived unexpectedly on Saturday afternoon with a joey kangaroo, a wombat, and a litter of new puppies for the girls to feed and hold.

Each activity challenged the girls. Some were physical challenges like horse back riding, others emotional challenges like talking about a mother or father they missed everyday. The girls fully embraced each challenge and supported each other in doing so. Being together with other bereaved children was comforting. Being with those in similar circumstances made them feel normal. At school they are often referred to as "the girl whose father died last year." At camp they were much-loved members of a club that lists death of a parent as a mandatory requirement.

Driving home in our white bus I look around at their young

faces and felt nothing but admiration. I was impressed by their spirit of adventure, their skills of resilience and the compassionate way they encouraged and supported each other on the weekend. The girls experienced three days with other girls who understood what they have gone through in their journey of grief. Together they had all gone through the long haul.

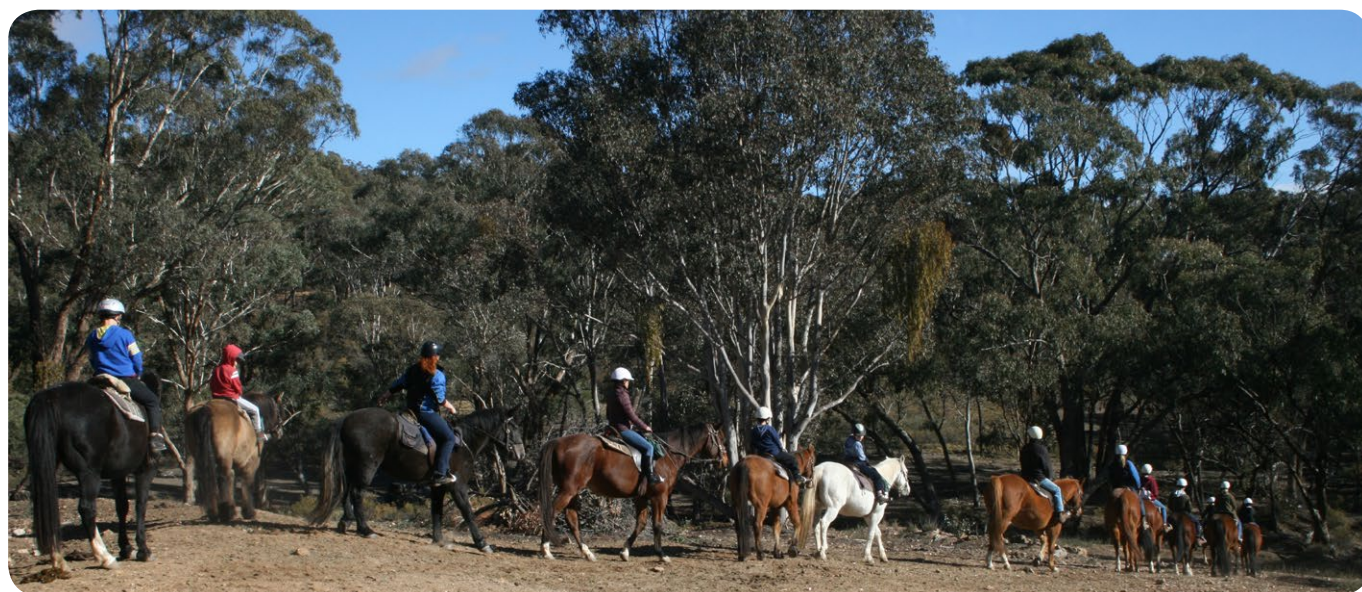
I think one of the loveliest things I heard over the weekend was a comment by one of the girls who was trying to describe Yarrabin. She said "This place is like heaven, but not the heaven where my mom lives, the heaven that sometimes happens on earth." I nodded my head and I agreed with her wholeheartedly.

A huge thank you to The QBE Foundation for providing funding towards the girls weekend. Many thanks also to Turks Legal for the craft bags that were utilised over this weekend. The weekend was thoroughly enjoyed by all and experienced by many of the girls as the best weekend of their lives.

Boys Adventure Weekend

Scott Andrews – Adult and Children Bereavement Counsellor

The first weekend of June saw our annual Peter Coupland's Adventure weekend for boys up at Yarrabin. This year, boys between the ages of 8-15 (most of whom had never been on an NCCG camp before) plucked up enough courage to leave their familiar surrounds in Sydney and venture into the rugged bush land outside Bathurst. On Friday night, we all participated in a drumming circle, which was a great hit. After a cooked breakfast and horse ride on Saturday, we took to the bush again to create some installation art in memory of our parents who had died. Saturday night was designated a games and video night - and everyone slept soundly after a big day out. We had one last horse ride on Sunday before lunch and our big bus trip home. Both the adults and boys who attended had a wonderful time. We arrived as strangers, but we left as family.



