Not long ago, I discovered the significant role a school library can play in the lives of students and staff coming to terms with death. In addition to traditional resources in the library, the school library makerspace recently proved invaluable during this difficult time for students and staff. We found it could also be a center for grieving. It was within this space that our students gathered to create a meaningful memorial for a classmate who passed away. After using our makerspace, one student stated, “I felt all the sadness slip out of me little by little.” Using our makerspace to share the pain was one step toward healing for students at Islip High School.

Called to a late-day emergency faculty meeting, we learned of the passing of a recent graduate, seventeen-year-old Anil John. Anil was on his way to classes at a local college when he was struck and killed by a passing vehicle. A vibrant life so dedicated to family, school, and basketball was ended too soon in a truly senseless tragedy that is difficult to process at any age.

Most likely, as educators, over the course of our careers we will experience the death of a student (Munson & Hunt, 2005). In recent years, schools have been focusing more on mental health issues, such as bullying. However, even though grief is a normal part of life, often teachers find they are not equipped to address it (Blad, 2015).

The only cure for grief is action. —George Henry Lewis

Grief and bereavement are not words typically associated with a library. The library has been deemed a “healing place for the soul” dating back to the Ancient Greeks, who inscribed this phrase above a library entrance in Thebes (Dovey, 2015). Not long ago, I discovered the significant role a school library can play in the lives of students and staff coming to terms with death.

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The day after we learned of Anil’s death, as part of our grief plan, we set up a room for faculty and students with school mental health therapists available. It should be noted that having a school grief plan in place can be highly beneficial (Haviland, 2008; Munson & Hunt, 2005). As the school librarian, I turned to the shelves for bibliotherapy. “Reading has been shown to put our brains into a pleasurable trance-like state, similar to meditation, and it brings the same health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm (Dovey, 2015, n.p.).” I provided books on grief and bereavement and even offered the use of our iPads, which have calming and reflective meditation apps loaded on them. For example, Simply Being: Guided Meditation for Relaxation and Presence and Take a Break: Guided Meditations for Stress Relief, offer guided meditations ranging from 5 minutes to a half hour. This fits our 40-minute bell schedule, allowing our students and staff the opportunity to destress and ease anxiety as needed. Our iPad cart equipped with headphones is left out all day for easy access in our makerspace.

We needed the support of our school mental health facilitators, as well as books and apps, but still there seemed to be a strong desire among students and staff to do something more, something physical. This feeling is common and often proposed as the “best way to get back some of the power you have lost” after a death.
So I wasn’t surprised when a classroom teacher, Karen Volkmann, who is also our Interact Club advisor, approached me. Interact is sponsored by Rotary International and has the motto “Service Above Self.” Part of the Interact mission is for students to carry out hands-on service projects that help the school or community. Volkmann suggested that making buttons with Anil’s jersey number or favorite color would be a nice tribute, especially since Homecoming was right around the corner. At that time our school didn’t have a button maker on hand, so I contacted a neighboring school librarian with an active makerspace, Kristina Holzweiss, to inquire about using hers. In the true librarian spirit and willingness to collaborate, Holzweiss shared not only the machine but also supplies for more than 500 buttons. It is times like these that I am proud to be a librarian.

Although I had multiple materials available so students had options to design and create the buttons, they chose a template with Anil in mind: one with a picture of Anil posing in his #22 jersey at a basketball game. The image was a resounding hit, and no one wanted any other design. With permission from the assistant principal, Lisa Ward, we were able to make numerous copies on the school’s only color photocopier in the guidance office.

During Spirit Week, students gathered in the library makerspace during multiple lunch periods and after school to make more than 500 buttons in two-and-a-half days. With permission from our school principal, Michael Mosca, our students decided they wanted to wear their buttons on certain days during Spirit Week, including Homecoming. Students made buttons for themselves, and some volunteered to make additional buttons for others. The school security staff, the Interact Club, coaches, and the library staff facilitated distribution of these additional buttons. Administrators also presented additional buttons to Anil’s family. It was a schoolwide endeavor with many benefits. One student commented that the activity gave him “a sense of closure” and that he “managed to find comfort and a sense of happiness in a period of grief and despair at the loss of a close friend.” Volkmann declared that the activity “brought [her] closer to [her] students.”

Solving a problem through collaboration is at the heart of making, whether engineering or artistic. Our makerspace activity seemed to provide an unexpected form of group therapy, as voiced by one of our students: “The making of the pins was an escape to the grief I was feeling.” We worked together to address our emotional needs through the action of making. Providing a physical outlet to grief is constructive since “it may be difficult for some students to sit and talk about their grief, worries, and fears. They may feel more comfortable releasing energy as they talk. Provide options such as walking, drawing or doodling, or playing with a stress ball or clay.” (Heath, Leavy, Hansen, Ryan, Lawrence, & Sonntag, 2008, p. 261). The library makerspace allowed for these alternative options.

