

# 76th Annual Writer's Digest 2007 Writing Competition Award Winning Entry

## FEATURE STORY:

### Olivia's House Receives National Recognition *Chosen for PBS Visionaries, Inc. 13th Season*

Her dream house has no swimming pool, sauna or spa, not even a driveway or a garage. Inside there is no bathtub or even a shower stall. But the walls are an incredible sight! This place is called *Olivia's House*. It is a grief and loss center for children and is a dream-come-true for Leslie Delp, Founder and Executive Director. "For years, I entertained the dream of having a house to nurture grieving young people," admits Ms. Delp, a counseling psychologist who specializes in grief therapy.

She has moved her career goal from a dream to a reality in a few short years. "An opportunity from God", believes Leslie, has shown the way for her grief center to evolve and to be recognized as one of the premier grief centers for children in America today. *Olivia's House* will soon gain national recognition when it appears on the prestigious PBS documentary series *Visionaries, Inc.* in 2007.

This nationally broadcast television series highlights the work of non-profit leaders and social entrepreneurs and is hosted by acclaimed actor Sam Waterston (*Law & Order, The Killing Fields*). Winner of the 2006 Genesis Award for Outstanding PBS Documentary, *Visionaries, Inc.* produces inspiring shows about individuals dedicated to making the world a better place.

Executive Producer, Bill Mosher tells us, “Since 1995, our production crews have traveled across six continents and to more than 50 American cities to profile the extraordinary work of people dedicating their lives and careers to the service of others”. Leslie Delp is one of those extraordinary people. Figures released in 2005 showed that more than 5,000 nonprofit groups had applied to be profiled and only 129 organizations had been chosen. When Ms. Delp was informed that *Olivia’s House* was chosen for the documentary, Charlene LaFerriere, Director of Development for *Visionaries, Inc.* commented, “We believe *Olivia’s House* exemplifies the type of work *Visionaries Inc.* was created to profile.”

Leslie’s vision began to unfold as a graduate student while attending Towson State University in Maryland where she obtained her MA in grief counseling in 1995. After graduation, she opened her own private practice, Grief and Bereavement Services and developed her first bereavement support program called *Hearts Can Heal*. Working with three local agencies, York Health Systems, J.J. Hartenstein Funeral Home and Hospice Preferred Choice Foundation, Delp organized the community’s first bereavement support group for the purpose of helping children and their families cope after the death of a loved one. With the success of the initial *Hearts Can Heal* program in 1996, Leslie’s idea of a grief and loss center for children was no longer just a dream. She had taken the necessary first step in fulfilling her lifetime goal of developing a grief center for children. Delp never looked back. After conducting a county-wide needs assessment with area mental health professionals, Leslie and her team of caregivers concluded that York County was in need of a center where grieving young people and families could find acceptance, support, education, and validation. “Many others in the community joined me in my vision and *Olivia’s House* became a reality in 2002,” confirmed Leslie, “I am

proud to call myself the founder of such an incredible place.” In just five years, *Olivia’s House* has become the region’s premier resource for children’s grief education.

The name Olivia owns a very special place in Leslie Delp’s heart. As a young teenager, she loved watching *The Waltons* on television. The show was about a rural family during the 1930’s. John and Olivia and their seven children along with John’s aging parents, Zeb and Ester, lived under the same roof. Leslie fondly remembers Olivia Walton and how she taught her children the importance of family, and she loved Grandma Ester who reminded her a little of her own grandmother. The show was about love and morality, but it was ‘Livia’s’ nurturing of her children that made a lasting impression on Leslie as she moved through her own adolescence into adulthood. “There was usually an outsider that just happened to show up - a weary traveler, an irate citizen, or a neighboring farmer, but after visiting the Waltons’ home, they were changed people. It was a good house,” she recalled. Unbeknownst to Leslie, her life’s mission of having such a house for children may have had its origins in front of the television many years ago.

There was a second Olivia, a young Olivia, who also played an important part in Leslie’s life. Just a few years ago, the two were brought together by a curious sequence of events which began when Leslie’s son discovered an article on the internet. Was it fate or just a coincidence? Divine intervention, perhaps? Regardless, Grandma Walton would have explained it by simply saying, “Things happen for a reason.”

Young Olivia entered Leslie’s life at an opportune time. She had lost her mother to a car accident when she was five years old. Because of that tragic event Olivia attended a program which was based on the *Hearts Can Heal* program that Leslie had written years earlier. After a few phone calls, Leslie was able to meet Olivia. Soon, Leslie realized that Olivia was sharing information that she had learned from the *Hearts Can Heal* program to help a friend who had

also lost her mother. “You know you’re healing when you find yourself extending your hand in order to help another person with their grief,” Leslie reminds us, “When you help another person, you begin to heal.”

“She was inspirational, like so many of the children in the program. She exemplified my philosophy of care,” Leslie explained. As fate and fortune would have it, Leslie’s relationship with Olivia coincided with the naming of the grief center. “It seemed only natural to call it *Olivia’s House*. It is a perfect name,” recalled Leslie, “It was as if Grandma Walton kept whispering to me, ‘It was meant to be’.”

