

## Little People With Big Hurts

By Cathi Lammert

Many children who lose a sibling through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death will experience a grief reaction. However, often their grief is overlooked or discounted. Parents may be so overwhelmed by their own grief that they are unable to assist their own children's issues.

*In Helping Children Cope With the Unexplained Death of an Infant*, the author, Dr. Charles Corr, outlines four basic psychological tasks that comfort grieving youngsters: understanding what has happened, identifying and validating their feelings, commemorating the life of the sibling(s) who died and learning to live and love again.

### Understanding What Has Happened

Many times parents who have experienced a perinatal loss already have a child under the age of two. These children do not fully understand what has happened, but they are aware of a change in their parents' behavior. Mommy may not be herself and cries often. Daddy may act irritated.

Children sense that their lives have changed dramatically. When our son Christopher died, our daughter Megan was two years old. Shortly after his death, I noticed a mirror effect with her. If I was crabby she became irritable. If I had been crying, she would tear up. She also became clingy and did not want to be left with anyone. Sometimes parents may not have the energy to meet the many emotional and physical needs of their little ones during the demands of their own very intense grief. It is important to try to maintain a normal routine even if it requires the assistance of family and friends.

Preschool children need to have things explained in concrete terms. I remember the confusing words a minister spoke at one of the funerals I attended. "Baby Joshua is asleep and will rise again." Joshua's siblings held on to every word and fully expected him to wake up. We need to be careful with our words; children become confused with statements that are not literally clear. Also, children of this age do not understand the finality of death and think heaven is a place one can visit temporarily. Often I hear little ones ask, "When is the baby

coming back?" Parents may become frustrated when they must repeat answers to a child's many questions, but as the child matures he/she will have a better concept of death.

School-age children are often frightened by death. Many believe death is like a "boogey man" that comes to get them. They may have fears of sleeping alone or being apart from their family. Also, children of this age are very curious. Of course this means they ask many questions and want detailed explanations. Some of the questions are "What happens to the body in the casket? Do they get cold?" All questions need to be answered as simply as possible. If we as parents do not answer these questions, their peers will. Other children's explanations may confuse and upset them even more.

### Identifying And Validating Feelings

Parents have shared with me their concern about their preschooler because he or she is sad one minute and happy the next. Preschoolers grieve in spurts and their intensity is not as great as that of an older child. Often children of this age will act out their grief feelings through their play. They will talk about their dead baby-doll and have funerals as they are playing. This is a very therapeutic way they can positively release their feelings.

School age children will respond in different ways. Heather, our quiet child, became even more quiet. Perhaps she was afraid of upsetting us. Sometimes "well-behaved" children will begin to act out their anger by being destructive. Our son Shaun was so angry after Christopher's death that he deliberately broke two windows. We were all surprised by the intensity of his anger. The acknowledgment of his frustration and anger enabled him to move past this. Sometimes a child may need a punching pillow or bag to release those feelings.

It is important that teachers, coaches and caregivers are aware of the family's grief history as well as your child's reaction to the loss. It is helpful for these individuals to have information and resources regarding the grief process so they can support the children that are entrusted to them.

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# **HAND of the Peninsula**

## ***Volunteer Opportunities Abound***

Among the many ways one may honor the memory of their children is to give back to the organization and ensure that HAND of the Peninsula will continue to provide the caring support and other vital services for which it has become well known over 27 years in existence.

As a 501c3 non profit, HAND of the Peninsula is governed by a Board of Directors which welcomes new members who bring fresh ideas, talent and energy to our common endeavor. The Board meetings are held quarterly in the evenings on the fourth Wednesday of the month. HAND of the Peninsula is run exclusively by parents who have experienced a loss and financed entirely with donations from parents, family and friends. Without their support, HAND would cease to exist. Consider getting involved in any of the following ways:

- \* **Schedule and facilitate inservice trainings where a sharing parent tells their personal story to healthcare providers interested in learning how to be more sensitive and helpful to parents experiencing a loss.**
- \* **Library organization and management.**
- \* **Write and edit the quarterly newsletter, Helping Hands, get it to the printer and post office.**
- \* **Distribute brochures to area hospitals which in turn, give these to parents experiencing a loss.**
- \* **Bookkeeping and accounting skills**
- \* **Web master skills**
- \* **Fundraising**
- \* **Special events such as annual Service of Remembrance, Volunteer Appreciation, Human Race, Scrapbooking or other creative activity workshop, etc.**
- \* **Anniversary and Special Dates remembrance**
- \* **Meeting facilitator scheduler**
- \* **Membership/database/ mailing list manager**
- \* **Attend training and become a meeting facilitator or phone support volunteer.**

If you have a talent you wish to share or would like to learn more about ways to get involved and support other parents please call (650) 367-6993 or email [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org)

