

PETOSKEY



RACHEL BROUGHAM/NEWS-REVIEW

Amy L. Juneau (center), an oncology social worker at Northern Michigan Regional Hospital, works with siblings Kevin Johnston, 9, and Martha Johnston, 11, on craft projects that help them express their emotions in dealing with their mother's battle with cancer.

Program helps kids express emotions

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Martha Johnson, 11, and her brother, Kevin, 9, sit at a table, surrounded by craft supplies.

The two make masks, decorate boxes, and create drawings that display a range of their emotions — angry, sad, confused, even happy.

The projects help the Harbor Springs siblings deal with a difficult subject — their mother's battle with cancer.

Lenora Johnston was diagnosed with lung cancer in October 2010. To help her children better understand the disease and the variety of emotions that can come along with it, Lenora and her husband, Kevin, enrolled their children in the CLIMB program.

CLIMB, which stands for Children's Lives Include Moments of Bravery, is a free six-week program offered by Northern Michigan Regional Health System that provides emotional support to children ages 5 through 12, who have a parent or other loved one touched by cancer.

"The goal is to help children

identify and express the complex feelings they may experience during this difficult time," said Amy L. Juneau, an oncology social worker at Northern Michigan Regional Hospital.

"The program allows children to participate, and offers them a place that is safe to talk about their feelings and learn they are not alone."

Each session, children will talk about a different feeling and do a craft project that serves as a vehicle for that emotion. Topics include happiness, confusion, sadness, fear, anger and communication.

"I can put this mask over my face when I get sad," Kevin said.

"I roll this box like dice," Martha added, as she shows off a paper box she made. "I wrote ways to deal with being angry and any time I feel angry I can roll it and read what I wrote and it helps."

Kevin made what he calls a "destruction box."

"See, the scene is kind of destructive," he explained. "I decorated it that way because I try to explode the cancer out of my mom's lungs."

The siblings added they use the decorated boxes when they feel scared or angry — putting

CLIMB

Through CLIMB, children will learn:

- cancer is not their fault;
- they are not alone;
- about cancer and treatment options;
- how to express their feelings;
- how to manage anger;
- how to communicate effectively with loved ones with cancer.

those types of thoughts out of their mind until they are ready to address them.

"At the beginning the kids weren't sure about the program, but after the first night they were so excited," Lenora said. "It really has made it easier."

In addition to learning about their emotions, Martha and Kevin also learned they are not alone. They met other area children their age who are also struggling with a loved one's battle with cancer.

"You know cancer is a bad thing, but you don't know how

bad until it happens to your family," Martha said. "But now I feel stronger and less afraid."

"It has helped us as a family and made it easier to talk about and deal with the issues involved," Lenora added. "We still have bad days, but we have good days, too. There are ups and downs, but we're able to better communicate now. We learned it is OK to cry and it's OK to feel happy."

The CLIMB program will take place from 5:30-7 p.m. on Mondays, Jan. 9, 16, 23, 30, and Feb. 6 and 13, at the Community Health Education Center building located across the parking lot from the main entrance to Northern Michigan Regional Hospital in Petoskey.

CLIMB was developed by The Children's Treehouse Foundation, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to the emotional support of children who have parents or grandparents with cancer.

The service is free and is funded by Northern Michigan Regional Health System Foundation.

For more information or to enroll a child in the program, contact Amy Juneau at (231) 487-4015.