

Increased Support and Awareness

Kate's Club leverages key partnerships to build awareness and extend their network of grief support.

Kate's Club empowers children and teens facing life after the death of a parent or sibling, providing social and emotional grief support services to children in metropolitan Atlanta and surrounding areas, at no cost to the child's family. By creating a safe, uplifting environment and providing them with critical coping skills through high-quality social and therapeutic programming, Kate's Club prepares grieving youth to be productive, healthy members of their families and communities. Since 2003, The vision of Kate's Club is to "create a world where it's okay to grieve." By combating the notion that grief is a taboo topic, the organization aims to create spaces throughout society where children are safe to grieve in a healthy manner, while building public awareness around the issue of grief. Kate's Club has a full time staff of 4, supplemented by a part-time program coordinator and 6 contract therapists and a fiscal year 2012 budget of \$410,000.

ENVISIONING GREATER REACH

On an organizational scale, Kate's Club reaches its intended impact in providing grief support for its local community – and, in 2010, started considering ways to increase the visibility of its mission and vision. A core question arose: Kate's Club is a shining example of a healing place, so what measures could it take to create more "healing places" in homes, classrooms and communities? Executive Director Emily Hawkins noted, "Even through aggressive expansion and partnership, we cannot directly serve each of the estimated 40,000 children in metro Atlanta who have lost a parent or sibling. We needed a paradigm shift. The answer that arose was awareness-raising efforts and advocacy, in addition to expanded direct programming." With a small staff, and limited resources, Kate's Club needed to find innovative solutions to reach larger audiences and build awareness outside of direct impact programming have had some very specific effects on the organization's internal workings.

ACTIVATING KEY PARTNERSHIPS

Kate's Club created a vision to grow their work every year, with the goal of creating a national movement – beginning with careful, collaborative strategy, and the creation of a structured event to build awareness on a larger scale. The beginnings of building that national movement sprang from a foundation of strategic partnership and collaborative programming, coupled with a structured event and media. Kate's Club's board and staff developed a vision for a Grief Awareness Day (GAD), in which the Atlanta community pauses to appreciate the importance of recognizing, and appropriately supporting, grieving children and families. Recognizing the need for a fresh perspective and an expanded network of support, Kate's Club partnered with LEAD Atlanta. A team of members from the Class of 2011 took on the

conceptualization, planning and implementation of the first Grief Awareness Day on March 1, 2011 – an event that proved hugely successful for the organization. As participants in an intensive leadership development program, the LEAD Atlanta members were focused on their internal team dynamics, leadership styles and learning outcomes. They found that skills of motivation and communication were critical, and that leadership in a volunteer context requires flexibility and creativity.

Key players of the initial Grief Awareness Day project included Kate's Club board, staff, volunteers and member families; the 10 member of the LEAD Atlanta team; Trees Atlanta; and the leadership of the Atlanta City Council and the Georgia State Legislature. LEAD



Alumni, Jeff Romig (Georgia's WIN List) and Catherine Woodling (The Home Depot Foundation) led this team. With programming supported in part by The Home Depot Foundation, GAD included a day at the Capitol, a memorial tree-planting program with Trees Atlanta, and the launch of a blog.

"It's always a challenge to go from an idea to a plan," says Hawkins, "especially for a Board, or Executive Director, to let go of where they saw an idea going; to let someone else operationalize your vision. In our case, when it

came to executing on the plan to strategically build awareness around our cause, everyone had to let go and let LEAD take the project. In the end, everyone seemed to work well together and enjoy it." The main challenge for Kate's Club in their effort to build awareness in partnership with LEAD Atlanta came in aligning group communication: it was essential that roles and responsibilities were clearly defined between the staff, Board, volunteers and LEAD members. Overall, as an organization, Kate's Club was able to learn how to create a structure in which its mission, vision, and values drove the work and empowered volunteers to lead the planning and implementation.

EXPANDING EFFORTS

The impact of Kate's Club awareness-building work has spread successfully throughout, and beyond, the metro Atlanta area. March 1, 2012 marked the 2nd Annual Grief Awareness Day with an Invite Resolution in the Georgia House of Representatives, a proclamation from the City of Atlanta, an issue briefing breakfast for legislators, a multi-faceted media campaign, dozens of business & community partners, and workshops in 72 local classrooms. Outreach efforts have gone beyond traditional media avenues: social media and digital communications have enabled Kate's Club to reach more constituents than ever. The organization's Grief Awareness Day Blog has reached over 9500 readers, shifting organizational messaging to frank, open conversations about grief and loss, and encouraging individual, impactful storytelling outside of the nonprofit's physical parameters. Kate's Club has increased its digital audience through a newsletter, Twitter, and Facebook, resulting in a 30% gain in followers and subscribers. Digital efforts, coupled with strategic collaboration, has led to more nuanced support and leadership capacity for Kate's Club, says Hawkins: "Organizationally, this effort has driven funds and support for our mission, in the form of two new board members from the LEAD team, new volunteers and individual and corporate donors, enhanced engagement of member families, and the creation of a Kate's Club Ambassador Program."