## **Helping After Neonatal Death**

### **Chapters:**

**HAND of the Peninsula  
HAND of Santa Cruz  
HAND of Antioch  
P.O. Box 3693  
Redwood City, CA 94064**

**(650) 367-6993 office  
(831) 438-4513 Santa Cruz  
(925) 437-3406 Antioch  
<http://www.HANDsupport.org>**

**HAND of Santa Clara,  
Contra Costa, Alameda  
Counties, Central Valley  
1-888-908-HAND**

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## **Helping Hands**

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## Little people

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I wish I had a magic formula for responding to all the emotional needs of the family. Trust your instincts and listen beyond the words that are said. Often on Saturdays, our family cried buckets of tears together in our bed. This release allowed us to spontaneously talk as a family about our much loved and wanted baby who had died.

### Commemorating The Life Of The Sibling(s) Who Died

A large number of people in our society believe children should not be exposed to death. Parents know their children better than anyone but sometimes feel at a loss in knowing what to do to help their children at the time of the death and in the years that follow.

The parents of children who experience an early pregnancy loss may find it more difficult to commemorate this life since there is not much tangible evidence. Families have been creative by having a memorial service or planting a tree and including their child/children. When there is a funeral, the majority of families with whom I work allow their children to choose whether or not to be included as they say their hellos and good-byes to their deceased baby brother or sister. Some children like to get quite close to the baby and others may only take a peak but they benefit from being there and from being included in this family ritual. The children tell me they are glad that they were able to make a picture for their sibling or place a treasured item in the casket.

Most children love to make things and find comfort in helping to make a memory book or a box in which to place the baby's special things. Our children cherish our memory book; it brings comfort to them on Christopher's birth and death days, holidays or

when they want to introduce their brother to a new person in their lives.

Memorial services that are private or those held by support groups are a wonderful way of involving children. Sometimes at the time of the loss, the children may not have been a part of the initial ritual. Group memorials are a means of providing for some closure and for remembering their baby. At our memorial services, children write or read poetry and are involved by handing out balloons, flowers or programs. I see a real acknowledgment of their grief when they too can light a candle or place an ornament on the memory tree at our service.

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Family rituals, such as placing flowers on the grave or lighting a candle in honor of the baby on difficult days, are very helpful. Every December our family honors Christopher by decorating our blue spruce with white lights. This tradition that is very important to our children. Children also connect with tangible items. This could be a picture of the baby, significant figurine or picture, stuffed animal or a piece of jewelry that is their special memorabilia in honor of their baby.

### Learning To Live And Love Again

Children will not forget their experience of losing a baby brother or sister. They will be able to lead productive, wonderful lives if given permission to openly

mourn the death of their sibling. They need our support and understanding of their grief in order to be able to move forward. As they grow up, children may have difficult days when they deeply miss their sibling and will change developmentally. Also their many questions may be asked repeatedly as they search for more in-depth answers. This does not mean they are regressing but rather that they are maturing and need to clarify some issues in their hearts and minds. I'd like to share with you some recent events that have made me more aware of the impact of our loss and the growth of our family that has occurred in response to our son's death.

When our son, Shaun, graduated from college, his last week at school was busy with exams, packing up and saying good-byes. He was very active in his fraternity and saying good-bye to his friends was one of the most difficult things he had to do. I thought he had joined the fraternity because it was something a college student enjoys. He told me he had chosen his fraternity because he wanted to have brothers; he could not have his own brother here. He spent those last four years nurturing and supporting the young men in his fraternity as their "big brother" and he knew he would continue these relationships. He shared with me that losing a brother taught him the value of family and friendships.

Heather, our oldest daughter, applied for a job in her college town. As part of the interview process, she was asked, "If you had a choice of spending a day with three people who had died, whom would you choose and where and what would you do?" Although she was surprised by the question, she answered without hesitation by saying, "I would spend the day with my brother Christopher and Grandpa Charlie." **Little people** *continued on page 6*

## Support Meetings

Support meetings are informal gatherings where parents can receive and give support by sharing common experiences as we work through and resolve our loss. We cordially invite you to attend.

Meetings may start out with a topic of discussion, but everyone is free to bring up any questions or aspects of their loss which may concern them.

Attending your first meeting does take courage, but parents who attend find a comforting network of support, encouragement, friendship and understanding.

Nothing is required of you. There are no dues or fees. You need not speak one word. Even if you no longer need the meetings for yourself, come and share your experiences with someone who has recently suffered a loss.

### HAND of the Peninsula

Support meetings are held on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Call 650 367-6993 or email [info@handsupport.org](mailto:info@handsupport.org) for more information.

