**Health Care Heroes 2018 Nomination: Health Care Innovation category**

**(An organization that has designed and implemented a new program that has improved the quality of life for a segment of our community)**

**Hospice Savannah’s Full Circle Grief and Loss counselors for**

**“We the Living: A Community-based Children’s Grief and Violence Support Network”**

Hospice Savannah, a not for profit organization, provides Savannah, Georgia and surrounding counties with the best services and resources on living with a life-limiting illness, dying, death, grief and loss. Our comprehensive mission charges us with meeting the critical and emerging needs of our community. While mass-shootings often garner high profile coverage in the news media, daily gun violence in communities like ours has a significant and sustained impact, and yet goes nearly unrecognized. Two years ago, Savannah experienced a record setting, near-doubling in the number of homicides, from 32 in 2014 to 53 in 2015, and remaining at 50 throughout 2016 – a rate tragically comparable to larger urban areas like Chicago. As in too many other American cities, gun violence disproportionally affects low-income, African-American children and families living in the poorest neighborhoods, who are left to struggle with grief and post-traumatic stress with little or no accessible support.

With our many years of expertise providing grief counseling, Hospice Savannah was compelled to take the lead in addressing the unique grief needs of children who have experienced a violent loss. Without intervention, these children are more likely to experience complicated grief including post-traumatic stress, hypervigilance, insecurity, sleep disruption, poor academic performance or truancy, fear, and more. In 2016, with a grant from the New York Life Foundation, and in partnership with other community organizations, we set out to create a community-based grief support network specifically for children who have lost a loved one to violence.

Foremost among our community partners have been the Savannah-Chatham County Public School System, the Chatham County Victim Witness Assistance Program, and the Savannah Metropolitan Police Department, both through their Savannah Impact youth re-entry program and via the police chaplains.

One of the biggest challenges we face is gaining the trust of the parents/guardians of the children and youth who need our support, and our partnerships have been instrumental in building these bridges. We have observed that many families affected by violence believe that if a child connects with his/her thoughts, feelings and memories, then it “will make it worse” (i.e. the child will begin to act out, or give expression to their grief). Our valued community partners are on the front lines in combating this misconception. For example, the Victims Witness Program personnel disseminate our information and promote its benefits to the families with whom they have already garnered trust. The same is the case for our longstanding and valuable working relationship with the Savannah Chatham County Public School counselors and social workers who are in a unique position to identify children and youth impacted by gun violence, advocate for the effectiveness of our support and then make direct referrals.

Our partners also make it possible for us to serve children in their own neighborhoods by hosting the grief support groups within their organizations. Last year through this project, a total of 43 children were helped through trauma-informed grief support groups in school or juvenile justice settings. This group included children at one of our most impoverished inner city schools, and 30 teens in the Savannah Impact Program who had experienced a violent loss.

Finally, through our partnerships, we are also strengthening our community’s ongoing capacity to help grieving children by creating a more comprehensive and enduring network of support. Last year we trained 21 trusted adults, including 15 public school counselors and 6 staff members of a local non-profit organization, to better support grieving children in their own neighborhoods or organizations. This year, Savannah Impact Program staff will also be trained to help the children they serve in the juvenile justice system. As a result, these community resources are better equipped to understand trauma-related grief, advocate for youth impacted by gun violence, and identify and refer children in need of professional assistance.

The outcomes of this project are significant, measurable, and meaningful. The groups have an immediate impact on the children, the majority of whom show demonstrated improvement in key areas such as feeling supported, decreased fear, and decreased loneliness. The groups are led by our masters-level counselors, all of whom are trained in childhood trauma, with our lead counselor also a Certified Clinical Trauma Professional. The groups help children learn to understand and express their grief, and to learn skills to cope with their emotions. Music is a special highlight of the program. Our music therapist helps children learn how music can be a tool to help with their emotions, create a personal grief playlist, talk about how a song speaks to them, and even write songs of their own. Each child also receives an iPod Shuffle with their playlist to keep.

The benefits of grief counseling and support also have long-term benefits. Young people who have learned to better express and cope with their feelings will more successfully navigate challenges and conflict at school, in the family, and in the community. As a result, they are also more likely to avoid future engagement with the justice system, succeed in their education, and improve their employment potential.

Although Savannah’s homicide rate dropped notably in 2017, violence continues to impact our city’s children as profoundly as ever. Early this year, a local high school football player was gunned down while getting a snack with his friends at a fast food restaurant. The loss was deeply felt not only by his family, but also by his classmates, teachers, and entire school community. Because of our partnership with the public schools, our Full Circle grief counselors were called in to provide responsive counseling and support, and will return to the school in the near future to lead a specialized support group.

While we may not be able to prevent violence, together, we can create a brighter future for those whose lives have been affected by it.