Report to the Community
July 1, 2014 - December 30, 2015

Our Mission
To restore grieving children and families back into the mainstream of their lives through innovative services that provide hope and healing.
A Message from Team Director, Mollie Giller

What an exciting time for Amanda the Panda! We’re celebrating the past and how our services and numbers have grown while looking toward the future and challenging ourselves to meet the needs of an ever-changing community. The events that commemorated our 35th anniversary year included a poignant reunion with donors, camp facilitators and campers dating back to 1982. Many shared memories of how deeply Amanda the Panda had touched their lives.

That touch can be felt in stories you’ll find here about former camper Jeremy Catron and his family, camp volunteer Kelly Lester and Urbandale Middle School students and families. Serving a second and third generation of families and our proactive community engagement speak both to the legacy of our past and to the potential growth in our future. Through our continued innovation and evolution Amanda the Panda will reach people virtually across the country.

Amanda the Panda needs your financial and volunteer support to do its work. From volunteers who wrap countless presents for Cheer Boxes, to restaurants that donate weekly meals for more than 90 people attending support groups, to corporations that send employees to volunteer and adopt us as their holiday charity, I am touched by the number of people and organizations which champion and invest in our cause.

Thank you for all that you do to help in our mission of hope and healing. We look forward to partnering with you in the year ahead.

Mollie Giller, Team Director
In November, 2014, Amanda the Panda became a program within the family of compassionate non-profit services offered by HCI Care Services and Visiting Nurse Services of Iowa. Amanda the Panda’s expertise in supporting children and adults through the grieving process is naturally aligned with the bereavement services offered by HCI Hospice Care Services and the programs offered by VNS of Iowa that address children’s health and mental well-being.

2015 marked 35 years of Amanda the Panda providing hope and healing. More than 35,000 children, teens and adults now have benefited from our free services. These include weekend and day grief camps, support groups, family nights and special events.

This past year’s major fundraising events included the Panda Bar Ride, Queen of Hearts Gala and the annual summer golf outing. Amanda the Panda has been honored to be the recipient of donations from groups that organize their own fundraisers, including Splash Seafood Bar & Grill, Little Princess Parties and even families who attended camp. To honor their daughter Abby and to thank the organization for help in their own grief journey, the Lowell and Dorothy Miller family held “Light Up the Night – Remembering Abby,” an event in their hometown of Kalona that raised more than $11,000 to benefit the programs of Amanda the Panda.

An October reunion of past campers and volunteers marked Amanda the Panda’s 35th anniversary year with lively activities and a memorable dove release. A November proclamation signing with Iowa Governor Terry Branstad recognized Amanda the Panda’s longtime contributions to grieving families.
After Casey Catron died in 1998, his parents and brothers attended Camp Amanda. One of those brothers was Jeremy Catron, and 16 years later, Jeremy still had the tie-dyed t-shirt he’d made there as an 18-year-old camper.

When Jeremy was in his late 20s, enjoying fatherhood and a new baby girl, he received the devastating diagnosis of cancer. By April of 2014, he had been battling cancer for more than five years. In his final days, Jeremy was thinking about his wife and daughter and how that same grief camp he attended as a teen could impact their healing journey after his own untimely death.

Jeremy told both his mother and his wife, Kindra, that he wanted his family to get in touch with Amanda the Panda. He found peace in knowing the program would be there for Kindra and their young daughter, Madison, who would become a third-generation camper. Kindra says, “He told me that if I didn’t want to go for myself, then at least do it for Madi.” Now, Jeremy’s camp t-shirt isn’t the only tie-dyed creation in the house. Kindra and Madi attended camp in October of 2014, and they have been sharing their healing story at Amanda the Panda events ever since.
Kelly Lester, one of Amanda the Panda’s 743 dedicated volunteers, was recognized in 2015 for her 37th time volunteering at camp. Kelly works behind the scenes to prepare fabric dyes and t-shirts. She then helps children and adults create one of their most colorful camp memories. Those tie-dyed shirts can reveal the rainbow of each camper’s soul.

