

Charity snapshot

The Mourning After



Melissa Wandall
channeled her
husband's death into a
life of grief advocacy.

BY ERIC SNIDER | CONTRIBUTOR

A parent loses a child. Our biggest fear? One of them, at least. Parents aren't supposed to outlive their children. But what happens when a child loses a parent? Where does he or she go for support? Melissa Wandall wondered the same thing, so she made it her life's mission to advocate for bereaved kids.

Why grief advocacy? Because on Oct. 24, 2003, Wandall's husband, Mark, was killed by a driver running a red light at State Road 70 and Tara Boulevard in Bradenton. The couple's only child, Madisyn, now 13, was born three weeks later.

Wandall was at once a widow and a first-time mom.

She slipped into a different mode, leaving her job as a hotel sales director and, keeping afloat with life insurance, launched a nonprofit to aid grieving children, while tirelessly lobbying for traffic safety in Tallahassee.

"Right after Mark's death, right at that intersection, I made the decision

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Photos by Dex Honea

In addition to running the Mark Wandall Foundation, Melissa Wandall serves as a public speaker, life coach and president of the National Coalition for Safer Roads.

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to rise out of it,” Wandall says. “I couldn’t get stuck in the grief. I knew it would just take me down and that wouldn’t do my daughter any good. I chose to embrace the love I had been given and not the loss.”

The Mark Wandall Foundation helps children who are grieving the loss of a family member or guardian. The centerpiece of the foundation is its participation in Comfort Zone Camp, a three-day bereavement program for children that’s part of a national organization of grief camps.

In late April, the foundation held its third annual camp in Apopka. Fifty children ages 7 to 17, along with more than 75 “big buddies” and support staff, gathered for bonding, counseling, consoling, catharsis, kickball and barbecue. Madisyn was there. Now a seventh-grader at Out-of-Door Academy, she’s attended all three camps.

Says Wandall, “We have children whose dads have passed away (who are told), ‘You’re in charge now. You’re the man of the family.’ They think that’s what the kid needs. That kid needs permission to cry, to scream, to laugh, to go to the surviving parent and lean on them.”

That’s something Wandall did not do as a 12-year-old when her sister died of bone cancer at age 14. “My parents were incredible, but everything changed; they didn’t talk to me like they used to,” Wandall recalls. “If anything was going on with me, I didn’t want to take it to them. They were already grieving, and I didn’t want to upset them further. My friends didn’t know how to treat me. I was really alone. After my husband passed away, I knew that I wanted to connect kids in grief so they would have an opportunity to grow together.”

The charity is a one-woman operation with some help from volunteers.

Backed by local sponsors, it brings together past Comfort Zone campers and other grieving kids for a social “reconnect” every other month. It gets by on \$70,000 a year, which, according to Wandall, is not enough to qualify for substantial grants. To keep the coffers padded, Wandall cobbles together donations of \$2,500



Madisyn Wandall, 13, was born three weeks after her father’s death.

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or less. Her primary fundraiser is a golf tournament, which is held each fall at Legacy Golf Club in Bradenton.

Wandall would love to open a youth center for grieving youngsters, a place for kids to engage in activities and find support. Though not a pipe dream, the center is still just a loose concept. Nearly all of the foundation’s money and Wandall’s energy is channeled into running its Comfort Zone Camps. (“We’re small and we don’t have the resources or the manpower to seek out grants,” Wandall says.) Right now her main focus is on ramping up donations to facilitate two camps a year.

When Wandall is not steering the foundation, she’s helping organizations and businesses develop grief advocacy programs. She earns her income by serving as a consultant and public speaker. “I’m such a nonprofit person that sometimes it gets forgotten that I’m for hire,” she says, without a trace of rancor. “My calling is nonprofit, but I still need to take care of my daughter.”

It took Wandall five years to pass the Mark Wandall Traffic Safety Act, a controversial measure that gives cities and counties the option to install red-light cameras at high-risk inter-

sections. Many municipalities have introduced them; some have dropped them. Despite the program’s good intentions, some drivers and public officials argue that it’s quick revenue grab. Although the law went into effect in 2010, Wandall still goes to Tallahassee every year to fight for it. “Every year the House tries to repeal it,” she says. “That body has a lot of representatives who do not believe in government intrusion. It saves lives, and if you want to put it in economic terms, one red-light fatality crash costs our state \$6 million.”

If Wandall is dogged by grief, it’s impossible to tell by talking to her. Outwardly, she’s energetic, warm and articulate — an open book. Her years of perpetual motion, while enriching so many lives, have taken a toll on her own grieving process.

“I’ve always asked people in grief to pause, to really nurture themselves and give themselves permission to grieve,” Wandall says. “But I never allowed myself to grieve. I look back on my life and I have no regrets. I’ve given a lot of love, but I forgot to love myself in the process. I’m learning to do that now.”