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** Sept. 3 and 17  
Oct. 1 and 15  
Nov. 5 and 19  
Dec. 3 and 17

**Location:** Ellsworth Room at Mills Health Center, 100 S. San Mateo Dr., San Mateo

### HAND of Santa Cruz

Support meetings are held on the third Wednesday of the month. Contact: Kristie Shulman 831 438-4513.

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** Sept. 17  
Oct. 15  
Nov. 19  
Dec. 17

**Location:** Congregational Church of Soquel

## New HAND of Antioch

Support group meetings are held on the first and third Thursday of the month. Contact (925) 437-3406 for location and more information.

**Time:** 7:30 –9:30 P.M

**Dates:** Sept. 4 and 18  
Oct. 2 and 16  
Nov. 6 and 20  
Dec. 4 and 18

## Pregnancy Support Meetings

Parents who are pregnant again after a loss have special emotional and psychological needs. Pregnancy Support Group meetings address the concerns of bereaved parents who have started or are thinking about starting another pregnancy. Fathers are especially encouraged to attend.

HAND of the Peninsula holds subsequent pregnancy support meetings on the second Wednesday of the month as needed. Please call the HAND office 650 367-6993 if you plan to attend or need more information

**Time:** 7:30-9:30 P.M.

**Dates:** Sept. 10  
Oct. 8  
Nov. 12  
Dec. 10

**Location:** Ellsworth Room at Mills Health Center, 100 S. San Mateo Dr., San Mateo

HAND of Santa Cruz subsequent pregnancy support meetings are held on the first Wednesday of each month. Please call 831 438-4513 for more information.

## Donations

Our warmest thanks to those who have sent donations to HAND of the Peninsula. It is

## Births

**Isaac Lorenzo Gilbert-Fagen** — June 2, to Jennifer Gilbert and Rob Fagen

**Sela Mae Sarbiewski** — June 5, to Jennifer Schmidt and Mark Sarbiewski

**Benjamin Cooper Luckey** — July 20, to Kelly and Judd Luckey

through your support that HAND is able to grow and help others.