For 15 years — at up to three camps a year — Kelly patiently shares the steps for folding the fabric and applying dye for the various design choices. Thanks to Kelly, campers of all ages take home a shirt that’s a personal painting of the colors in their hearts.

Some campers dye shirts in their loved one’s favorite hues. Some let the darker dyes run together to tell their story. And others select only lively lighter shades, perhaps envisioning brighter times after camp. Kelly says, “Emotions come through in their shirts. It can be startling. Being part of the process is not something that can be forgotten.”

At the conclusion of camp, adult campers write messages that are placed in the welcome packets of future adult campers. Here’s just one example of a life touched by Amanda the Panda in 2015:

“You don’t know me and chances are we will never meet, but I wanted to welcome you to take a step. This step is towards healing and love. This step is towards a tomorrow that will feel better than today. This step will have new friends, new memories, and hopefully a diminished pain in your heart and gut. I pray your smiles return again and you may find joy in all the little things. Life is so incredibly short and every moment is a blessing. I pray for love and healing in your life journey. Love the love you live, and live the life you love with those you love by your side. And wings up to our lost loved ones.”

From a young donor in 2015:

“When I was 10 years old I lost my mom. It was such a struggle for me, but my step-mom and dad helped me so much through it. I am now 17 years old and I want to help others who have gone through what I went through. I want to donate to Amanda the Panda for kids, teens, or adults who have lost a loved one like I did. Do you think I could do that?”
Amanda the Panda was a caring resource when two students at Urbandale Middle School completed suicide in February of 2015.

“I really can’t say enough positives about how helpful and supportive Amanda the Panda was for us,” says Heidi Zwick, facilitator of Family Outreach Services for Urbandale Community School District.

Grief support by Amanda the Panda staff members and resource materials for talking with teens about suicide were provided at February parent-teacher conferences. Amanda the Panda was on hand again in March with materials and a volunteer grief facilitator. A pilot educational unit on suicide prevention and grief support was developed and presented to the 915 middle school students in early May. “If it wasn’t for them, we would not have been able to deliver these lessons to our students,” says Zwick.

Amanda the Panda’s involvement with school teachers and counselors continued through the end of the school year, and other schools now are requesting presentations of the pilot suicide prevention unit and receiving suicide support resource handouts.
Donors

July, 2014 through December, 2015
During this time, more than 1,374 donors generously supported our programs and services. View the names of these caring individuals and organizations at amandathepanda.org.

By the Numbers

July 2014 through December 2015

3,159
Number of clients served by Amanda the Panda camps (spring, summer and fall), support groups (spring, fall and winter), monthly family nights and other outreach activities.

5,238
WRAPPED GIFTS
More than 200 volunteers were involved in providing holiday encouragement to hundreds of families experiencing one of their first holiday seasons after the loss of a loved one. Annually for approximately 200 hours, volunteers wrapped packages and delivered family Cheer Boxes to those Amanda the Panda served in both 2014 and 2015. The gifts are “hugs” and provide hope and comfort during the holidays.

8,236
Number of hours donated by volunteers for camps, support groups, office assistance, holiday Cheer Boxes, training, special events and to serve on committees.

We Need Your Support

Because of your donations, we’re able to provide support to children and families grieving the loss of a loved one. Please help ensure these services are always available – make a donation today at amandathepanda.org and click on “Donate Now.”
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amandathepanda.org

Click here to learn how you can support Amanda the Panda.

To request a paper copy of this report, please call (515) 223-4847.

Amanda the Panda is a program of HCI Care Services and Visiting Nurse Services of Iowa

HCI Care Services and Visiting Nurse Services of Iowa Mission:
Promoting dignity, independence and quality of life for all through education, compassion and effective community-based care.