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Coach's wife discovers: 'You're going to be OK'

by John Johnston

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Bill Brewer died of a heart attack at age 42 in November 2007, leaving behind a wife and three daughters. More than 2,000 people came to the wake of the popular Princeton High School basketball coach and math teacher.

"Everybody offers to help, but unless you've been through something like that, I don't think you truly understand how difficult it is," said his widow, Peggy Brewer.

One place she and her daughters - Katie, now 17; Abby, 15; and Maddy, who turns 11 on Tuesday - got help was Fernside. The Kenwood family attended support groups every other week for a year, starting in January 2008.

Like many teens, Katie, was reluctant.

"Sometimes I didn't want to go. It was easier for me just to not talk about it," she said. "But when you have other people who have gone through the same thing, it's so much easier."

Sometimes they expressed themselves in ways other than words. Abby's group, for instance, painted both sides of a mask, showing the contrast between how they look to people on the outside and how they feel on the inside.

"If (children) don't know how to say what they're feeling, they can at least show it," Brewer said. "The Fernside leaders were great about bringing that out."

Brewer said she also benefited greatly. "My biggest concern was: How am I going to help the kids get through this?"

The volunteer who led Brewer's adult group had lost her husband 10 years earlier. "Hearing her stories, and seeing how her kids had made it through the horrible tragedy and were all doing well in school and being successful as adults - that really helped."

Her mindset when she left Fernside: "You're going to survive. You're going to be OK."



Peggy Brewer, whose husband Bill died in 2007, consoles daughter Maddy, 10, during an interview about the role Fernside played as they contended with their grief. *Thomas E. Smith for The Enquirer*



Maddy Brewer with her "memory" camera, which contains letters she's written about her deceased father. *Thomas E. Smith for The Enquirer*