

Death isn't taboo topic for youth, experts say

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

It hasn't been an easy past few months for Amanda Harrington.

On Aug. 12, the 15-year-old Avon resident and two other teens witnessed a freak accident which claimed the life of their friend, Christopher Hagan. Christopher, 16, was running through the East Avon Cemetery when he slipped and fell; the fall's impact caused a loose tombstone to crash down on his head.

Amanda, a parishioner and youth-group member at Avon's St. Agnes Church, had just met Christopher, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Dansville, at the Diocesan Youth Convention the previous weekend.

"The first week or two after it happened, I was still waiting for him to call. And I came to realize he wasn't going to call. It was hard — it was real hard," Amanda recalled. "Then I realized that you've got to go on."

Amanda said she has been able to cope with her grief by sharing her feelings about the tragedy with those she feels close to.

"I think it's better when I talk, personally," she remarked. "I don't mind; I kind of like it."

In fact, Amanda now finds herself in a supporting role following the death of yet another teenager in her area. Some of Amanda's peers, she acknowledged, were also close friends with Danielle Banach, 17, who was found strangled to death in her Livonia home Oct. 5.

"I told (my friends) I would

Youth

be there for them, and we talked," Amanda said. "I gave them my opinion on things."

Beth Merges, youth minister at St. Agnes, has favored a similar air of openness with her youth-group members surrounding these recent tragedies.

"It's important to provide a space for them to talk about it," Merges said.

At the same time, she added, "With most teens and young children, their parents won't talk about it. There is a real problem in the avoidance of that topic."

Merges, who also serves as a hospice counselor, recalled a 10-year-old girl whose cancer-stricken mother had just been moved into a hospice facility. The girl confronted her father, asking, "I know my mother's going to die, so why haven't you told me?"

Jack Geherin, administrator of St. Joseph's Cemetery in Auburn, experienced a similar reaction among adults last year when he attempted to organize a seminar about death and grieving for teens. To his dismay, the response was paltry.

"Many of the parents objected to it," Geherin said. "These kids get no meaningful introduction to death, and it's such a reality of life."

However, not all programs of this sort are met with strong resistance. Since the mid-1980s, Mark Anthony, director of Anthony Funeral Chapel in



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Amanda Harrington views the 'Cultural Concepts' theater group during a lock-in at St. Agnes School in Avon Oct. 28. The lock-in's theme, 'Called to be the Peacemakers,' dealt with social issues facing today's youth.

Brighton, has offered an instructional program for sixth-graders in the Pittsford Central School District. The students are given a tour of the funeral home along with an animated

slide presentation depicting a boy going through different stages of grief.

"Children are much more open to death than adults," Anthony said. "Unfortunately,

not many adults have had the chance at a young age to have their fears dealt with or dispelled."

Dr. Michael Henrichs, founder and director of the Rochester-based Kids Adjusting Through Support (KATS) agrees with Anthony.

"If parents give them the opportunity, kids will demonstrate they can handle the situation," Henrichs remarked.

KATS, a non-profit service helps children and their families cope with illness, grief and other trauma. Henrichs also gives numerous school lectures per year, and is able to broach the topic of death with children — even as young as kindergarten age — by asking them if they've ever lost a pet.

"You can ask how they felt, and the list of feelings is very similar to if a brother or sister or mother or father died," Henrichs acknowledged.

At Rochester's Aquinas Institute, 60 students are currently taking a course titled "Life, Death and Resurrection." The class took a field trip Friday, which included visits to Bartolomeo Funeral Home and Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

"Once the kids get over their initial fear, they have 1,000 questions," course instructor Edward Heyman commented.

Heyman, who also serves as Aquinas' theology department chairperson, added that he emphasizes the positive aspects of death in his class.

"The resurrection of Jesus is the most important focus," Heyman noted. "We live on after we die."

Burial

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Catholic cemeteries, the statement reads, "give witness that the community of faith is unbroken by death."

Although the cremation of Catholics and the burial of non-Catholics in Catholic cemeteries are permitted, there are still rules that govern these practices.

For example, funeral Masses are not permitted after a body has been cremated.

Father Mull said the reason for this is that the funeral rite refers to the "body," but the church views cremation as destroying the body, thus the rite cannot be used with cremains. For pastoral reasons, he

noted, families are often allowed to bring the cremains to the church for the memorial service, but they are not to be prominently displayed.

Moreover, the church requires that cremains be interred in a mausoleum or in a burial site: They may not be scattered.

Non-Catholics may be buried in Catholic cemeteries, for

example, in the case of a spouse in a mixed marriage with a Catholic. But only a Catholic may purchase a burial or interment site.

As for organ donations, Geherin pointed out that "from a Catholic standpoint, the body parts do not constitute the soul. If somebody donates a body part, it's an act of love. It's an act of charity."



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