The makerspace is not a replacement for traditional forms of bereavement counseling. However, reflecting upon this activity, I can see how librarians can use their makerspace to offer infinite possibilities for creating memorials to a loved one or colleague. Working with individuals on an as-needed basis can help create positive memories. A memory shirt pillow (using the shirt of a loved one to create a pillow) or digital
WAR STORIES

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. Under Their Skin. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2016. 311p. $16.99. ISBN: 9781481417587. Grades 4-7. Ever since twelve-year-old twins Nick and Eryn could remember, their parents had been divorced. Friendly, both involved in the twins’ lives, they traded them back and forth once a week—until Mom announced she and her boyfriend of two years, Michael, were getting married. As if that wasn’t enough, they were buying a new house, too, so no one had to live in a house peopled with the memories of another family life.

The really shocking fact, though, was Michael had two kids, also twelve, that he had never mentioned before and that Nick and Eryn were not going to be allowed to meet. Ever. Apparently, something about the twins meeting Michael’s kids scared the adults. Something was wrong here, and the twins were determined to discover what the secret was. How bad could it be? Imagine their shock to discover the secret affected the entire human race….

Sepahban, Lois. Paper Wishes. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2016. 181p. $16.99. ISBN: 9780374302160. Grades 3-7. Ten-year-old Manami has lived on Bainbridge Island in Washington her whole life, until the 1942 bombing of Pearl Harbor turns everything upside-down. Fearing spies among the Japanese-Americans living near the US coast, the government forces families to move to inland prison camps. It’s bad enough to have to move from the Washington coast to the California desert, but Manami has to leave Yujin, the family dog, behind.

Devastated by all her losses (Yujin, her school and friends, her older siblings who are still in college) and sick of the terrible living conditions, Manami stops talking. Drawing picture after picture of Yujin, she throws them over the barbed wire fence every day, hoping they will bring him back. But he doesn’t come, and conditions at the internment camp worsen. Will their family—their life—ever be whole again? Includes an author note and a list of resources for more information.

Smith, Dan. My Friend the Enemy. Chicken House, 2014. 279p. $17.99. ISBN:9780545665421. Grades 4-7. The war in 1941 in Europe seems far away from the English village twelve-year-old Peter and his new friend (a tough-as-nails girl named Kim) live in, despite the bombing runs that often dump bombs on the countryside. Then, one day they see a German plane come down in flames nearby, and they decide to sneak out at night to scavenge for souvenirs. What they find is even more exciting: a German airman who parachuted out of the plane and is injured.

Should they turn him in to the village adults (many of whom want his blood), or should they hide him and help him recover? It’s what they both hope German villagers would do if Kim’s brother or Peter’s dad were injured and alone in a German village. But how much trouble will they be in—will the airman be in—if they’re caught? Includes brief war timeline in front.

Spradlin, Michael P. The Enemy Above: A Novel of World War II. Scholastic Press, 2016. 240p. $16.99. ISBN: 978054585782-6. Grades 4-7. Twelve-year-old Anton and his Jewish family and neighbors, fearing the coming Gestapo, hide in a local cave, where the absence of water means dangerous night runs to obtain it and the threat of possible discovery and capture. When a vicious Nazi major bent on advancement spots the water bearers, he and his soldiers follow them back to the hiding place and capture Anton’s elderly grandmother and a neighbor woman and child.

Anton, sent into hiding just in time, watches in horror as they shoot the neighbors and threaten his grandmother. His mother is dead, his father and brothers are involved in the war (and maybe also dead), and Bubbe (Yiddish for “grandmother”) is all the family he has left. He can’t let them take her! But what can he do armed only with daring, courage, a can of rusty nails and a fistful of rocks? You’d be surprised….
As Volkmann stated to me, “The makerspace was in place, ready and available to help ease emotions during an emotional time.” We came together as school communities often do in tragedy. According to Wolfelt (2001, n.p.), “All teens grieve when someone loved dies. But if they are to reconcile the loss, they must have a safe, accepting atmosphere in which they can mourn.” Our makerspace provided a physical outlet for healing and for moving forward. It turned into a place where we could share, heal, and come to terms with the emotions surrounding us. Though I would prefer to never again use our school library makerspace in this way, I am grateful to be able to provide a compassionate and healing outlet for students and staff.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


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