

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

## **Angel of Hope Service — comfort, healing**



By Mark James Miller, 12-9-17

The Angel of Hope Memorial Service takes place at the Santa Maria Cemetery every year on the first Saturday in December. What makes it unique is the service is for parents who have lost children.

The chapel-like section of the cemetery where the service is held is dominated by the Angel of Hope, a statue of an angel that has become a symbol of comfort and healing for those who have suffered the unimaginable grief that comes when their child dies.

Suzanne “Sam” de St. Jean and her husband Glen took over the Santa Maria Service in 2012 after the death of their son Michael.

“The service gives people a place to come and remember their lost children,” Sam said. “It is a time for healing, to bring comfort and peace.”

The Angel of Hope Memorial Service happens in more than 120 locations across the United States and Canada. The concept comes from a 1993 novel, “The Christmas Box,” by Richard Paul Evans.

“To me the meaning of the Angel of Hope is being with our loved ones again,” said Sophia Schwark, who helped raise the money for the statue. “I lost my boys Johnnie and Zachary Lee on Dec. 25, 1999. Christmas has never been the same.”

“My urge as a parent to do things for my child did not die when my son did,” said Yesenia DeCasaus, who lost her son in 2014. “But material things are meaningless when my child is in Heaven. It’s hard not to be able to see him and touch him. That is why the

Angel of Hope is so important to me. It's a place where we can fill our spirit with their memory."

The service begins with the reading of a poem by an unknown author. It concludes: "I want to tell you something/So there won't be any doubt/You're so wonderful to think of/But so hard to be without." This is followed by a sermon from Pastor Paul Berry, of the Calvary Chapel of Santa Maria.

Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five stages in the grieving process — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Her 1969 book, "On Death and Dying," has become a guidebook for many on how to deal with the death of a loved one. Each stage is necessary if one is to find peace and healing.

The last part of the service — and perhaps the most inspiring — comes when everyone is given an opportunity to come forward and share a story about their lost child. While the stories are always heartbreaking, they give the people gathered an opportunity to hear from others who have gone through the same heartache and pain they have.

When the service is over everyone is given a white carnation that they can put in the arms of the Angel.

I'm sure anyone who has ever lost a child knows, as I do, that the pain is never going to go away. With time it may become easier to bear, but it never leaves you. For my part, when my son Corey died on Dec. 13, 2009, part of me died. I know that. But what remains is a determination to carry on for him, knowing he is always going to be with me until my journey also comes to an end.

Going to the Angel of Hope Memorial Service every year has helped me understand that others feel as I do, and have gone along the same road of grief and sadness that I have traveled, and I fervently hope others are helped as well.

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