

Local

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JESSE GROVES / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Susan Whitmore, above, speaks at the Circle of Remembrance at Cottage Hospital on Saturday. Ron Akin and his daughter Lili Rose Akin, at left, pay their respects to Lili's brother during the event.

S.B. Cottage Hospital remembers children

By **KIMBERLY POHAS**
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More than 50 community members — nurses, doctors, families and clergy — gathered together Saturday evening at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital for a ceremony that honored and remembered the lives of children who passed away at the hospital too soon. The Circle of Remembrance, an interfaith memorial service now in its 11th year, draws between 50 and 70 people each year whose lives have been touched by the loss of a child. Hospital staff, doctors and nurses arranged and participated in the event, reading aloud poetry and prayers in English and Spanish.

Featured was guest speaker Susan Whitmore, founder of the Erika Whitmore Goodwin Foundation and griefHaven.org, a Web site that provides a place for grieving parents to find support through information and communal message boards. Mrs. Whitmore read aloud inspirational passages and offered help and advice based upon her own experience:

years of healing from the death of her daughter Erika, who died of a rare sinus cancer just 6 weeks before her scheduled wedding date.

"The pain is indescribable," Mrs. Whitmore said before the families sitting in a circle at the Reeves Medical Library. "It was so horrific that I just wanted to die. You don't believe that you'll feel joy again."

But nothing that difficult can ever happen to a parent again, she said, and over time it does become more manageable as the parent rebuilds his or her life. Parents need to stop asking "Why, why my child?" and instead find closure, mustering up the strength to move on with their own lives. The key to healing is finding hope, she said, and then the pain will lessen with time. "Our children are fine, wherever they are," she said. "We are left to pick up the pieces. . . . We'll move forward."

Mrs. Whitmore started the Website and foundation — based in Pacific Palisades — three years ago to help other families find support in each other in the privacy and comfort of their own homes. To help grieving

parents, she said, don't ask them if they need help, just be there for them. It is a myth that the majority of marriages end after the death of a child and, according to a recent study, they grow closer, she said.

Families at one point in the ceremony one by one placed a rose in a floral arrangement as their child's name was read aloud, while soothing acoustic guitar played in the background. It helps the families to hear their children's names announced publicly, said Rev. Pamela Washburn, chaplain and spiritual care director at Cottage. "The more you hear the child's name, the more it honors the life that your child had," said Rev. Washburn, who organized the event this year.

A small reception followed the ceremony and several families interacted with each other, approaching Mrs. Whitmore with hugs, thank-yous and sharing their losses. "It's not something you get over or get through," she said. "It's a major roller-coaster ride."

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