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Kate's Club faced three primary challenges as the program matured: finding the right partners, scaling use of technology, and addressing competing opportunities. While support groups certainly exist in all parts of the country, the concept of a dedicated day for grief awareness and support is a relatively new one – particularly in the state of Georgia. Hawkins' research revealed that a similar organization to Kate's Club exists in Pennsylvania, and holds its own Grief Awareness Day in November, backed by the National Alliance for Grieving Children. While the solidification of national alliances is an ongoing goal for Kate's club, an immediate partnership held its own challenges in regards to streamlined coordination of timing and messaging. Would it be more beneficial for Kate's Club to partner with the Pennsylvania organization in November, thereby foregoing an intensive, yet comparatively solitary, effort during the legislative session in Georgia?

Focusing on your mission often brings the resources and support to you.

As Kate's Club continued to seek effective partnerships, the key challenge was aligning potential partners in a way that was mutually beneficial. The solution to this challenge proved twofold. Kate's Club unveiled its own deliverable support resource called "The Memory Tree" that could be inexpensively obtained by other like-minded grief support organizations, thereby lending exposure to the issue of grief awareness and facilitating a type of interstate partnership – particularly, a sort of packageable partnership that could go beyond a single, national Grief Awareness Day.

To solve the issue of how to increase support for their cause during the Georgia legislative session, Kate's Club leveraged its partnership with LEAD Atlanta to connect with elected officials from the City of Atlanta – enabling them to meet their vested goal in policy impact during the legislative session through impactful connections. This relationship with policy-makers, developed through the LEAD Atlanta partnership, laid the stage for impactful, personal storytelling from high-powered city influencers, and clarified a tenet of Kate's Club's mission: that grief and loss are universal. In addressing the simultaneous needs for expanding national partnerships while maximizing local relationships and legislative periods, Kate's Club was able to find innovative solutions for advocacy and awareness.

INCREASED SUPPORT ESSENTIALS

So what lessons can nonprofit leaders draw from this increased support and awareness snapshot? What essential elements are intrinsic to Kate's Club's success?

I. Keeping your mission front and center. According to Hawkins, the secret lies in "focusing on your mission often brings the resources and support to you. For us, Grief Awareness Day isn't a fundraiser, it is an awareness-building project. Advocacy awareness-building becomes a feedback loop, because when people see that you're impacting an issue – and you're giving them room to engage – then they'll really support you." Kate's Club's core model of the positive effects of grief support remains as true in its public awareness activities as it is in its "Clubhouse." Hawkins notes, "Almost every contributor to the blog has remarked that sharing their story was one of the most powerful and therapeutic experiences they have ever had. School children who have not experienced the death of a close family member deeply relate to the messages we share."

II. Communicating with intention. As the Board and staff of Kate’s Club worked alongside volunteers from LEAD Atlanta to build large-scale mission visibility, there was significant impact on organization’s internal messaging and culture. “We became much more intentional in the way we talk about our cause, both internally and externally,” said Hawkins. “We began using clearer language – using empowering language that states what we’re actually dealing with.” Their strategy for external communications also experienced a dramatic shift in intent: where, initially, Kate’s Club social media content focused on promoting events, numbers, and statistics, its digital communications now reflect a much richer experience for followers and supporters. The organization’s social networks now skew towards a more personal, individualized experience that spans the globe, focusing on “grief resources and personal testimonials; providing platforms for people to connect with one another through shared experiences – altogether, supplying uplifting stories & positive resources for people not just in Atlanta, but around the world.”

III. Seek meaningful partnerships. Kate’s Club plans to scale efforts up significantly while expanding their efforts in Atlanta public schools. Hawkins has found parallel tracks between Kate’s Club’s core mission supporting children who have lost a parent or sibling, and notes the organization constantly works to expand the definition of dealing with loss: “Grief touches everybody, and our awareness and classroom-based activities speak to all kids.”

With GAD as a point of conversation, Kate’s Club convened the first meeting of the Georgia Bereavement Camp Alliance, bringing together camp directors from around the state. The organization has also held an open house for referral partners from hospices, hospitals, counseling groups, social service agencies and schools, spreading the word about grief awareness and allowing like-minded groups and individuals to work together for greater impact. Considering the success of awareness-building efforts, Hawkins is able to lend some best practices for other nonprofits based on her organization’s experience: “By stepping back from our operations and our program model with open minds and a focus on our long-term vision, we were able to identify a new way to approach our mission. We decided to maintain and expand our core service delivery model, but to simultaneously pursue a parallel track of awareness-raising. By pursuing this parallel track, resources and support have been driven back to core services. By giving the community meaningful ways to connect with Kate’s



Club’s mission and with their own family stories, their awareness-building efforts have successfully engaged donors, advocates, board members and volunteers.”

IMPACT

The results of Kate’s Club efforts to build awareness, specifically through initiatives like Grief Awareness Day and tools like social media, represent the beginning of a transformational movement.

Now in its second year, GAD represents “a transformation that has begun dramatically, but is far from complete,” says Hawkins. Going forward, they will continue to rely on volunteers and creative low-budget tactics such as online campaigns, wholesale awareness ribbons, and do-it-yourself memory activity kits. Kate’s Club’s eventual goal is to coordinate a national movement for grief awareness. To do so, they will continue to seek out solid partnerships and builds coalitions. As Hawkins says, “there are going to be so many people who care about your issue. Identify those people, amplify their voices. find your allies and reach out to them.”