

## the MISSION

of the Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) is to enhance the effective services of Routt County agencies serving special needs, at-risk, and/or low income youth through financial and hands-on support.

**Fall 2015**



## Letter from the Director VNA's Youth Grief and Loss Program

Part of being a successful, productive adult is the ability to navigate through grief and loss and come out on the other side stronger and wiser. However, as we all know, topics of death and loss in general are not always openly discussed in our American culture. Many adults are ill-equipped to deal with a serious loss, and it is even more difficult for a child or adolescent. In 2007, under VNA's Hospice Program, Katy Thiel, VNA's Medical Social Worker and Therapist, recognized the need to therapeutically address the number of death losses impacting youth. Part of the mission of all Hospice programs across the country is to reach out to people in the community who experience the death of a loved one, so Northwest Colorado VNA launched its Youth Bereavement Program. Over the years, Katy has closely observed a growing need for loss therapy beyond issues of death.

Quietly and steadily, Lisa Brown, Chief Executive Officer of VNA, and Katy Thiel have been working to grow and evolve the Youth Bereavement Program which has become the Youth Grief and Loss Program. After attending a VNA strategic summer gathering last month on this subject with an impressive variety of community members and stakeholders present, it became evident to me that the program has gone through a total metamorphosis. What started out as a small scale VNA program specifically addressing ways to help youth in our community cope with the death of a loved one or fellow student, typically through large group presentations after a death, has transformed into a structured and proactive county-wide program designed to help children of all ages manage the full spectrum of loss and grief that they come across over the years. This program is implemented through the schools, at no charge to parents or the schools themselves. The Youth Grief and Loss Program design includes the short term goal of assisting children through the immediate grieving process and also the long term goal of helping youth gain essential, lifelong skills of recognizing feelings of loss, expressing those feelings in a productive and healing manner, and creating healthy habits for healing through connections with others and giving back to the larger community. The VNA is genuinely helping our community create resilient youth from the inside out!

In a collaborative and grassroots manner, Katy Thiel, who is now transitioning out of directing VNA's Hospice Program and into the lead role of directing VNA's Youth Grief and Loss Program, is working with all of the schools throughout the county to establish grief and loss programming tailored to every age, kindergarten through high school. Katy has been working closely with each school building counselor to collaborate and discuss student, family and teaching staff needs. This program is currently being formalized in the Steamboat Springs School District and Katy and staff are conducting workshops in Hayden, South Routt, and at the North Routt Charter School with the hopes of launching formal programs in those schools by the winter.

The grief and loss programming is being fine-tuned in the schools at all age levels, specifically in the Steamboat Springs School District, by using the tool of creative expression. Through various art mediums, students explore their feelings and emotions and this helps them learn how to express those emotions in a productive, healing and non-destructive manner. For example, the program at the Steamboat Springs Middle School is now in its third year looking at grief and loss and how it affects youth. This year the sixth graders will focus on death and dying topics, while the seventh graders focus on losses beyond death, such as moving to a new town or a divorce. The eighth graders will be encouraged to look outside of themselves, connect with genuine community service, and learn how giving back to others is an essential part of the healing process and helps put things into perspective.

Katy Thiel's goal is to implement an eight week Youth Grief and Loss Program at every school building throughout the county, which would be offered twice a year. At the elementary school level, the school counselors are helping Katy to implement the program, while at the middle school, Partners' School-Based Mentors are identifying kids for the program and giving support. At the high school level, Katy is implementing the program with the help of counselor Shelby DeWolfe. Additionally, Katy and staff are now starting their second year of offering Youth Grief and Loss programming to the Steamboat Springs Boys & Girls Club.

Janie Dunckley, VNA's Director of Business Development, a self-described "data nerd," is excited to create an evaluation framework where short and long term desired outcomes for the Youth Grief and Loss Program can be tracked and measured. As some of the long term impact may not be seen until these children grow into adulthood, Janie is looking into the possibility of tracking some youth participants over several years or more.

