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Courtesy photo by Denise Michel

Area residents perform with The Children's Room acting troupe on Saturday.

Teens learn to cope with grief on stage

By Michael Stratford

Special to the Citizen-Herald

Standing tall and wearing brightly colored T-shirts against a darkened, otherwise empty Belmont Hill School stage, a group of six local teens took turns describing vivid scenes last Saturday afternoon.

"It was an unseasonably warm spring day," began one.

"I was at home doing my

homework, when the doorbell rang," started another.

"I was at school and the phone rang and it was for me," said a third actor, solemnly, "My teacher looked at me and then I knew."

These interwoven memories introduced a powerful and moving performance by an Arlington-based acting troupe that has been touring the region this past

spring. This is the second year The Children's Room — a center for grieving children and adolescents that serves about 75 local communities — has sponsored an acting group. The 9-year-old, non-profit organization offers all of its programming to families for free and relies on private donations for funding.

Program Manager Donna Sharff said the acting troupe en-

gages teens that may not perform as well in other types of support groups. The Center employs peer-support groups for children and families and also uses art, music and movement therapies.

"Creative expression is an important part of grieving for people," she said, "Theater is also a forum that through which audiences can respond and interact."

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The show is based on the actors' real-life experiences of grieving the death of a parent or sibling.

Actor Josh Bell described the show as important therapy for him since he lost his mother to cancer five years ago.

"It was something that saved my life," said Bell, who is a senior at Arlington High School where he has been involved in many theatrical productions.

The performance brought to the stage a host of issues that grieving teens have to deal with — from experiencing suicidal thoughts to feeling disconnected from peers at school and social events.

One lighter skit mocked the apparent insensitivity of "professional" therapists, which the actors later said were based on some previous personal interactions. Another scene revealed the frustration of dealing

with people who try to console a grieving teen with empty lines like "Do you want to talk about it?" and "Is there anything I can do?"

The acting troupe met for about two hours each week last fall to bond over shared emotions and to develop their experiences into a performance under the guidance of troupe leader Shelly Steward.

The routine of going to rehearsals each Sunday afternoon also helped Bell cope by serving as a distraction to painful reminders like the anniversary of his mother's death, he said.

Livy Baldwin, another member of the troupe who is also an AHS senior, attributed the performance's success to the "raw quality" of the show

"A lot of our show isn't scripted," she said, "We talk about the basic ideas, but we way whatever memories come to our heads in the moment."

In the most emotional part of the performance, actors directly addressed their deceased parent or sibling and shared memories of what they miss from that person — from the laughter to being tucked into bed to being cheered on at sporting events. Several of the actors also wondered aloud of how difficult it will be to go through future life events — like getting married and having kids — without their loved one present. Baldwin said this is the most challenging part of the show, but she found it helpful because she would often remember certain memories about her father in the middle of the show.

The intended audience of the performance is middle and high school students as well as mental health professionals, according to Sharff. In addition to performing at a national conference of healthcare providers this year, they performed at sev-

eral are high schools.

This educational component of the show, however, is not isolated from the primary, therapeutic goal of the program. Many of the actors said it was important for them to be able to touch other people's lives.

"I'm very interested in other people," as a result of the troupe, said Baldwin, who hopes to combine her interests in art, writing and psychology next year while attending the University of Wisconsin.

For Bell and Baldwin, both founding members of the troupe, performing in front of their peers this year at Arlington High was initially nerve-racking, yet it proved rewarding, they said.

"It was scary because you are making yourself so vulnerable, but it was also gratifying to see all the support from your friends and classmates," said Baldwin, who was touched by the standing ovation the troupe received.