

TULSA WORLD

Abundant inspiration



Jim Schmidt (clockwise from left), Fiona Markham, 20; Blake Markham, 23; Sheila Schmidt and Sofia Schmidt, 8; are surrounded by plush bunnies at their home in south Tulsa. STEPHEN HOLMAN / Tulsa

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A family's story and a plush rabbit help kids dealing with grief

Aaron Markham always was the playful sort, so when a floppy-eared rabbit scurried across his parent's Florida farm, he gave chase until the furry critter sped into a 30-foot irrigation pipe.

Undeterred, Aaron raised that metal pipe to flush out his furry quarry, but as he did, the pipe struck a power line, which sent a fatal charge through the 30-year-old father of two. The bunny scampered away.



Although Aaron left behind his wife and their two young children, his 1993 death became more than just a tragic accident. See, in time, Aaron's family created a children's storybook titled "I Cried Too," which tells their poignant story of grief and recovery through the rabbit's eyes.

The "I Cried Too" package comes with an inspirational book and CD, along with a plush rabbit named Abundance — it's even got a notch in his right ear just like the one Aaron chased more than 15 years ago.

Since the book was released in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, the "I Cried Too" package has helped several thousand grieving children deal with the loss of a loved one, including those who lost parents to 9/11 and the war that followed.

Cheri Decker is a Tulsa woman who has given the "I Cried Too" package to a handful of loved ones over the years. She said it gives children "an opportunity to express how they feel about the story and, many times, their own emotions."

Before "I Cried Too" could help anyone, however, Aaron's family first had to cope with his untimely death. Only months before Aaron's death, the family home and sporting-goods business burned.

It was hard on all of them, of course, but 8-year-old Blake Markham actually blamed himself for his father's death. This was the same boy who prayed for it to snow in Live Oak, Fla., back in '86, then got to build a snowman the very next day. And he's the same boy who prayed to ride in a limousine two weeks before riding in a long, black car bound

for his father's funeral.

For eight months after his father's death, Blake would sometimes bang his head on walls, scream and hurl things across the room.

And even after Blake explained how his limousine prayer killed his father, the boy's mother couldn't sway his misguided thoughts.

As for Blake's sister, 5-year-old Fiona Markham, she clutched her emotions and then shoved them way down deep where they stayed until working themselves back up in the most destructive ways.

Now 20 years old, Fiona is learning how to help grieving children, much like the ones who have found solace in "I Cried Too."

"You have these kids growing up with all this bottled (up) emotion that's never being dealt with," Fiona said. "Personally, I did that. I bottled everything up and it became a huge issue later on in my life."

"I think something like ('I Cried Too') just really focuses on how important it is to help the children, and to help them get through it without telling them all the things that can make it worse."

Looking back on how she helped her children deal with their father's death, Sheila Markham (now Sheila Schmidt) said, "Instead of asking them questions, which most of the time shuts them down, I would just tell them how I felt. Most of the time, not all of the time, it made them feel like it's OK to talk about it."

Soon after Aaron died, Sheila found herself bawling one night when she believed God sent her a life-changing sign.

"I didn't know what to do with my life," she said. "My whole life was gone. I was begging God to show me what to do. I needed to hear from him because I needed to know what I could do with this life that seemed totally torn apart and gone now."

Then she noticed a yellow beam of light shooting through her bedroom window. When she investigated the light source, she couldn't explain it away.

"There was no moon, no streetlight, no reason for a light to come through my window," she recalled. "So I turned back to the bed, and I realized that the beam was shining straight on a book on my dresser. I walked over to it and this book was not there before. It was 'How to be Led by the Spirit of God,' by Kenneth Hagin."

About 4 a.m., when Sheila finished the book penned by the man who founded Rhema, she recalled thinking, "I know I am supposed to go to (Rhema Bible College)."

But how could she take away her in-law's grandchildren so soon after their son's death?

So Sheila prayed, "OK, God, if this is you, you're going to have to tell my mother-in-law, because there is no way I'm going to take her grandchildren halfway across the U.S. after she just lost her son."