Storytime: A Kids Group Tale

Maksim

My name is Maksim and I graduated from Group during the year. I would like to share my experience of coming to 'A Friend's Place'.

When I was little my sisters went to Group. After my eldest sister Milana graduated, then Katarina started and when she graduated Adriana started. I so badly wanted to go to this "Group thing". The girls didn't really talk about what was happening at this group but they were always excited to go and even more excited when they came home. I was so intrigued about the events taking place there I stayed up... even though I was supposed to go to bed... just so I could hear a little bit about what happened that night. Mum would get annoyed that I wasn't asleep but it was worth it. My sisters mentioned talking stick, craft, friends, food and cooking, playing games and sport... it was hard to fall asleep after that and even harder to get up the next morning... sorry mum.

Well a couple of years passed and one day mum said that I will be starting group... if I wanted. Did I??? More than anything. I couldn't wait. But on the day I was supposed to start I was so nervous. I had my brother starting with me so that made it a little better but I still remember how worried I was. My first memory is that I was greeted with smiling faces from the counsellors... and there was juice and cookies. I remember listening to other kids sharing stories about their mum or dad who had died. I was glad to hear other stories but sad at the same time, that this had

happened to all these kids. I made friends that first night and we played soccer... what can I say... Group lived up to all my expectations.

Over the next year and a half I looked forward to group night just like my sisters did. I loved doing the scrolls and craft activities. I liked finding words to describe my feelings. I enjoyed cooking and especially eating. I loved playing celebrity heads, balloon volleyball and red knickers. But mostly I love that I learnt lots of things about my dad, through these activities, because I don't remember him.

All week before graduation I was thinking about what to say but then I read this poem, which I think, sums up what I have learned at Group. I would like to share this poem with you.

"You will lose someone you can't live without,

And your heart will be badly broken,

*And the bad news is that you never completely get over
the death of your beloved. But this is also good news.*

*They live forever in your broken heart
that doesn't seal back up.*

And you come through.

*It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly
– that still hurts*

*when the weather gets cold,
but you learn to dance with the limp"*

– Anne Lamott

End of year Creative Workshop

Dr Elizabeth Mann – Clinical Director

It was an absolute scorcher of a summer afternoon when we welcomed more than 20 children and their parents to 'A Friend's Place' for an end of year celebration. Glue was melting, glitter was sticking to sweaty faces, and sprinklers were needed to cool us all down! Nobody knew each other at the start, and yet children and adults all made themselves vulnerable and trusted our team with their story and their grief.

We had decided to offer this workshop to children who had not yet attended group, so that they could experience what it is like to meet some other kids who have also had someone close to them die. Joké brought her creative flare to the afternoon. She designed our large wooden heart, now in pride of place in our group room, and provided all sorts of beautiful bits and pieces so the children could create a special heart in honour of the person they love who has died. Huge thanks also to Kerri and her husband, Gary, who used their skills to bring Joké's vision to life.

While all this creativity happened, Mal and Di facilitated a group for the adults. There was both tears and joy as everyone shared their stories. Our group families understand the importance of our regular end of year party and celebration, which brings all our group families, past



and present, together to reflect on the year, and to celebrate life and the achievements made, in the midst of our grief. Our Creative workshop was another wonderful celebration of life. The children learnt that sometimes it can help to share the pain of their grief with others who understand. It helps us to feel we are not alone in our grief. I want to thank all our wonderful team who gave so generously of their time, as they always do, to enable this to happen.



