

## Comfort Zone

Lynne B. Hughes



**Lynne Hughes** is a co-founder of Comfort Zone Camp, a nonprofit organization that offers free weekend bereavement camps for children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling or primary caregiver. Hughes and her husband founded the camp in 1998. In 2002, Hughes was chosen by *Redbook* magazine as one of its 12 Movers and Shakers, and she has been featured on "Today," CBS News, "The Caroline Rhea Show" and others. In 1995, Hughes helped found the national organization Motherless Daughters. Previously, she spent 10 years working in association and convention management with various medical societies.

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A few moments ago, you watched a short video portraying an idyllic family— a Mom, a Dad, brothers and sisters: a complete family unit. What happens when part of that family unit breaks? My life began on April 28, 1964. My life began a second time on January 9, 1974, the night my mother died in her sleep from a blood clot after pulling a muscle in her leg playing tennis. I remember thinking this was a bad dream and I just needed to wake up. Chaos followed her funeral. My father went off the deep end, became the poster boy for denial— rarely coming home, and began sleeping on the couch, to avoid the bed my mother had died in. My father's parents moved in to help take care of my 3 brothers and me. I was only 9 years old.

My grandparents were responsible for hiring and firing our housekeeper. They hired anyone who had a pulse — from an ex-nun who had just left the convent, to a 22-year-old whose own two children had been taken away from her by the state.

Most men remarry within two years of losing a spouse. My father was no exception. He thought getting a "woman in the house" would solve all the chaos and bring some stability to our family. He met my stepmother one year after my mother had died, and married her 3 months later. A year into their stormy marriage, my father had a massive heart attack and died. It was the day before I started junior high. I was 12. My family was now officially and completely broken.

What happened next was a blur. My goal was to get through each day and not cry - not to be happy, but just to be okay... and not to cry. I did not fit in with other kids my age. I felt like I was dealing with the weight of the Universe, and they were dealing with their pet goldfish dying. They had parents and family stability... I had neither. On the outside I looked good, but on the inside, I struggled with everything I did. An insecure and unhappy little girl had invaded my life and my body, squashing the outgoing, confident, happy girl I once had been. There are millions of children who have lost a parent, and felt the

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same feelings I did— but I didn’t know any of them. My days were dark, and the emotional pain was indescribable. I was completely alone.

After my father’s death, we discovered that he had designated my stepmother as our legal guardian. He had not changed the rest of his will however, and everything was left to my deceased mother. There was no planning, no sitting down with a Financial Advisor; it was simply left undone!

My stepmother sued our trusts for more money almost the entire time I lived with her. She claimed if she didn’t get the money, we would have to go live with relatives. When I was 16, a judge turned her down. Believing I now had to go live with relatives, I chose an aunt and uncle and asked to live with them.

Unfortunately, I had escaped one bad situation and unknowingly put myself in another. After two weeks of not speaking to me, my uncle’s first words to me were, “I’ll never love you as a father or an uncle, nor should you expect me to.” I was devastated. Fortunately, I knew what a normal life looked like. I knew what it was like to be unconditionally loved. I was also keenly aware that the life I was living then was NOT how it was supposed to be.

I believed the death of my parents happened for a reason; that God thought I was special; and I was supposed to do something meaningful with my life. I didn’t understand what this meant, but it was a pressure that weighed on me for many years.

At the beginning of my senior year in college, I decided to become a summer camp counselor. I picked a camp in the Poconos to see a different part of the country. And I know it sounds like a bad TV movie, but yes, I met my future husband Kelly at that summer camp.

In my personal life, I struggled with intimate relationships and my inability to make a commitment. I was still grieving for the loss of my parents, but didn’t realize it. I went to a lot of therapy which was “paid parenting” for me. By the time I married my husband, we had been dating off and on for eleven years. I think there were bets being made about whether I would show up for the wedding!

When I was 30, I read a book called “Motherless Daughters,” written by Hope Edelman, for women and girls who had lost their mothers at a young age. Her book spoke to the huge emotional hole inside of me. At the time, I was managing non-profit organizations, planning conventions, overseeing boards, and managing daily affairs. The book became a bestseller, striking a chord with thousands of motherless girls and women. I thought there really ought to be an organization for this, maybe this is how I was supposed to do something meaningful with my life.

I wrote to the author in 1995, telling her my story and suggesting there ought to be a national organization for Motherless Daughters. It was the first “out of the box” thing I had ever done. Two months later, I received a call from Hope asking me to help her and four other women start a national organization. It was one of those magical defining moments— I remember not knowing whether to cry, cheer or wet my pants!

