



Bag & Baggage offers gift for Camp Erin's children

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By Susan Gordanier

Laurel Shepard and her mother, Julie, will appear on stage Dec. 14 when Bag & Baggage presents its production of "A Christmas Carol."

The pair won't be cast members. Instead they will speak on the services provided by Camp Erin. The camp, organized by Providence Health & Services, provides a unique experience for children ages six to 17 who grieve the loss of a parent, sibling or other close loved one. This show will be a special benefit performance, with all proceeds going to the camp's support.

Laurel attended Camp Erin's 2009 session, which was held from Friday through Sunday at the end of August. Marilyn Schulte, manager of bereavement and community services for Providence Hospice, said the camp is always held the weekend before Labor Day in order to give the children tools to use in their grieving process before the return to school.

Laurel's story shows that the passage of time, in itself, is not enough.

In June 2007, Laurel, then age eight, was savoring the last day of the school year at Beaverton's Nancy Riles Elementary. Her brother, Benjamin, 12, was excused from school because his paternal grandparents would be flying the boy in their private plane to Kansas, where he was to attend space camp.

Their plane crashed minutes after its takeoff from Hillsboro Airport, and all three died.

Laurel speaks of that first summer after losing her brother and grandparents: "I was kind of bored more often and sad." Friends at school, she says, "feel sorry for me."

Behind these words are feelings she shouldn't have to explain to an outsider. That's one of the advantages of Camp Erin, as Laurel says, "being around others who feel the same."

Julie Shepard says she takes Laurel to biweekly group sessions at the Dougy Center, which also provides continuing services for grieving children. But, she says, the Camp Erin activities were more intense.

One example was a luminaria ceremony where the children filled paper bags with sand and candles, placed them in a boat and set them afloat at night in memory of their loved ones.

Attending Camp Erin is free. Schulte says her organization gets referrals from school counselors, the Dougy Center and Me, Too, a similar program run by Providence. The camp began with a grant from the Moyer Foundation, which sets standards for its expanding network of these camps.

"We've been growing our camp," Schulte says. Six years ago the first local Camp Erin served 39 children. By 2009, the total had increased to 54.

In 2010, the goal is to split campers into two groups, one for the children, ages six through middle schoolers, and the other for high school-age teens.

The camp is held at the Salvation Army's Camp Kuratli facility in Boring, which is leased for the weekend. The actual cost for each child is about \$500, Schulte says. This includes lodging in cabins, food and all activities.

Campers also receive gifts to inspire memories of their weekend. Laurel Shepard brought home the donated quilt that had decorated her camp bed. She says its cat and butterfly decorations remind her of her grandmother, who loved those creatures.

"Everyone also got teddy bears," Laurel says. "Someone had made clothes for them."

Each child can attend Camp Erin only once. Schulte says, "There're a lot of kids out there we'd like to serve."

Tickets (\$18 to \$22) for Bag & Baggage's benefit performance are available online at www.bagnbaggage.org or by calling 503-516-4840. The show begins at 7:30 p.m. Monday, Dec. 14, at the Venetian Theatre, 253 Main St'.