



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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SCHOOL 21 STUDENTS LEARN TO COPE WITH LOSS OF LOVED ONES

Seven district schools scheduled to observe November as Child Grief Awareness Month

KHS alum turned life insurance agent responds to teacher's call, arranges \$1,000 in donations from New York Life to School 21

Photos attached: See end of release for captions.

[CLICK HERE](#) to see a video of the balloon launch.

PATERSON – On an unseasonably warm November afternoon, Erica Bernard-Parker's second-graders at Public School No. 21 gathered outside of their school building to release balloons into the cloudless blue sky.

Some of the balloons were white. Others were different shades of blue. A few were heart-shaped. Each balloon had a name tied to it, the name of a loved one who had passed away. One student, Ryan Cropper, had lost his father only a few months ago. His mother, Maria, and a family friend were with him. Another student had also lost a parent. Two teachers at the school had died in recent years. Each of their names was tied to a balloon. The same for Eastside High School Principal Dr. Gerald Glisson and former Board of Education Commissioner Chrystal Cleaves, who had recently passed away.

"It's a time for everyone to feel sad, yes?" said Bernard-Parker to her students, just before they let go of their helium-filled balloons. "We can always think of those special memories. And when we're feeling sad, who can we go to for support?"

Students spoke up, almost in unison in response to their teacher's prompting, "We can go to a..."

"Teacher," some said. "A parent," more students said. "A friend," many more said.

The teacher gave a count of three and the children set their balloons aloft with an awestruck "whoa" as they rose to the blue infinite sky. Students broke into applause, pointed upward, and some even smiled and giggled, their grief giving way to the simple joy of watching balloons go higher and higher.

It was just one in a series of activities that have been scheduled at School 21 and six other district schools this month as part of November being Child Grief Awareness month, dedicated to addressing the needs of grieving children and teens.

Bernard-Parker, who attended Rosa L. Parks School of the Fine & Performing Arts, said the initiative began at School 21 after she spoke with Ryan's mother, Maria Cropper, whose husband died suddenly on June 22 leaving her and her son, Ryan, grieving his loss.

“It became apparent that support for the children’s social and emotional health was needed not only for students in my class but also for students throughout the district,” she said.

She reached out to Lillian Estrella, a Kennedy High School graduate who now works as a New York Life insurance agent. Bernard-Parker previously had Estrella’s child as a student.

They worked with School 21 Principal JoAnne Riviello to present workshops to the school’s administrative team and a workshop for other school educators about resources available to help students who are dealing with the loss of a parent.

“It’s all about giving back to the community,” Estrella said. “As a life insurance agent, I’m impacting people’s lives every day. When someone passes away, we are there to support the family in their grief.”

Estrella read two short stories to the students about coping with the loss of a loved one, *The Girl With The Locket* and *The Golden Sweater*, before Bernard-Parker’s students went outside to release their balloons.

The students lined up in the hallway to exit the building in front of a bulletin board with the heading, “The Warmth of a Memory.” It displayed paper cut-outs of sweaters the students had colored and write about their deceased loved ones. “My favorite memory of my dad is when he was tickling me and when he took me to his job. I love you dad,” Ryan Cropper had written on the sweater he colored brown and black.

Estrella arranged donations to School 21 from New York Life that totaled \$1,000, which will be used for student activities and professional development that will raise awareness about children who are grieving.

“I want to thank everyone who made addressing children who are grieving the loss of loved ones a priority in their schools,” said Superintendent of Schools Eileen F. Shafer. “I commend Ms. Bernard-Parker and Ms. Estrella for collaborating, as well as Principal Riviello for supporting this initiative and instituting it at School 21. These have been particularly hard times for all of us, but most especially for our children. Anyone who helps a child cope with the enormous loss of a loved one is truly doing God’s work, and I so greatly appreciate our educators who have chosen to do this work.”

Other schools that have planned activities to observe Child/Teen Grief Awareness Month are Public School No. 15, Public School No. 16, the Alexander Hamilton Academy, Alonzo “Tambua” Moody Academy, the Dr. Hani Awadallah School, and John F. Kennedy High School.

Photo 1: A School 21 second-grader looks at the name of her loved one who passed away tied to a balloon about to be released to the sky.

Photo 2: Lillian Estrella reads to second-graders at School 21.

Photo 3: Maria Cropper accepts a balloon with her deceased husband’s name tied to it from teacher Erica Bernard-Parker. Her son, Ryan, is in Ms. Bernard-Parker’s class.

Photo 4: School 21 second-graders and staff get ready to release their balloons in honor of loved ones they had lost.

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