The next weekend, Sheila's mother-in-law, Margie Markham, sat Sheila down and said much to Sheila's surprise, "I know that God wants you to go to a Bible college, and I know that means it's going to take you far away from here, but I want you to know that it's OK with me because I know it's God."

A few months later, Sheila arrived in Oklahoma to attend Rhema Bible College, where she spent the first year readying herself for her coming mission.

"It was like everything I was learning was to help me heal and to be empowered to go on and do what I had to do," she said, "because I was a mess."

At the beginning of her second year at Rhema, Sheila met "Armadillo" Jim Schmidt, a former car salesman who'd made a name for himself in Texas and beyond. Over the years, he'd become a popular children's entertainer who used live armadillos to teach kids to "put on your armor against drugs, crime and violence." And, like Sheila, Jim arrived on the Rhema campus after receiving a sign from God.

"Why are you leaving?" people asked him, to which Jim would reply, "God told me to."

Eventually, Sheila volunteered for Jim's nonprofit group, Put on Your Armor, before starting a courtship that led to Jim meeting Sheila's in-laws. During that holiday visit, Margie pulled Sheila close and said, "Will you marry him?"

A surprised Sheila replied, "I don't know this guy well enough to say I'm going to marry him."

But Margie assured her, "He's the one."

And she was right. The couple married in 1997 and a baby girl, Sofia, followed in 2000, the same year "I Cried Too" was born. The book's creation came, they say, with more than a little help from the Almighty.

The inspiration came one night in Broken Arrow, not long before Easter 2000, as Jim and Sheila readied Easter gifts for Blake and Fiona.

At one point, Jim reached into a shopping bag filled with stuffed rabbits and said aloud, "What an abundance of bunnies."

At that moment, Jim remembers hearing God say, "What do you know about abundance?"

Well, Jim knew the scripture John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it in abundance."

Then Jim heard the voice say, "Write a book through the bunny's eyes."

Sheila liked the idea, so the next morning, the family gathered in the living room, where Jim told Blake and Fiona, "God wants us to write a book about how the bunny feels."

Forty-five minutes later, Sheila looked down at the notepad and had a story that appears almost verbatim as it does in the "I Cried Too" storybook.

The next day, Fiona, who had been taking guitar lessons, came up with her song, "He Cried," which appears on the "I Cried Too" CD.

It wasn't until after 9/11, however, that the project became a reality. It happened the day Blake saw a television report on 9/11 orphans and said to Jim, "We should have had (the book) ready for them."

The boy was right, Jim figured, so the family gathered donations and plenty of help from volunteers to quickly publish the book, make copies of the CD and purchase a gaggle of stuffed rabbits.

Everything was finished by the time the family arrived in New York to be the masters of ceremony at the first Christmas party for 9/11 orphans, who all received the "I Cried Too" package.

Then, the week before Easter 2002, Jim received a call from an official at the Pentagon. The gentleman wanted "I Cried Too" packages for children of Pentagon employees who lost their parents on 9/11.

Among the other groups who received "I Cried Too" packages during that second trip to New York were the New York Police Department and Catholic Charities. And when there were no more packages in New York City, FedEx offered to make a free emergency shipment so children in New Jersey could read about a grieving bunny named Abundance.

The relationship with FedEx continues to this day.

Once the war started in the Middle East, Jim received another order from the Pentagon, but this time they would go to the children of dead soldiers.

These days, "I Cried Too" packages still find their way to grieving families who open a cardboard box to find the book, CD, bunny and a handwritten note like this one: "Because your sacrifice is appreciated more than you ever will know, please accept this gift for your children."

When a child then opens the "I Cried Too" book, they find a letter from two children, Fiona and Blake, who understood what it's like to lose a father. In their simple words, they summed up the overall mission of "I Cried Too."

"This story was written about how our first daddy died," Blake and Fiona wrote. "We made it through the tough times. You will too ..."

"I Cried Too" can be found online at www.tulsaworld.com/icriedtoo

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