Ceremony keeps alive the light of lost children

Candles are lit around the world to remember those who died young

By Aneri Pattani GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 13, 2015

Chuck Snekvik held a candle for his daughter, Amy. The light of the flame reflected her bright, lively spirit. She was a spunky girl, he recalled.

Chuck’s wife, Marianne, held a candle for their son, Andrew. His love for people could be felt in the warmth radiating from the candle. He always made people feel close to him, Chuck said.

Amy died in a car accident when she was 7 years old. Andrew passed away from colon cancer at 38.

The Snekviks held candles in their memory, hoping their children could see the tribute from heaven.

“As a parent, losing a child is the worst thing that can happen to you,” Chuck Snekvik said. “We have the hope of seeing them again in heaven, but it still hurts.”

The Snekviks joined more than 50 people Sunday night at the Church of the Covenant for a candle lighting ceremony to honor children who are no longer with them, but whose memories continue to burn bright.
The Newbury Street church hosted the ceremony by the Boston chapter of the Compassionate Friends, an international organization that offers support to families that have lost a child.

This was the second time the Boston chapter hosted the event.

Parents, grandparents, and siblings who had gathered in the church clasped hands and put their arms around one another as Marianne Snekvik, one of the chapter’s coleaders, read 35 names of children who had died.

As each name was read, a family member received a candle and joined a line at the head of the church. The group stood in silence, some with tears in their eyes, as the glow of the candles steadily grew brighter.

“It’s the type of group for which you hope you never become eligible,” Marianne Snekvik said, “but we do find some encouragement in being with each other.”

The first candles in the international ceremony were lit in New Zealand at 7 p.m. local time. As candles burned down in one time zone, they were lit in the next, creating a virtual 24-hour wave of light as the observance continued around the world.

“The idea is that we are not alone in our bereavement,” said Louise Strasenburgh, another coleader of the Boston chapter, who joined the group after losing her 26-year-old son in 2011.

Those words rang true when the voices of all the attendees recited a poem about remembrance in unison.

“When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them,” the voices echoed in the church. “When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.”
The worldwide candle lighting ceremony began in the United States in 1997 as a small Internet observance. The event has since grown to an international event, consisting of hundreds of formal candle lighting events and thousands of informal candle lightings done in people’s homes.

Compassionate Friends aims to connect families that have lost a child of any age and from any cause to a network of supporters.

The idea for the organization took root in England in 1969 when a hospital chaplain brought together the parents of two children who had died. He realized that they could help each other in a way he never could, Strasenburgh said.

The group now has more than 650 chapters around the world. The Boston chapter has about 20 members, Strasenburgh said.

Kenneth J. Cooper, a member of the local organization for about two years, said it gave him a safe place to talk about the loss of his older brother.

Ronald Cooper was attacked in Monterrey, Calif., in 1966 and died from his injuries. He was 17 years old. Kenneth Cooper was just 10.

The loss is still as poignant today as it was 50 years ago, Kenneth said.

He can’t talk about it with his family, though. The last time he brought up the incident with his parents, they got angry. The Compassionate Friends helped him fill that void.

“For a while I felt self-conscious for feeling the loss so strongly after all these years, but these meetings helped me feel that I was not weird or out of order,” Cooper said. He found a place where people understood his loss and were willing to listen.
At the end of the ceremony Sunday night, Cooper extinguished the candle that honored his brother. As the lights went out, Strasenburgh said the memories would live on.

“Although we will extinguish the lights, the lights in our hearts will never go out,” she said.