We launched a national organization. The first event I organized had 34 women and girls attending. I was really touched by Barbara, a 70 year-old woman whose mother had died 60 years earlier. She had never met or spoken to another motherless woman. Here she was, 60 years later, still having that need to connect with other women who had experienced a loss and still needing to see that she wasn’t alone.

Soon after my husband Kelly sat me down and said, “What are we going to be when we grow up? Is this as good as it gets? Are we ever going to get back into the camp thing?” How many of you went to camp as a kid or have sent your children to camp? Camp is a magical place, a place where time stands still and you “turbo-bond” with old and new friends - much like an MDRT annual meeting. If that world speaks to you, you are always trying to justify a way to go back to camp!

Kelly and I decided we should start our own camp and make it for kids who had experienced the death of a loved one. Our thought was to catch the kids when they were actually going through the grief process, have them meet an entire camp full of kids who had experienced

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a significant death, and drink in the message, “I’m not alone” instead of waiting 5, 10, 20 or even 60 years to start working on their grief. If you want to prevent an emotionally scarred adult, the child needs to heal immediately.

I believe when you are doing what you are supposed to be doing with your life, doors open, mountain move and you are able to accomplish things far greater than you ever knew were possible. This is exactly what has happened since founding Comfort Zone Camp.

I spent a year researching and interviewing the few bereavement camps that existed, and planned for two camps in May and August of 1999. The week after we set those first camp dates, I found out I was pregnant with my first child. And, with God having a sense of humor, I was due the weekend of the first camp in May. It was very interesting to be giving birth to two things simultaneously!

While organizing our first camp, a writer from our Virginia newspaper agreed to do a story about us. The article ran on the front page of the Sunday paper. We received enough kids and volunteers to fill our first camp as a result. AND, we actually knocked Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton off the front page!

We decided our camp would be free of charge. Each child would be paired 1:1 with their own adult “big buddy” volunteer who would serve as their anchor, mentor and friend. We planned a mixture of small support groups called healing circles, arts and crafts and lots of “mindless wear ‘em out” fun camp activities.

On May 21st, 1999, 34 kids and 50 volunteers took a faith walk to camp. The kids were amazing, the volunteers were incredible and the surviving parents and guardians were so grateful! We knew we were doing something magical and important. The results of that weekend were published in our newspaper, the very day I was handed my son for the first time.

That same article made its way into the hands of the Huber family. I’d like to introduce you to Hannah Huber.

### Hannah Huber

Like most 16 year-old girls, I often dream of my wedding day. But it’s a dream mixed with sadness. I’ll be missing the person who won’t be able to walk beside me— my dad.

My father passed away seven years ago from a brain tumor. It was hard watching him suffer. I didn’t want to believe that he was going to die, and after he did, I tried to keep the realization of his death from sinking in. I thought that if I could keep the sadness I felt bottled up inside, I could still be a happy, normal kid. My life had just changed dramatically, but I didn’t want anyone to feel bad for me or exclude me. I didn’t want to be known as “the girl whose dad died”.

But I was. It’s hard to feel like you fit in after one of your parent’s dies. You can’t bring your father to “Hero Night” at your school or make a Christmas present for him with the rest of the class. Everyone around you says they know how you feel, but they really couldn’t even begin to understand.

On the first Father’s Day after my dad’s death, my mom, brother and I visited his grave. There, tucked inside a flower arrangement was an unexpected gift. It was an article about Comfort Zone Camp, a camp for kids who had lost a parent or sibling. We all read the article together. My mom thought we should go, and my brother and I reluctantly agreed.

On the way to camp, I was a little apprehensive. I was thinking, “All I’m going to do is cry all weekend and hear other people cry, which will make me cry even harder.” Was I ever wrong! I had a great time! Comfort Zone was a lot like traditional summer camp. We played games, swam, sang around the campfire and made arts and crafts. But we also had “healing circles”— small groups where we could tell stories about who we lost. At first, I didn’t really want to open up, but by the end of the first circle, I was sharing stories with kids who I had met just that day. We felt an immediate bond, and many of the kids I met at that first camp are still some of my best friends.

I kept a memento from one of those first healing circles. We were given a white sheet of paper and told to color it in based on how we felt about our parent’s death. I colored mine all pink on the outside with little bits of color on the

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inside. That was the truest reflection of me at the time: bright and happy on the outside, sad and empty inside. I keep that drawing by my bed to remind myself how far I've come in the grieving process.

My brother Miles and I have now been to over 10 camps during the past six years and I now volunteer as a junior counselor/peer mentor at the camps. During this time, my mother has had two separate bouts with cancer. Today she is doing well and she serves on the camps' board of directors.

