

# Life Transitions Center... *changing lives*

*Counseling services offer a helping hand on the road to healing*

by **MATT CHANDLER**  
Reporter

**T**he Life Transitions Center of Western New York has come a long way since its modest beginning three decades ago. Founded by two University at Buffalo professors and five of their students, the Life Transitions Center began as a project to support those facing issues involving death, grief, and dying.

As the center celebrates its 30th anniversary, it has grown to serve more than 12,000 people annually, and its services have expanded to meet the changing needs of the Western New York community as well.

The pinnacle of this growth is its soon-to-be-completed new facility in Cheektowaga. According to director MaryJane Sledz, as the center grew, there was a serious crunch for space, leading to the development of the new facility.

"The need was there — it was the right time," she said.

While the time may have been right, a project of this magnitude required a major financial commitment. That's where Buffalo Bills owner Ralph Wilson Jr. and his wife, Mary, came aboard, making a lead donation of \$500,000. Many others followed, and soon work began on the 9,200-square-foot \$2.2 million project.

The Mary and Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Counseling Center will allow Sledz and her staff to greatly increase both the services they provide and the number of people to whom they can offer loss and grief counseling.

## A multitude of services

While the early years of Life Transitions focused on counseling for individuals either grieving the loss of a loved one, or who themselves were dying, the scope of its services has expanded through the years. While the center still offers grief counseling as a



Work progresses on the new home of Life Transitions Center in Cheektowaga, above. An artist's depiction, below, shows what the completed facility will look like. The 9,200-square foot center is scheduled to open in July.

Photo by John Rusac



cornerstone of the practice, it also conducts counseling and offers support services for:

- People who have lost loved ones in the war in Iraq.
- Families who have lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome.
- Schools where a pupil has died.
- Workplaces where there has been a loss of a co-worker.
- Individuals dealing with the loss of a family member due to incarceration.
- Children who have lost both parents and are living with extended family or nonrelatives.
- People who are coping with the loss of a pet.

Sledz said the programs are available to all residents regardless of financial considerations. "We don't turn anyone away because they can't pay," she said, adding that in addition to accepting most insurance plans, the center also offers a sliding scale fee for those who have limited financial resources.

## Early diagnosis care

Sara Montz, clinical coordinator of Community Counseling at Life Transi-

tions, said the staff assists many people who are coping with early diagnosis of a terminal disease. With advances being made in medical testing, many people are diagnosed much earlier, and that is where Life Transitions can help.

"They may not be hospice appropriate," Montz explained. "But we help them with things such as knowing what questions to ask their doctors." Montz also said that those with an early diagnosis can meet with their clinical counselors, all of whom are master's level clinicians, to assist in processing their feelings.

## Children's services

One area that Montz is excited about is the expansion in children's services. In the new facility, there will be more dedicated space to house a children's counseling center.

"We wanted more of a therapeutic environment," Montz explained. That environment will include such innovations as an area dedicated to sand play therapy, as well as a therapeutic garden located behind the building where children and counselors can go and walk as part of their program.

Additionally, Life Transitions offers two programs focused on grieving children and teens: Shelter from the Storm, and StormClouds and Rainbows.

## One mother's story

Karen Lambe, who attended the Storm Clouds program with her daughter, shared her feelings on what it meant to her to have the support of such a program.

"I think it was a great service to have around," said Lambe, who lost her husband to colon cancer two years ago. She added that the program is beneficial on two levels.

"It gives kids the tools to deal with the loss they have experienced. But they also talk to the parent separately to let you know what they (the children) will go through at different ages." Lambe's daughter, who was 10 when

her father passed away, was reluctant at first to go to counseling. Although two years had passed since Life Transitions first offered its services to the family, through Buffalo Hospice, the Lambes were welcomed with open arms when she was ready to talk, and her mom believes the time spent with the Life Transitions counselor was time well spent.

Asked how it felt to know that her staff was able to make a difference in a child's life in such a positive way, Sledz said it shows the depth of help they can provide.

"We are not only helping the individual, but through them, the family, and ultimately the community," she said, adding, "It's wonderful to know we helped the family, because that is what we are here for."

## Looking ahead

"The community needs a state-of-the-art center to go to" Sledz explained. With the July opening of the Mary and Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Counseling Center in Cheektowaga, she believes that there will be such a place.

"In the new facility, we will have three additional conference rooms," Sledz said. "With the

extra space, we will be able to collaborate with other community organizations and offer more support groups."

By doubling the existing square footage, Sledz said the center will also incorporate a library where visitors can view videos, read books, and use the Internet, all as part of the learning process that goes along with grieving and healing.

Sledz summed up what Life Transitions is all about, saying simply, "We are here for all people so they don't have to struggle alone."

Anyone interested in learning more about the services offered through Life Transitions can call the center at 836-6460 or visit [www.LifeTransitionsCenter.com](http://www.LifeTransitionsCenter.com).

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Mary Jane Sledz, Director of the Life Transitions Center, tours their new facility being constructed in Cheektowaga. The Mary and Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Counseling Center is slated to open in July.

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