We are pleased that VNA has strategically identified the growing need to positively address youth grief and loss, and in response they have developed dynamic and inclusive programming. The metamorphosis of this program since 2007 is truly remarkable. Over the coming years, we look forward to observing some of the initial therapeutic impact on youth, as VNA's Youth Grief and Loss Program develops youth resiliency and life coping skills. ■



**Sara Craig-Scheckman**  
*Executive Director*

### Major categories of youth loss observed in Routt County by Katy Thiel:

- Divorce (loss of both parents living with the child in the home, and loss of the parents loving each other)
- Death (most typical is the death of a grandparent)
- Father loss (death of father due to illness, accident or suicide)
- Parent separation (loss of parent contact due to a physical separation, detachment or abandonment)
- Moving (loss of community, friends, home, everything familiar)
- Illness (mental or physical illness of parent or immediate family member living in the household)
- Abuse (emotional trauma of abuse between parents is negative for the child)

## Immigrant Youth Facing Grief and Loss

Everyone experiences some manner of grief and loss throughout their life, and while each person may express it differently, the emotions of grief are felt in every language. Loss is often associated with the death of a loved one or a pet, or going through a divorce. However, for those who are part of the immigrant community, loss can be more complicated and profound. When people from other countries come to the United States, many times to escape poverty or unsafe living conditions, they are leaving behind family, social status, traditions, feelings of connectedness, and their first language. These issues can cause genuine distress and grief, which can be very isolating.

Loss of culture has a big effect on immigrant families. Assimilating into a new country while maintaining one's own heritage can be a struggle for anyone and from any social class. For children, school can have a large influence

on them socially and psychologically. Children are educated in the American way of life, and over time they may become embarrassed by their native language. As these children grow up with American values there may be societal and peer pressure to “choose” a culture, which can lead to a gradual disappearance of heritage and traditions. Their parents are aware of these changes and the loss of ethnic identity can be very detrimental for the whole family.



Sheila Henderson, Executive Director of Integrated Community, says that her agency sees families saddened by “the loss of family members that are still alive” while facing a multitude of general challenges in their attempts to adapt into the American culture. They are unable to travel great distances home to visit grandparents, aunts, uncles and other family. In other circumstances, there are dads working in this country on Visas. As there is no process in place that allows these fathers to stay once the Visa ends, they are deported and often do not see their family in the United States again; this leaves many “single” mothers raising children who are often U.S. citizens themselves. In turn, the children feel the stressors of their parents’ and their own losses, but have difficulty articulating what they are feeling. As traditional counseling isn’t for everyone, Henderson is excited about the VNA’s Youth Grief and Loss Program’s positive impacts. She feels the program will draw kids out, particularly through art therapy, as it is a way for these children to release emotions they can’t verbalize. The Youth Grief and Loss Program will teach immigrant children about the normal range of feelings that everyone experiences after a change, and will show them helpful ways to deal with those feelings.

All families experience grief and loss, but for immigrant families there are other complicating factors that U.S. families do not have to face. For example, children can settle with their families in the United States, and it is not illegal for that child to be undocumented. There is no documentation process for children until they reach 18 years of age, so it is impossible for these children to qualify for Medicaid or other public resources. However, a U.S. born child from an immigrant family does have access to Medicaid or insurance. It can be extremely confusing to children when a U.S. born child can receive help while the foreign born sibling cannot. College is also an issue. For example, an undocumented child cannot attend college unless he is able to pay for international tuition; his sibling born in the U.S. can go to college as a U.S. citizen and can apply for grants, loans and scholarships. For the child who cannot attend college, this loss of opportunity can cause animosity and sadness within the family. Clearly the “loss” of attending college will lead to other permanent hardships and closed doors that this child will have to face if he stays in the United States.

Dealing with loss and grief occurs many times throughout a person’s life, and practicing empathy, in any language, is a great means of support and comfort. Sheila Henderson notes that there are steps that we as a community can take to make these losses less traumatic for immigrant families. Immigrants have lost their support systems and creating new ones will help them through the grieving process. Encouraging the preservation of their cultural and religious traditions will help alleviate feelings of isolation. Luckily, Henderson says, good things are already happening here in Routt County; we have a large, connected immigrant population, and our general community is friendly. However, creating genuine community awareness and understanding of immigrant circumstances and needs is the crucial first step to empowering immigrants.

While the focus herein has been on immigrant families, loss and the emotions surrounding it affect everyone, and children especially may not understand what they are feeling. Rather than wait for a traumatic event to touch a child’s life, children need to develop coping skills at a young age in order to cultivate lifelong resiliency. The growth and enhancements of VNA’s Youth Grief and Loss Program are timely and will help many children in our community learn skills to deal with a diverse range of losses that they may experience throughout their lives. ■

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# CALENDAR OF EVENTS

## November 2

YAP Fall Funding Cycle Applications Due

## November 20-27

CSFF Office Closed for Thanksgiving

## December 1

YAP Grant Notifications

## December 17

CSFF Office Closed for the Holidays

## January 5, 2016

CSFF Office Reopens



## Vision

*The Youth Advocacy Project for Routt County (YAP) envisions a strategic network of collaborative, sustainable youth serving agencies that builds resiliency in youth and guides them towards their optimal potential.*

## Staff



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