

# Daily Record

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MORRIS COUNTY'S NEWSPAPER

## Their 'savior' helped to cut 9/11 grief

Morristown counselor named social worker of the year

BY MEGHAN VAN DYK  
DAILY RECORD

Maureen Underwood has touched the lives of hundreds of area residents who lost family members in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

She is a grief counselor who specializes in trauma caused by sudden losses, and the program she developed after 9/11 to help

families cope is now being adopted by social workers and schools nationwide.

Underwood, 60, of Middletown was named social worker of the year by the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers for creating the Morristown-based Families Going on After Life (GOALS), a counseling support service for families who lost a loved one in

the attacks.

Bill Waldman, NASW president said the board unanimously chose Underwood from a handful of nominees who broke new ground and made a difference with their work.

"There are not many heroes in today's world," Waldman said. "And (Underwood) is one of the quiet heroes who solidly toils to make life better for others."

Just months after Sept. 11, Underwood began pooling a net-

work of colleagues to fill the void of counseling programs that could meet the diverse needs of families.

"GOALS is the lemonade that came from the lemons of Sept. 11," Underwood said. "This is it, there isn't a program like this in the nation offering such comprehensive support. Without this, memories would be lost, lessons would be unrealized."

The 180-page GOALS curriculum that came out of Underwood's work includes activities tailored to the emotional needs of young children, teens and adults. It incorporates storytelling, art projects and role playing to help families understand their grief and recover their strength, Underwood said.

One project asks children to make necklaces out of mementos attached to a lost parent. They string pictures, fabrics, even golf tees and chocolate bar wrappers onto the necklace as a keepsake. Another teaches kids that life is unfair by giving each unequal sizes of birthday cake.

Erin Finnegan, of Basking Ridge lost her husband, Michael, a broker at Cantor Fitzgerald. She described Underwood as a "savior, an angel," she said. "It was her calmness and wisdom about where I was early on. She

walked me through every moment of every day. My two oldest kids got so much out of it, that they were able to express their grief in such creative ways with other kids — it just meant everything."

Seven years after the tragedy, a group of 10 Sept. 11 widows, who call themselves the "Thursday morning ladies," still meet in Underwood's quaint office twice a month to share memories of their late husbands and stories of how their families have been coping.

This Thursday, they spoke about the book "The Year of Magical Thinking," written by Joan Didion to track her own mental state after the death of her husband. Afterwards, Underwood hosted a jewelry sale as a way for the women to treat themselves for Mother's Day.

A Red Cross grant that has sustained GOALS for the past few years is running out, so Underwood is searching for new funding to help keep it going.

"It's really about giving (the

GOALS program) away so it can help the larger population," Underwood said. "There is such a demand for this service. In this post-9/11 world, you never know what could happen next."

Underwood received her BA in psychology from Marquette University and her MA in social work from Louisiana State. She got interested in mortality after giving birth to her son Ethan, who is now 33. "Natural childbirth was so profound, such an amazing sense of life," Underwood said. "It took me to the other side. But the work I do is influenced by life, not death."

Underwood's motto is "carpe diem" and her anthem is The Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

"I often feel I've learned more about the value of life and courage of the human spirit," Underwood said. "I feel so blessed because I love my profession."



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Maureen Underwood, center, leads a monthly counseling session for women who lost their husbands in 9/11. Underwood started the GOALS program to assist those affected by 9/11.