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Marion Fitzgerald, Sheila Martello, Pat Wotton and Kevin Keelen staff Stephy's Place, a grief support center in Red Bank.

A Place for Solace

RED BANK – After she lost her husband in the 9/11 World Trade Center tragedy, Sheila Martello found that every morning was a struggle to get out of bed and get moving for her two young sons.

But what helped her through those days was a place where she could share her feelings and find comfort and solace: the 9/11 New Life Support Group on Tuesday mornings.

“The grief – it was so overwhelming,” said Martello. But the Tuesday morning support group gave her strength. “Tuesday was a symbol of what happened,” said Martello. Sept. 11 was a Tuesday that year.

“We looked forward to that meeting,” she said of the women, all of whom had lost a loved one on Sept. 11. “Tuesday was our center. If we could get to Tuesday, Tuesday can get us to Friday.”

Despite the tragedy, Martello said her experience with the support group was a gift.

Now, nearly 13 years later, Martello and others from that group have founded a place they hope will be a similar place of refuge for those who are grieving. Stephy’s Place, a support center for grief and loss, will open its doors Sept. 1 at the Swede Chevalier Building, 210 W. Front St.

Named in honor of Stephy Hardman Kaminoff, a woman from Middletown who when diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, knew she would eventually lose her life, leaving behind three small children and all those who loved her. Martello said she thought about how lucky she herself had been to have the support of the New Life Support Group and wished she could create a similar place for people like Stephy.

“Knowing Stephy’s grief and the grief her death would cause others,” said Martello, said, she and the others wanted to give people “a Tuesday group” of their own. “There needs to be a place for people who are grieving. I was waiting for God to tell me when it was the right time.”

Kevin Keelen, one of the facilitators at Stephy’s Place, thinks the center will be a great asset to those grieving.

“These families were so shattered,” said Keelen of the 9/11 families. At the time he was a priest at Holy Cross Church in Rumson, but he has since left the active priesthood.

“We realized we could be a support system.” Bereavement groups are not always easy and those grieving are not always quick to share. A trust has to develop. “You ask if one person wants to start,” said Marion Fitzgerald, a facilitator of Stephy’s Place, who was instrumental in the 9/11 New Life Support Group.

“Inviting people to share, that’s what it’s all about.” “Death is the only one thing guaranteed,” said Keelen. “And most people spend time in denial. We embrace it as a reality and help others in doing so we grow and heal together.”

There are naysayers, Martello warned. “Already there’s a 9/11 backlash,” she said. She has heard comments about “Aren’t they over it?” But Martello insists it’s not about their personal grief or the 9/11 tragedy, but about helping others to start to heal, the way they have been helped.

After Sept. 11, there was an outpouring of gifts – from gift baskets to vacations to babysitting services. A group called ROMEOS– Retired Old Men Eating Out – helped with odd jobs around the house, errands and more. Volunteers pitched in with help paperwork, help learning to pay bills, get financially organized, among other tasks.

“All services were volunteered,” said Fitzgerald. The group hopes to be able to offer those services and help at Stephy’s Place, including a resource and referral list

“We’re trying to model Stephy’s Place after what we knew,” said Martello. “Peer support offering encouragement.”

In addition to support groups, Stephy’s Place will offer monthly adult meditation classes.

“We were so fortunate to have that support group,” said Pat Wotton, who gave birth to her son Rodney eight days after her husband Rodney was killed in the World Trade Center. Now she is one of the board members of Stephy’s Place. “We were in different circles,” she said about members of the support group, “and would never have met. Yet they’ve helped so much in my life.”

Visitors to Stephy’s Place will meet with a facilitator and find group that best suits them. “People grieve differently,” said Fitzgerald. “Men and women grieve differently.” They hope to offer groups for spouses, siblings, younger people, motherless daughters, and suicide survivors.

Even people grieving the loss of a spouse through divorce can find comfort. “Grief is so debilitating,” said Martello. “And there’s a reason to be healthy and move forward. “I refuse to raise angry children, and the key is not to be an angry mom.”

Martello hope the healing that begins at Stephy’s Place moves beyond the small support group. “If we can help somebody heal from this, it’s got to help the world.”