

Funeraria Jaramillo, Loja, Ecuador

Beyond the Rainbow: Validating childhood grief through theater.

In recent years, our Bereavement Care Unit encountered a profound story that highlighted a critical gap in society's understanding of grief. During a consultation, a woman shared her poignant experience:

"I have lost several family members in recent years. Each loss, though painful, has found peace in my heart over time. However, I struggle with the loss of my baby, whom I lost seven months ago. The pain overwhelms my soul."

The therapist, with empathy, asked, "Dear, what is the name of your baby, your partner?"

She replied, "Tobby. This may sound strange to you, but my little boy, was my dog. I do not want to say he was my pet because he was my son; he gave me that motherly role. When I dared to say it out loud, people told me I was crazy, saying I could not grieve for an animal, that my feelings, that my feelings were sinful, and suggested I simply get another dog."

This narrative underscores a pervasive issue in how society often invalidates grief, especially regarding the loss of a pet. Such invalidation, rooted in ignorance rather than malice, compels mourners to endure their grief in silence. This leads us to question: if adults face such invalidation in their grief, what about children? Children often form deep, meaningful bonds with their pets, sharing daily experiences filled with love and companionship. Common responses like "They are small; they do not understand," or "Just get another pet," fail to recognize the depth of these relationships.

In response to this reality, Funeraria Jaramillo, driven by a strong sense of social responsibility, recognized an urgent need to address this gap through our Bereavement Care Unit. We launched the micro-theater production "Puente Arcoíris, El cielo de las mascotas," targeting children in various educational settings. This project encourages psychoeducation on grief in children through theater, facilitating emotional identification and validation of their feelings. The theatrical production promotes open communication about death, reduces stigma, promotes emotional resilience, and includes farewell rituals such as "the box of memories." Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of psychological care during a loss, offering a free bereavement support service from our Bereavement Unit.

The micro-theater draws inspiration "Rainbow Bridge" poem by Edna Clyne-Rekhy, an 82-year-old Scottish artist who penned this moving piece after losing her beloved Labrador Retriever, Major, at the age of 19. Her mother's advice to articulate her grief led to the creation of a poem that beautifully encapsulates the essence of loss and hope:

"Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food and water and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who have been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who are hurt or maimed are made strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content except for one small thing; they miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet you cling on joyous reunion, never to be apart again. The happy kisses rain upon your face, your hands caress the beloved head and

once more you look into the trusting eyes of your beloved pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....”

Inspired by this moving poem, we adapted the micro-theater “Puente Arcoiris, el cielo de las mascotas,” which narrates the story of Pablo, a 10-year-old boy, and his dog Lucas. After Lucas’ death, a fairy narrator appears to comfort Pablo by sharing the legend of the Rainbow Bridge. This touching narrative, set in the innocence of childhood, conveys a message of eternal love and hope that transcends time and space, offering Pablo the certainty of a future reunion with Lucas. The play is distinguished by its profound serenity and the magic of its characters.

At the conclusion of the micro-theater, our Unit’s therapist explains to the children the significance of the scenography, which includes an “altar” –a space to honor the life, love, and memory of their pet, where their belongings rest- The specialist provides the children with the necessary tools to cope with their loss, giving them a physical storybook titled “El cielo de las mascotas del Puente Arcoiris (The Heaven of the Rainbow Bridge Pets). To conclude, playful activities are conducted to foster unity and companionship among the participants. Finally, with the support of the institution’s psychologist and the consent of the children’s representatives, we schedule free sessions to support the grief of the children, their parents, and even other community members, such as teachers.

This initiative is part of the annual Bereavement Care Unit’s planning, which has been active for four years. The play has been presented without interruption, reaching various educational institutions, both public and private, and touching the hearts of approximately 1035 children in 17 institutions. This initiative has been enriched by the invaluable coordination of collaborative staff and the Psychology Departments of the participating institutions.

We culminated our annual planning with a moving performance in April of this year during “Student Week 2024” *1, organized by the Loja Municipal Social Support Center. This event took place at the emblematic Bolivar Theater, located in the historic heart of the city, with a capacity of 277 people. We welcomed children and adolescents from public, semi-public, and private institutions, accompanying them through art.

To ensure the sustainability of the project, we also relied on the generous and committed collaboration of our company’s personnel, who developed their innate theatrical skills under the guidance of a professional in the performing arts. This joint effort resulted in a ten-minute micro-theater production, following meticulous pre-production and two weeks of intensive daily rehearsals. The dedication extended to set design, sound recording and mastering, and the development of the technical script, ensuring a precise and coordinated production. This project, an example of talent, creativity, and teamwork; provided a compact yet profoundly impactful theatrical experience, executed under the following structure:

Costume: Two costumes were created to represent the characters Pablo and Lucas, and the fairy narrator’s costume was designed to be eye-catching for the children.

Scenery and Props: Designed with a child-friendly approach, the set features a landscape dominated by a rainbow and various animal species, offering a cheerful and colorful atmosphere. Additionally, an altar was arranged with Lucas’ belongings, used by the therapist to teach the importance of creating a space of remembrance and honor.

Sound: Several voices were recorded for the voice-over narration, and the complete audio of the play was edited, mastered and prepared.

Actors: Our staff participates as actors in this play and currently review the script before each presentation with the support of one of our collaborators.

Our staff was dedicated to ensuring the success of the event. They assisted in the assembly and disassembly of the stage, transported the necessary materials, and worked collaboratively to promote the

event. In total, six people were involved, including the cast and the therapist. Thanks to their commitment, we were able to offer an unforgettable event.

This project, "Puente Arcoíris, El Cielo de las Mascotas" (Rainbow Bridge, Pet's Heaven), emerged alongside the introduction of a new pet cremation service Funeraria Jaramillo*2, carrying the same name in its brand, accompanied by its value promise: "A goodbye with care and respect for your special friends." This service has had a profound and unexpected impact due to the emotional story behind it. It is offered with the same care and sensitivity as for human loved ones. With this new service, we have opened a new panorama, transforming our funeral home from a service traditionally associated with sadness into one that brings color and hope. This has helped to establish our brand as a compassionate and sustainable entity in the community.

*1 The Student Week in Loja is an annual event of great significance that celebrates and recognizes the talent, effort, and dedication of Loja students. It is organized by the Municipality of Loja through the Municipal Social Support Center.

*2 Funeraria Jaramillo, a recognized brand in the funeral services sector, operates under the ownership and management of Previsión Exequial La Esperanza. This relationship provides the support and expertise necessary to expand and enhance our service offerings.