Dianne McKissock's New Novel

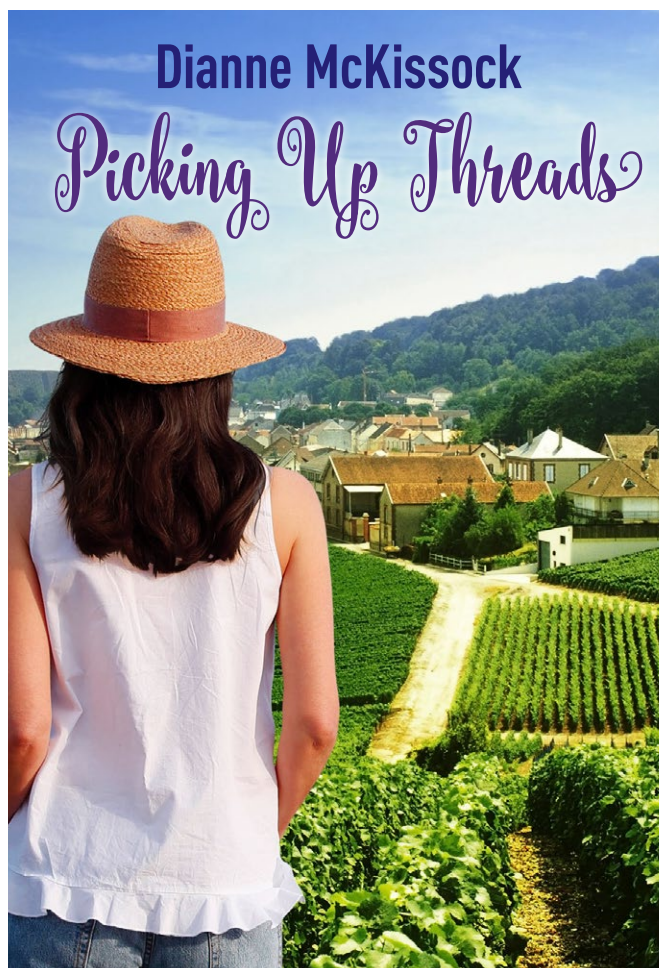
On sale at the Centre now 1300 654-556

Doris O'Donnell is just ten years old when her beloved mother, Felise, dies suddenly from an aggressive brain tumour. Growing up in Sydney in the 1970s and 80s, Doris' grief, like the grief of bereaved children everywhere, is largely misunderstood or overlooked. Books become her refuge and she struggles to find her feet in her new motherless world, her devastated father emotionally just out of reach. The loss of illusions adds to her distress when she learns the confronting details of her parents' first meeting and their early relationship.

Over time, Doris and her father manage to create a different version of a sustaining family circle. The inclusion of new people, with varied religious and cultural backgrounds, adds to the rich tapestry of Doris' life as a young woman. However, everything begins to unravel when

she is rocked by a series of traumatic events that threaten the vulnerable foundation on which her adult life has been built. Everyone who loves her feels powerless to prevent her collapse, learning the hard way that love is not always enough.

When skilled therapist, Alice Anderson, becomes part of her support team, Doris learns how to regain control of her life. In the sanctuary of the counselling room, Alice's compassionate understanding and skillful questioning enable Doris to retrace significant steps in her life, picking up loose threads and repairing frayed ends, memories of her mother the strong links that bind key elements of her life together.



Angela runs for NCCG

Angela Webster

Watching grief engulf your child is incredibly hard. It almost broke me then, and still chokes me very regularly. One in every 29 Australian children will have at least 1 parent die before they turn 18. Our son was 5 when his dad died. I looked carefully for support for him, and for me, as we navigated our way through early grief and beyond. The National Centre for Childhood Grief, a charity who operate from 'A Friend's Place' in Sydney, were what we needed, and what we continue to need. They are experts in what they do. Having lost my own mum at a young age, I know how it feels, and what lies ahead. This is only the beginning of our journey without Colin, and I know we'll continue to need help in the coming years. I wanted to

support the work of National Centre for Childhood Grief by raising money by doing the 2018 Sydney Morning Herald Half Marathon. Many of you know I'm a terrible runner, and this would be a big personal challenge.



The team at NCCG would like to say a huge thank you to Angela Webster for her mammoth effort in raising \$8000 for the Centre. We are truly touched by the camaraderie and strong community spirit reflected in the messages of support to Angela as she prepared for this half marathon event. We know how significant community is for bereaved people and it has been a privilege to witness such generosity of heart from so many.





Kitchen Love



Garden Love



Di Love



Gift Time



Mal and Heidi Time





Team Love



Kids Group Time



Counsellor Time



BBQ Time



Centre Love



THANK YOU ...

The team at NCCG provide a service for children and their families to support people not just to survive the pain of grief, but rather to find over time ways to thrive, despite the pain of grief. This service is made possible through the generous donations, both monetary and non-monetary, from corporate sponsors, foundations and grant applications, major gifts, fundraising and donations from clients and the community. Thank you to all who have supported the Centre this past year. We look forward to continuing to provide this much valued service to the community.



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A tax receipt will be issued for all donations over \$2.00

THERE ARE MANY WAYS YOU CAN HELP:

- 1 Monthly "direct debit". Decide the amount you wish to pledge and you can join or cancel at any time. Visit childhoodgrief.org.au/donate/ for further detail.
- 2 To make a one-off donation our bank account details are:
AC name: NCCG: BSB 032524: A/C 152908
- 3 You can also help by providing craft materials or much needed equipment. Phone 1300 654-556 or email info@childhoodgrief.org.au for details of items on the wish list.

- 4 The National Centre for Childhood Grief is now registered with www.everydayhero.com.au nominate us as your charity to fundraise for e.g. City to Surf, the Sydney Half Marathon or any number of activities nationally.
- 5 Call 1300 654-556 if you wish to make a donation from your credit card (Visa or MasterCard).

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A CHILD'S LIFE

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