

APPEALS TO ALL AGES

Pre-Valentine event 'for the loves of your life'

Sponsored by South Shore Hospital Friends of Hope

By Carol Britton Meyer
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Linden Ponds is hosting a celebration for grandkids, grandparents, and parents.

"Isn't It Grand!" will take place Saturday, Feb. 4, from 10:30 a.m. to noon in the Linden Ponds auditorium, 203 Linden Ponds Way. The event will feature music, comedy, and fun for all ages.

Award-winning entertainer Keith Munslow will blend music, wacky poetry, storytelling, improvisation, art, and audience participation into a program that appeals to children and adults alike.

Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. The event is sponsored by the South Shore Hospital Friends of Hope, with proceeds benefiting their "Helping Children Cope with a Loved One's Cancer" program (HelpingChildrenCope.org).

Hingham resident Julie Kembel, co-leader of the HCC program with Weymouth resident Maureen O'Brien, called this celebration a "pre-Valentine event for the loves in your life." The idea, she said, "is to do something special for grandparents and grandchildren." Parents are also welcome.

"The choice of venue seems a natural for our targeted audience," Kembel said.

Art and story program

A child's world changes when a family member has cancer. HCC is a free, two-hour art and story program for children ages four through 10 and their families or caregivers designed to help children gain a sense of comfort during stressful times when adults are struggling with their own feelings and worries and may not recognize cancer's impact on their young lives. Parents and children share their feelings in a comfortable, library story-hour format. Take-home materials include cancer-specific resources and guides for home discussion.

The idea behind the volunteer-run program is that a diagnosis of cancer affects every family member and that children whose loved ones face this illness are often unsure how to express their feelings. HCC provides caregivers with guidance as to how to discuss the topic with children while helping the youngest family members transform their gift of imagination into a coping strategy.

Hingham and Weymouth sessions

HCC sessions are offered from October through June, on the first Thursday of each month from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. at Hingham Pub-

lic Library, 66 Leavitt Street, in the Whiton Room and on the first Tuesday of the month at Tufts Public Library, 46 Broad St., Weymouth, in the Jones Room, from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Individual sessions are available throughout the year by appointment. For further information or to sign up, call (781) 624-8919.

The program provides a creative outlet for ideas and feelings within a supportive environment. During the first 45 minutes to an hour of each session, children work in a small group format while the adults observe. Then they break for a snack, make individual drawings, and talk with the two team members working with them. During that time, adults take part in a mini-session of their own with a third team member, learning about available resources and how to use the program effectively at home.

'Moon Balloon'

Families receive a copy of "The Moon Balloon: A Journey of Hope and Discovery for Children and Families" by renowned Hingham author-illustrator Joan Drescher, which is central to the program. The book helps children use images to express their feelings about something that may be too painful for them to talk about.

For more than 20 years, this story has taken children on an imaginary trip in a hot air balloon, allowing them to express their inner emotions and wishes through art. Balloon symbols are used to enable creative expression, allowing participants to identify and reduce their stress level. Each balloon represents a feeling one might have. The book emphasizes that it's all right to have more than one feeling at a time.

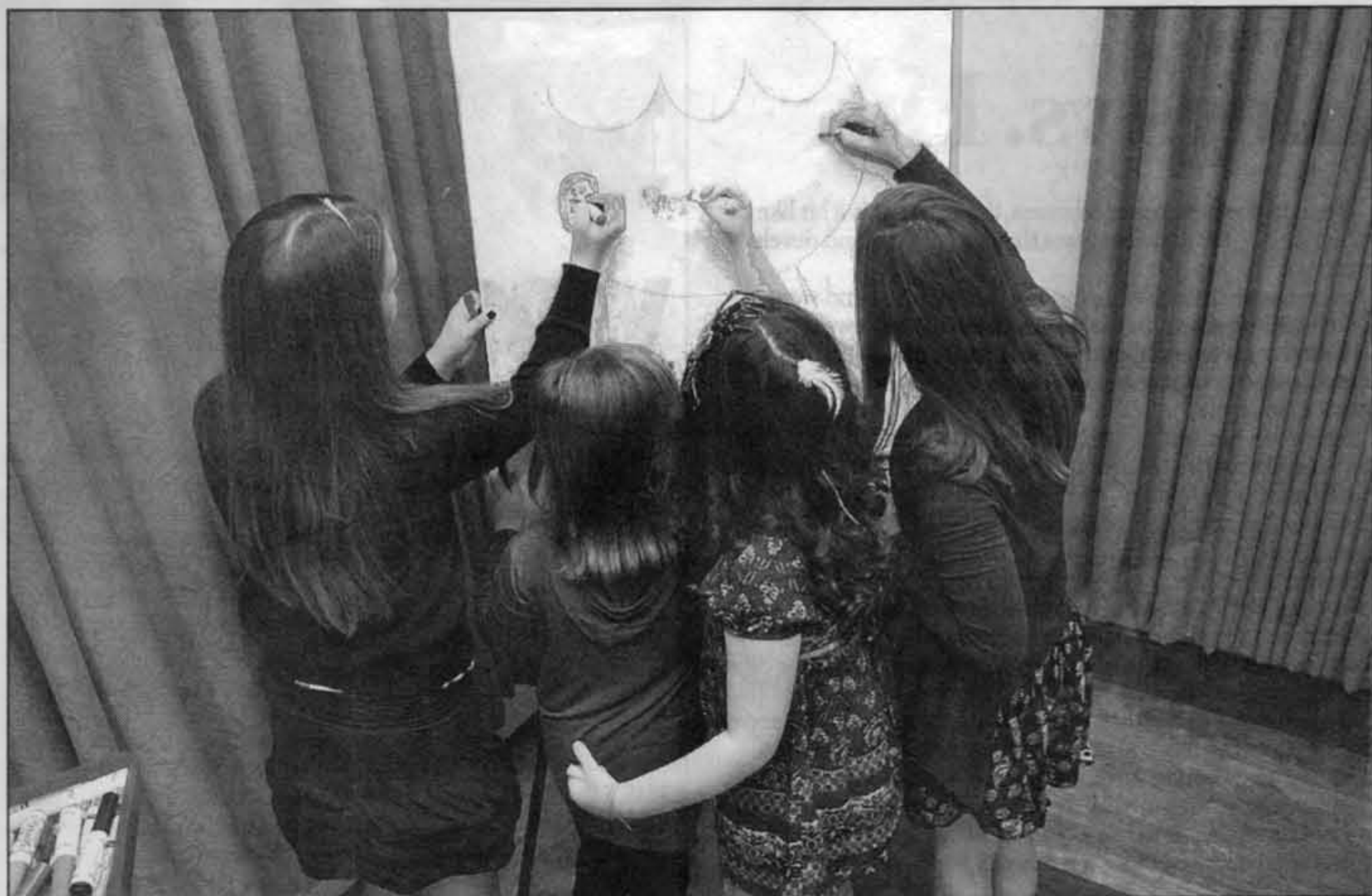
During HCC sessions, trained facilitators encourage youngsters to express and communicate their feelings about a loved one's cancer. In the process, parents and caregivers learn that it's all right to talk to children about this subject.

