

If you've lost someone to substance abuse, you're not alone. Center for victims' families turns 5.

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Rhonda Miller is the executive director of the Oasis Community Center in Hanover Township, Northampton County. She's photographed at the center on June 3, 2024. Tim Wynkoop | lehighvalleylive.com contributor

By [Rudy Miller | For lehighvalleylive.com](https://lehighvalleylive.com)

Nothing compares to losing a child to [fentanyl poisoning](#), according to Rhonda Miller.

Trying to find her way out of the darkness wasn't easy. The Hanover Township, Northampton County, woman's years-long grief journey was made bearable by connecting with similarly situated mothers and fathers and brothers and friends.

She's applied her experience and her compassion into [building a place](#) where people facing unbearable tragedy can help each other carry on.

"It's really hard to find a safe place that's compassionate, where you can unload your burden and get support and help," Miller said.

Oasis Community Center will celebrate its fifth anniversary next week. The center on Route 512 in Hanover Township, Northampton County, is the only recovery center in Pennsylvania with a primary mission of assisting family members and friends of individuals who died due to substance-related issues.

People find their way to Oasis from all over Pennsylvania and New Jersey, some driving an hour and a half to make weekly meetings.

You can't get one-on-one therapy at Oasis. But you will find a community that understands what you're going through.

"I feel like they really care. You become a family," said Lower Nazareth Township mother Karen Altman. She's lost her godson, her nephew and two of her son's best friends to substances. Her 33-year-old son has struggled with addiction most of his life.

'It feels like home'

Few of Altman's family or friends can relate to being the mother of someone struggling with addiction. When they ask about her son, she feels compelled to give a polite answer regardless of how he's really doing.

"I say, 'He's fine,' and I'm flat out lying," Altman said. At Oasis she can be honest and open without fear of being judged.

"It feels like home," agreed Dee Zerfass, a woman from Coplay who lost her adult son to fentanyl in 2020.

Miller lost her son, Ben, in 2016. She was barely functional the subsequent two years but started to rebound in 2018 when participating in a march against a pharmaceutical giant and its aggressive opioid marketing strategies. Her volunteer work in that capacity led her to join a [Northampton County Drug and Alcohol advisory committee](#).

The county wanted to know what it could do to help. Miller made a bold suggestion: provide help for families. Most aid was earmarked for those directly suffering from addiction. But families suffer as much as those struggling with addiction, and properly trained and supported families can help save their loved ones.

"There's hardly any support for families. We don't know where to go," Miller told the county.

Many families turn to clergy for guidance, Miller said. But clergy often lack proper training to offer appropriate advice or support to families desperate for help. She's working with faith leaders to help change what she calls our "grief illiterate society."

"People don't know what to do or say so they often do nothing and avoid interactions with the bereaved. It's a horrific experience to go through in the dark, utterly alone," she said. That's especially true for someone suffering the stigma of losing a loved one to a substance-related death.

The county agreed to fund Miller's plan. She wound up opening the center at an old farmhouse built in 1803. She'd once brought her young sons there when it was a shop selling scented candles.

It's not like a church basement where they host Alcoholics Anonymous or an impersonal medical office building. It's a home. That's what families need, Miller said.

There's a room to host potluck dinners, a "serenity" room for meditation, a conference room and a couple meeting rooms (the "blue" room has blue couches). There are yoga classes and support groups.

Thousands seek out help

Oasis serves about 4,000 people a year, Miller said. About two-thirds of them have lost a loved one to a substance related cause. Most are mothers who have lost an adult child to fentanyl poisoning, but people from all age brackets seek help from Oasis. The center supports spouses, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, partners and friends, and even children who lost one or both of their parents.

All the services are free.

Some folks come for one meeting and leave. Others have been coming for years. Many can't believe such a place exists, Miller said. They're relieved to find it. Although many have benefited from Oasis, Miller is convinced there are many, many more who have yet to find it.

She hopes families on the fence about seeking support will drop in and give Oasis a try.

"There is no shame for families when their loved one has a substance abuse problem. There's no blame. It happens to the best of families," Miller said.

Oasis Community Center at 3410 Bath Pike outside Bethlehem in Hanover Township, Northampton County, will celebrate its fifth anniversary on June 28. Find out more on the Oasis [website](http://oasisbethlehem.org), oasisbethlehem.org.

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