

The Virgin Islands Consortium

'Day of Remembrance' Helps Local Children Cope With Grief

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Cynthia Graham **September 26, 2014**



This year's National Day of Remembrance for Murdered Victims, which saw its eighth annual observance held on St. Croix on Thursday night, was all about the children. A special picture frame-making workshop took place at the Women's Coalition of St. Croix's Children's Center on King Cross St. in Christiansted in an effort to help youngsters cope with the grief of losing a loved one to violence.

According to Clema S. Lewis, women's coalition executive director, while the seven previous observances held on the island had been geared toward providing support services to adults who have lost loved ones to domestic violence or domestic assault, this year, she wanted to do something different.



l--whether it's a cousin, a mother or
September twenty-fifth we have an
on children."

Wall of Remembrance

And, what could be more kid-friendly than a fun arts-and-crafts project? But, Lewis pointed out the child's play had a clear purpose in mind.

"We're going to be making picture frames and t-shirts, little journals or whatever [the children] need to do to give them an opportunity to express their loss," she said. "We spend a lot of time with adults, but we don't give children the opportunity to [grieve]."

Lewis further explained that the death of a loved one, especially to violence, affects children just as much as it does adults.

"When people die, it hurts them just as much as it hurts us," she said. "When [children] lose their mother, their father, their uncle--it has the same impact it has on an adult and we think that because they're little people, it doesn't have the impact that it does, so this is a chance for them to come to express themselves."

When asked how many children across the territory have lost loved ones to murder, Lewis said the numbers are well in to "the hundreds."

"When we go into schools and do presentations, I have never been in a classroom when I ask the children to raise their hands who have lost someone to violence that half of the class doesn't raise their hands," she explained.

She added, "If it's not a family member, it's a neighbor, so [the children] are still being



udent at St. Croix's Educational
first hand.

A Child's Grief

"My son, who is now twenty-seven, I remember getting a call from him one day freaking out because he was waiting for the bus and this young man walked up and shot another guy right in front of him, because they had a rivalry over jewelry," she explained. "They had a fight at the race track over the weekend and the next boy brought it to the school."

She continued: "My son said all he could remember, at the time teacher Terrance Nelson saying, 'hit the ground, hit the ground' and they all hit the ground."

As a mother and social services provider, this experience saw Lewis wearing two hats at once.

"I never thought my child would have to experience that, so that was kind of rough for him and I had to do some healing with him, and that's just because he witnessed it, so I know the impact [violent crime] has on children," she said.

Besides last night's event, Lewis pointed out that the Women's Coalition provides year-round counseling services for children, with a full-time child therapist on staff.

"We provide grief and loss counseling," she said, "we also provide individual and family counseling for families grieving over the loss of someone they love."

When it comes to helping children cope with the death of a loved one, Lewis offered some advice.

"If you have a child that lost someone, don't think that because they are a child they're not experiencing grief and loss," she said. "Let them talk about. If they have something special from that person, let them keep memories. Take a special day to celebrate [the memory of their loved one]."



Childlike expressions of love

And, contrary to what some may believe, Lewis said allowing a child to express the loss of a loved one is healthy.

"Some people think that if you talk about it, it makes the child worse," she said, "but what they need to understand is the more [the child] talks about it, the more they feel comfortable and get used to losing that person--at least losing them physically, but they can still keep them close to their heart."

The Women's Coalition of St. Croix provides on-site grief counseling for children and families and can be reached at 773-9272, Mon. - Fri. from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Its main offices are located at 45 Fisher Street in downtown Christiansted.