The "Moon Balloon" features sun, stress, peace, tear, love, giggle, butterfly, and angry balloons. Participants are asked to create their own drawings of how they feel in relation to the feeling each balloon stands for.

The balloons in the book are designed so that each child can interact with them, putting his or her own images and symbols in the balloon's basket and all over the balloons. Entering a different balloon opens up a new avenue of communication.

Community focus

Helping Kids Cope has a community focus, bringing



Children love to join in and create 'Moon Balloon' drawings that express their feelings as part of the 'Helping Children Cope with a Loved One's Cancer' program. COURTESY PHOTO

Award-winning entertainer Keith Munslow will blend music, wacky poetry, storytelling, improvisation, art, and audience participation into a program for all ages.

knowledgeable, skilled volunteers into the program — including teachers, artists, counselors, and nurses — at every level. A number of Hingham residents participate in the program.

Kembel was among the small group of local volunteers who conceived the program originally and applied for the first funding grant in 2009.

Drescher, a collaborator and mentor from its inception, has explored how art heals the body, mind, and spirit over the past two decades. Her colorful, healing murals are found in major hospitals in the United States and Canada, including Mass General Hospital for Children.

Old Ship Church Minister the Rev. Ken Read-Brown composed a melody to accompany Drescher's "Moon Balloon" book and is a program mentor.

"I've been very pleased to assist in small ways with the 'Helping Children Cope with a Loved One's Cancer' program," Read-Brown said. "This program fills a need not otherwise addressed, and does so in loving and beautiful ways using the gateways of art and story to gently and supportively elicit the sharing of children's feelings. I wholeheartedly would recommend this program to any family living through the challenge of cancer."

Pauline Alighieri of the Hingham-based Friends of Mel Foundation sponsored the 2010 and 2011 volunteer training programs with Drescher.

"In my work at Mass General, I have used 'The Moon Balloon' as a way to help children and families communicate when words are too difficult. I am delighted that

Helping Children Cope is using this book," Drescher said. "It's an excellent program that offers comfort and communication to families dealing with illness."

The Moon Balloon Project and Helping Children Cope work as non-profit partners to bring families together in conversation at a time when they need it most. "I am impressed with the dedication, commitment, and professionalism of the HCC volunteers, and I

encourage families to participate," Drescher said.

To purchase tickets call Barbara Wahlstrom, (781) 624-4170; visit southshorehospital.org/events; or stop by Noble's Camera Shop in Hingham Square (781-749-0588). Tickets are also available at The Village Toy Store, 95 Washington St., Canton (781-821-9374). To make a donation or to get involved with the program, call (781) 624-8919.

Positive feedback

Program participants offer many positive comments. These include:

- "Our three children participated and used the 'Moon Balloon' at home to help them with difficult feelings. As an example, one child had a nightmare and the others brought out the book to help cope with the feelings. The program had a major impact in our daily lives, helping me and the children express our feelings." — Parent
- "Cancer takes you and your family on a journey that you didn't necessarily plan for. The HCC program has ensured, through opening the communication lines with my children, that I don't take the unplanned journey alone, but rather with my family right by my side. As a mom, I would not want it any other way!" — Parent
- "Moving forward, the 'Moon Balloon' will give us a new way to talk to each other about difficult topics and understand what we're all feeling. The program made us all feel very comfortable and ready to have some fun." — Parent
- "I liked the program; it was fun. I think about the balloons when I feel sad or angry. They help me calm down and feel better." — Child, age 8.