I never got a chance to thank the person, whoever it was, who placed the flowers and article on my dad's grave. I like to think that person is my guardian angel. Without Comfort Zone, I would be a different person today.

### Lynne Hughes

Over the next two years we added teen camps, reunion camps and a week-long camp. In March of 2001 we received our first national media attention with an article in Parents Magazine. The writer of that story was so inspired by our camp, that she had her husband, a senior editor at People magazine, write a story on us which was published in August of 2001.

The national publicity brought us hundreds of phone calls, letters and emails from all over the country, some wishing this had existed when they were going through their loss as a child; some wanting to volunteer ; and many from parents and guardians seeking help for a grieving child. Most of the existing bereavement camps were few and had limitations on who could attend. We hated to tell the mom in California or the dad in New Jersey, "Sorry there is no such program close to you; too bad and good luck." So instead, we raised the money for travel scholarships to bring those kids and their guardians to us in Richmond-all at no cost.

One of the volunteers who started coming to Richmond as a result of the national media was "NJ Gary". During the summer of 2001, he asked Comfort Zone to consider holding a camp for New Jersey kids. On Monday Sept. 10, we were conducting a full board meeting. Holding a New Jersey camp was the last item on the agenda. Within 24

hours, there was no doubt we needed to go. I knew we had the volunteers, a proven program and I was confident we could raise the money.

Our first camp for the children and families who lost a loved one on September 11th was within 9 weeks. Since then, we have held 14 camps, making Comfort Zone one of the most consistent responders to our nation's worst tragedy. It has been the hardest and most humbling work I have ever done.

Comfort Zone is now the largest bereavement camp in the country. We have held over 40 camps, helping more than 1,800 grieving children. Our ultimate goal is to build our own permanent camp, allowing us to expand the number and length of our camps.

Society gives you 6 months and maybe a year to "get over" your loss. But grief is a life-long journey. Children grieve very differently from adults. You may see them playing and laughing...and assume they are 'ok' ...but a huge emotional hole is developing inside.. Children need a place that's a community for them, a place they can go 6 months, 6 years or 16 years after their loss. We help repair the damage; we help repair the child. I'd like to introduce you to Matt Togna.

### Matt Togna

My name is Matt Togna and I have been involved with Comfort Zone Camp for over 4 years. My mother died suddenly from a brain aneurysm in the summer of 2000. Shortly afterwards, my dad found out about Comfort Zone Camp. He asked me if I would like to attend a camp for teens that was to be held in March of 2001. Reluctantly and not thinking much of it at the time, I told him "yes." As it grew closer for my weekend at Comfort Zone, I grew more and more nervous about what to expect and really didn't want to go.

On the Friday of camp, my dad picked me up early from school and took me home to pack my bags. It had been a long week for both of us, constantly fighting about whether or not I was going to camp. After loading the car, we fought more about the subject and finally unpacked the car. This would go on two more times until we loaded

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the car up for a third time and made the thirty-five minute drive out to camp.

We didn't speak a word to each other during the entire ride to camp. My dad knew my emotions were running high as were his. He promised me in the parking lot that his cell phone would be on the entire weekend and that I could call him at anytime to be picked up.

I never did make that phone call. The minute I walked into the dining hall and met my big buddy Todd, I knew I was in the right place and that I was going to have a phenomenal weekend. Well phenomenal wasn't the word to describe it; my weekend with Comfort Zone Camp was life changing. The fact that I was around twenty-five teenagers that were going through similar situations and experiencing similar emotions blew me away completely. I never would have thought that a weekend with a bunch of strangers would turn into one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

Since that first camp I have been to three other teen camps and have volunteered at sixteen camps for children 7-12 years old. As a volunteer I have gotten to

be a junior counselor as well as a big buddy. Each camp I attend is unique and special in its own way. The little buddies and the big buddies are always amazing and make for an incredible experience.

As I said earlier, Comfort Zone has changed my life. I don't know where I would be without it. I consider Comfort Zone my home away from home ... They are my second family. When people ask me to describe what happens during a visit to Comfort Zone, I tell them, "It's too good for words to describe, but it's the best thing I've done with my life".

### Lynne Hughes

There is no Greater Reward than doing what you're supposed to be doing with your life. I expect that in the coming years you will hear great things from Comfort Zone Camp and I am confident you will from Matt and Hannah!

I challenge you, as MDRT members to become global ambassadors for grieving children and their families. To quote John F. Kennedy, "One person can make a difference and everyone should try."