





"A WARM PLACE, WHERE IT FEELS LIKE A HOME"

AUNT JANET'S HOUSE™, ON THE AVOW CAMPUS, OFFERS GRIEVING CHILDREN A HAPPY, SAFE SPACE TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES

By Tess Raines

For children who have lost a loved one to death, incarceration, deportation, divorce or deployment, the grieving process can be especially difficult. And without healthy expression, its impact can be detrimental.

So when Naples philanthropist Janet Cohen stepped forward in 2018 with a donation large enough to cover the costs of renovating a standalone bereavement center for the Avow Kids program, the children didn't just receive a new facility; they received a home: Aunt Janet's House.

Cohen has a history of making notable contributions to the youth of Southwest Florida over the years. She has donated to the Florida Gulf Coast University student union; to the Golisano Children's Hospital garden; and to the Naples Salvation Army's youth facility, which was named the Fran Cohen Youth Center in honor of Cohen's daughter and only child, who passed away from breast cancer in 2010.

EACH PROGRAM GIVES CHILDREN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Her philanthropic nature was inspired by her parents, who lived through the depression and came across others who were on the brink of poverty. “They didn’t judge people by how much money they had. They judged them by their character,” say Cohen, 94. “I guess it rubbed off on my brother and me.”

But, for some reason, she began to consider her donation to Avow Kids as something special, she says.

“I think of all the things I’ve contributed to—I really think that I have the closest feeling to doing this house,” Cohen explains. “I just want it to be a warm place, where it feels like a home with children.”

The concept of Aunt Janet’s House was highly anticipated by Avow staff ever since talk of a standalone grief center began to circulate early in 2018. Since opening in 1983, Avow has offered bereavement support for children who have suffered the loss of a loved one, but for several years this was largely unknown to the community; many only knew Avow as a hospice. “People didn’t really know that we had this program,” says Natalie Gonzalez, Avow’s manager of supportive care.

Over the years, the organization has fostered several support programs and workshops on the Avow campus with the intention of giving grieving children an outlet to deal with their emotions in a healthy way. As the program continued to grow, Avow Kids needed to expand, so in 2017, it moved into a small wing in the new Lyon Center on campus. Soon, however, the program needed even more space – one dedicated solely to



Photo credit: Bernadette Lapaglia



HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH THEIR LOSS AND MAKE STRIDES TOWARD HEALING

children's bereavement. A gift from Cohen made that possible. In 2017, Avow had purchased property adjacent to its campus for growth; it included a home that leaders originally intended to demolish. On closer inspection, Avow recognized the home's potential to be a new space for the Avow Kids program, but did not have the funds to remodel it. With Cohen's contribution a year later, the home was renovated to accommodate the children's bereavement programs.

Avow Kids counselors hope that activities like music and art therapy and other creative programs offered in a comfortable and non-clinical space like Aunt Janet's House will help the children cope with their loss and make strides towards acceptance and healing. Providing different forms of bereavement therapy is crucial for kids, says Gonzalez.

"Validating those emotions for them, whatever that looks like—whether it's through drawing or through creating music or taking pictures or playing outside—they have to be told that it's OK and that they don't have to be happy all the time," she explains. "Aunt Janet's House is a safe place where kids can think, 'All my feelings are OK—I can cry, I can be angry, I can be happy—I'm learning all these things that are all good things to learn.' And if they can do them in our home, maybe they can take them back to their home, and feel like 'Oh, now this is a safe place for me to process, too...'"

Each program gives children freedom of expression by addressing their emotions directly, without limits. But getting kids to share their thoughts and express their grief is only possible when they feel they are in a safe place, which is why Aunt Janet's House needed to convey security and comfort. To make the center feel truly like a home, Avow furnished it with cozy furniture and bright pops of color, from the orange counter stools to the fuzzy round couch pillows. The remodeled kitchen is trimmed with neon green backsplash and includes a refrigerator and microwave. In the corner sits a small dinette, labeled the Conversation Station, and on the walls hang paintings created by children who have participated in Avow Kids programs. The art and music therapy room boasts shelves lined with drums, maracas, tambourines and a violin.

One of the most important new concepts introduced to Avow Kids through Aunt Janet's House is the Grief Cave. A walk-in closet-sized room in the home is painted black and lined with plexiglass panels. The kids are given neon markers and encouraged to write and doodle anything they want on the walls. Black lights illuminate the room, making the children's messages glow. "It adds to that creative fun for the kiddos, of highlighting what they're feeling and letting them leave their mark on the world," says Gonzalez.

Avow Kids offers its bereavement services to any kids from the surrounding counties who have experienced a loss. It

LETTING THEM LEAVE THEIR MARK ON THE WORLD

has always been their mission to comfort a grieving child, and now they have a safe and inviting facility to make the transition of loss easier. "It isn't just bricks and mortar and a house. It's feelings and caring and it's the love of children," says Cohen. "I think that's the whole thing."

To refer a child to the Avow Kids program, call (239) 261-4404. Services are offered to children and teens without charge.



NAPLES PHILANTHROPIST
JANET COHEN