**Anna and Rob Strong**

**Nancy and Richard Sciutto**, in honor of the Human Race 2008

**Nina and Art Squillante**, in memory of Leo on his 2nd birthday

**Laurie and Brian Polivy**, in honor of the Human Race 2008

**Emily and John Corpos**, in memory of Maria Corpos, and in honor of John, Mike, Matt and Martin Corpos

**Ronda Chowaki**, in honor of the Human Race 2008

**Teresa Harkin**, in honor of the Human Race 2008

**Nursing Mothers Counsel/San Mateo Chapter**

**Gigi and Joe Casey**, in memory of Timothy's 5th birthday

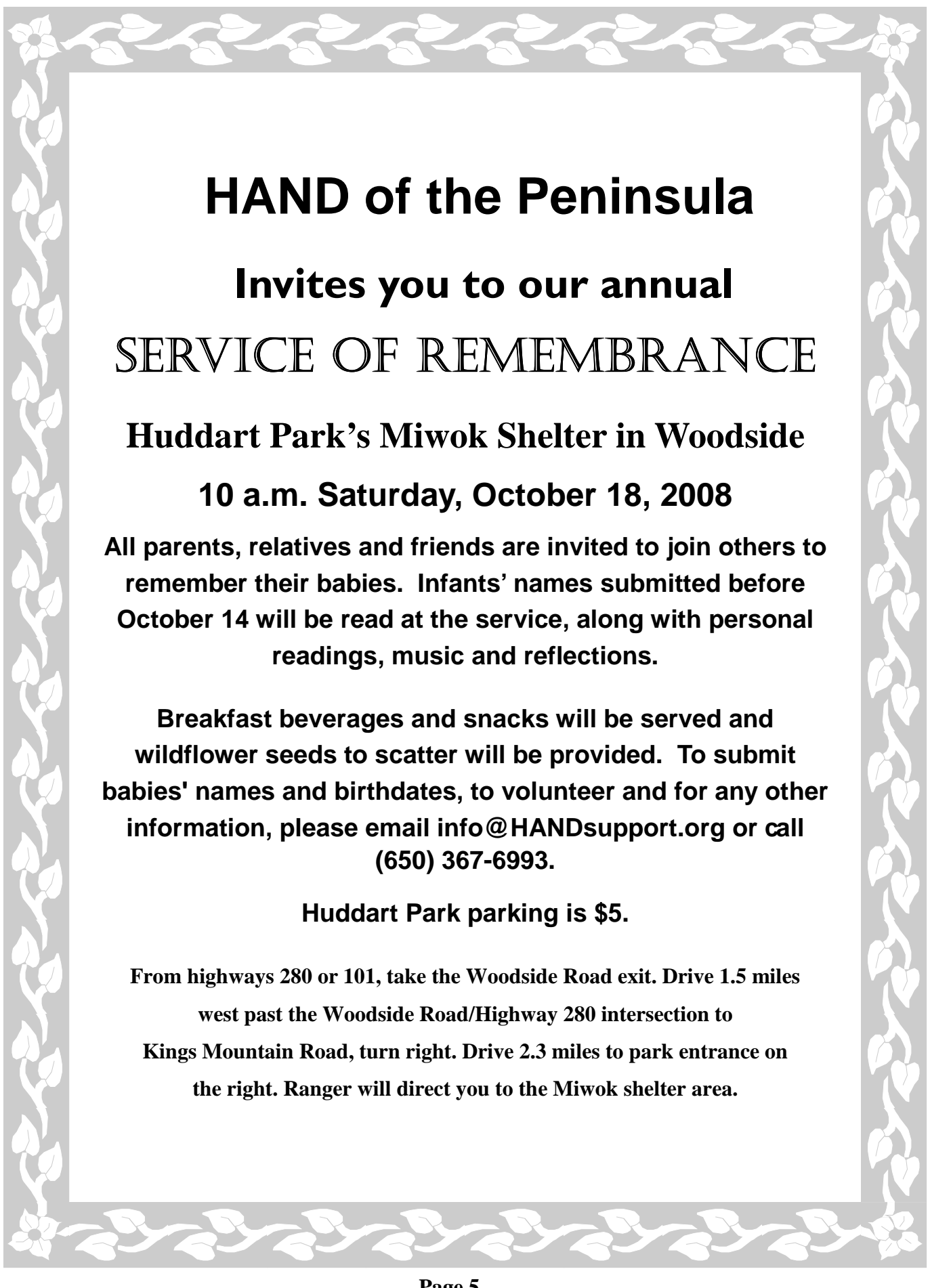
**Phyllis Van Hagen**

**Leslie and Frank Muennemann**, with deep gratitude to all HAND volunteers

**Kathleen Addison**, MA, MFCC, in memory of PJ and Baby Mac

**Leslie Alden**, in memory of Elizabeth Anne Eilerman

**Char and George R. Rocha, Jr.**



**HAND of the Peninsula**  
**Invites you to our annual**  
**SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE**

**Huddart Park's Miwok Shelter in Woodside**

**10 a.m. Saturday, October 18, 2008**

**All parents, relatives and friends are invited to join others to remember their babies. Infants' names submitted before October 14 will be read at the service, along with personal readings, music and reflections.**

**Breakfast beverages and snacks will be served and wildflower seeds to scatter will be provided. To submit babies' names and birthdates, to volunteer and for any other information, please email [info@HANDsupport.org](mailto:info@HANDsupport.org) or call (650) 367-6993.**

**Huddart Park parking is \$5.**

**From highways 280 or 101, take the Woodside Road exit. Drive 1.5 miles west past the Woodside Road/Highway 280 intersection to Kings Mountain Road, turn right. Drive 2.3 miles to park entrance on the right. Ranger will direct you to the Miwok shelter area.**

## **Little people** *continued from page 3*

We would fly to Yellowstone Park and have a wonderful picnic.” The interviewer asked who the third person would be and she said there was no need for another person. The interviewer was surprised that she did not want Picasso or another artist to be the third party since she was an art major.

Megan, our middle daughter, shared with me that on Christopher's death day she had been quietly celebrating her brother's life in her thoughts all throughout that special day. When she returned home from school, she happened to turn on the Oprah Winfrey Show and, amazingly, the topic of the show was celebrating life. She was very moved that the program focused on what she had already been doing that day by celebrating her brother's life and valuing all of what was good in this world. What wonderful gifts Christopher has bestowed on our family because I had not previously mentioned the significance of the day and she had done this on her own.

Subsequent children may also miss the sibling that died before they were born. Shannon, our

youngest, wonders if she would have had a close relationship with Christopher since they would have been one and one-half years apart in age. Her other siblings are four to nine years older. Sometimes she misses that lost relationship. However, Shannon has the unique ability to quietly reach out to others during their time of need. She is a sensitive, compassionate teenager who provides a listening ear as well as providing support when needed, even though it may not have been requested.

In closing, your children are often your greatest source of comfort. Their openness and non-judgmental attitudes often allow us to express ourselves and give us permission to talk about our babies. Unfortunately, they have been deeply hurt at very young ages. Most of the time, bereaved children interact with their peers with sincere and compassionate hearts. Perhaps this is the best of the many gifts their brother or sister has left them.

*This article appeared in the March/April, 1998 (Volume 7/ Issue 2) edition of Sharing, the bereaved parent newsletter of The National SHARE Office .*