Since that first bereavement workshop ten years ago, *Olivia’s House* has added more than seven peer support programs focusing on grief education. These innovative programs seem to reflect the essence of the curriculum in their titles: *Hearts Can Heal*, *Out of the Darkness*, *Nana and Poppas*, *The Little Ones*, *Barkley’s Gone*, *In Between*, and *WINGS*.

*Hearts Can Heal* is an eight session program for children ages 6-18 and their families after the death of a parent or sibling. *Out of the Darkness* is an eight week closed ended educational program designed to help children ages 6-18 and their families understand the complicated issues surrounding bereavement after a loved one completes suicide. It is the only program of suicide support in Pennsylvania. *Nanas and Poppas* is a program that supports children through the loss of a grandparent, and *The Little Ones* is for pre-school children aged 3-5 years old and encourages grief play during the bereavement process.

*Barkley’s Gone* is a unique support program for children and their families after experiencing the death of a pet, a furry family member. “We are the only grief center that I know that does a program like this,” says Delp. The one day workshop is offered at various times throughout the year, and after the program, families get a certificate of adoption from the SPCA

which entitles them to either an all fees-waived option of adopting an older pet or a percentage-off certificate for the adoption of a kitten or a puppy.

*In-Between* is a six week closed ended program for young adults ages 18-25 who have experienced a loss. This program addresses vital needs at a critical time in the lives of these young adults, many of whom are away from home when the tragedy occurs. *WINGS* is a social group for the “graduates” of the support programs at *Olivia’s House*. Monthly activities are held in the York community enabling the children to connect with new friends while having fun.

Set in rural south central Pennsylvania, Olivia’s House which is located at 830 South George Street in York, Pennsylvania is the only free standing, independently owned and operated grief center in Pennsylvania. Providing a safe setting for young people and their families while they learn to cope with death, the center includes a public lending library available to families as a tool to help children learn about all of life’s difficult issues. The library offers a variety of subjects and topics which are available through books, videos, and audiotapes.

Walking past the sign in the front yard, people get a feeling of contentment. Upon entering the house, visitors sense a warm and nurturing atmosphere of love and healing. Leslie is convinced that the presence of “God’s hand” is on this house. “Every time we give a tour, there is a feeling that people get when they walk into the Welcoming Room. We hear comments such as ‘You can feel the goodness here.’ or ‘This place draws you in - it’s magical’.”

Area artists have decorated the grief center’s interior with beautiful pictures and butterfly-themed walls. The butterfly theme throughout the house symbolizes the children’s journey through grief. Upstairs there are dozens upon dozens of individual handprints. Each block of handprints represents a child who has struggled with grief and the battle within himself as he seeks to understand. Each block of handprints represents the child’s courage to tell his own

special story in his own special way and to trust the process of healing. “The children had the courage to go through the program and then leave us a piece of their self.” Leslie continues, “and they know they can revisit us at anytime, just like the young soldier who stopped in to visit before he was sent to Iraq. He just wanted to see his hand prints that he had made years earlier when he courageously struggled with grief as a young boy.”

*Olivia's House* not only provides a variety of in-house services for grieving children and their caregivers but also travels to nearby businesses, civic groups, religious groups and schools in need of educational services. Counseling referrals to qualified professionals are available and offered when appropriate. The programs at *Olivia's House* are free. There are no costs to grieving families. “We are blessed to have such great community support, and we are blessed with trusting families at a very difficult time in their lives.” acknowledges Leslie. The center has welcomed families from York, Adams, Cumberland, Lancaster and Dauphin Counties, as well as families who live in Maryland.

*Olivia's House* is looking forward to its next level of success, growth. “We already have more than 100 active volunteers. We are looking into the possibilities of expanding our facility, the professional staff, and our services, but none of it will happen without the support of the community,” says Delp. One of the primary goals is to find a way to pay off the existing mortgage. Finding an individual or an organization to help “burn the mortgage” would be a huge blessing for the non-profit organization.

As one of America's pioneers in bereavement education, Ms. Delp has spoken about grief and loss and the success of *Olivia's House* throughout the United States. She has presented programs in Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Baltimore, and most recently, at The

California Mental Health Association's Annual Conference on Childhood Grief and Tragic Loss which was held at Los Angeles Children's Hospital.

*Visionaries, Inc.* has set out to show that one person can make a difference. With the airing of the PBS documentary, *Olivia's House*, will have a chance to step into the homes of millions of television viewers across America. *Visionaries, Inc.* has documented the work of large and small non-profits and discovered that some of the most moving stories are occurring within the smaller, community-based non-profit organizations across America---just like *Olivia's House* and Leslie Delp in York County, PA.

Visit the website at [www.oliviashouse.org](http://www.oliviashouse.org) or call (717) 699-1133 to find out more about Leslie Delp's dream-come-true and be sure to watch for the *Visionaries* series on PBS in the fall of 2007.

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