

# Na Keiki O Emalia allows children to talk, cry, remain silent to cope with bottled-up emotions

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While driving to town a few weeks ago, Maui resident Brooke Brown heard a radio interview about the Nutcracker ballet. She started to tear up, remembering how she used to take her daughter Emalia to see the Christmas classic when she was younger.

Reminders of Emalia, who died in February 2014 at age 42, are all around at this time of year.

"The holidays are absolutely, for most people, the hardest time when there's been a death in the family," Brown said. "It's in the air. You can't buy so-and-so a gift. You can't go to dinner with them. It's a huge hole."



Emalia Guard enjoys a moment with her son, Kahalakea. When Guard died in 2014, her son was 3 years old. Wanting to help children deal with the loss of loved ones, Kahalakea's grandmother, Brooke Brown, started a nonprofit called Na

Keiki O Emalia.

Photo courtesy of Brooke Brown

While many are gathering around glittering trees and loaded dining tables with family, others are seeing empty seats and missing faces.

This Christmas, Brown is working to honor her daughter's life the way Emalia would have wanted "by helping grieving families find their peace."

Brown is spearheading an organization dedicated to "helping children heal" after the loss of a loved one. Named after her daughter, Na Keiki O Emalia received nonprofit status in August. Now, it's in the process of adding staff and programs.

After her daughter died, Brown worried about her grandson. Little Kahalakea was 3 years old when Emalia passed away, and Brown wanted to know what she should look for as he got older - "possible signs that he's struggling with his grief."

While searching for guidance, she realized that there were no organizations in Maui County fully dedicated to children's bereavement. The Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center has programs, but it only serves children of Native Hawaiian ancestry. Hospice Maui offers family counseling and has weekly support groups for grieving adults, but no ongoing programs for children.

"For children . . . we don't have any groups right now, which is why we're so thrilled about what Brooke's doing," said Hospice Maui psychosocial services director, Beverly Lundquist. "For kids to have . . . something that they know will be accessible and available on an ongoing basis, to me that's a huge service."

After exploring her options, a friend told Brown about the Dougy Center, a comfortably sprawling house in Portland, Ore., where grieving children and families can find support and advice, a shoulder to cry on or a bag to punch.

Her friend asked Brown if she'd consider starting a similar organization on Maui, a suggestion that went straight to her heart "like a heat-seeking missile," Brown said.

Based on statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, Dougy Center staff told Brown that Maui County currently has about 1,800 children under the age of 18 who have lost a parent to death. The Queen Lili'uokalani Center serves around 250 children who have lost parents, staffers say.

Na Keiki O Emalia will be modeled after the Dougy Center. It's free and open to kids ages 3 to 18 who've lost a loved one. Anyone can attend as long as they keep up regular attendance, said Brown, who plans to have meetings twice a month.

It's not therapy, she insisted, but it will be therapeutic.

"This is not about fixing anybody," Brown said. "We're just giving these parents and these children safe space to be themselves, to be accepted as they are, whether it's crying the whole time they're there or laughing."

Kids will gather in age groups led by a facilitator, whose job it will be not to lead or direct, but simply "hold the space," allowing kids to sit in a circle and just talk, or cry, or not say anything at all. They'll get to participate in activities, making art, pounding drums, anything to let the grief or anger flow instead of being bottled up.

"For kids, finding a language for what happened is a different process, just to be able to name what their feelings are and understand what they're going through," Lundquist said.

Parents or guardians will have their own groups to attend. Brown said it's crucial to have families on the same page; otherwise kids might be moving on before parents are ready.

Everyone grieves differently, Brown said, but for many people grief is a subject they don't want to touch. Parents who are in pain may try not to talk about it to shield their kids. The kids, in turn, pick up on the silence and end up avoiding the subject as well, she said.

When the grief stays dormant, it's hard on both parents and kids, who might act out their emotions in other ways, such as substance abuse and run-ins with the law, Brown said.

"It's so important that children's grief get addressed. Otherwise, it stays with them and can impair relationships when they're older," Brown said. "It's such a sad waste of a life, not to mention the social cost."

Having a time and space where families can come together and address their emotions and struggles is a major purpose of Na Keiki O Emalia.

"By requiring that the adult caregiver accompanies the child, it means there are two evenings a month that's dedicated to grieving for that person, which is going to be really good for them personally in their own adult groups and also really good for them with their child, driving to it and driving home. It's real bonding time," Brown said.

Brown hopes to start programs in April. In January, she and other organizers will undergo training with the Dougy Center, followed by instruction for facilitators, who must attend two full days of training. Then, the organization will begin interviewing interested families.

While services are open to anybody, Brown said she wants to make sure the group setting is right for each child. Some kids might be better served attending individual therapy first before attending larger groups, she explained.

For Brown, Na Keiki O Emalia gives meaning in the aftermath of her daughter's death, which "wasn't right" for someone as young and healthy as she was, Brown said. Reaching out to others and sharing aloha was what Emalia was all about.

"My daughter was really upbeat. She'd be the first person to try to help people get back to being happy again," Brown said. "If our groups can make it an easier path for any of these people to go back to living lives where they feel good again and happy again, then how wonderful."

For more information on Na Keiki O Emalia, visit [nkoemaui.org](http://nkoemaui.org). Additional information on Hospice Maui and Queen Lili'uokalani Center bereavement services can be found at [hospicemaui.org](http://hospicemaui.org) and [onipaa.org](http://onipaa.org), respectively.

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