EMPOWER

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

A 2026 Impact Report



Skylar, age 6 + Stephanie, age 7

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IMPACT

Our Intended Impact

Before we share this year's numbers and stories, we want to be explicit about the change we are holding ourselves accountable for – and why we're the right organization to deliver it. Guided by the Bridgespan framework, we define our impact through three lenses: who, where, and what.

Who

Children and young adults who have experienced the death of a parent

Where

Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, New York, California, Colorado, Florida, and North Carolina – expanding by 2029

What

By 2029 every grieving young person in our service area has access to sustained mentoring and community support – and goes on to demonstrate measurably better academic, social-emotional, and long-term life outcomes than bereaved peers without that support.

Why Empower

What we are not: a replacement for clinical therapy or crisis intervention. Empower's model is designed to complement – not substitute for – mental health treatment, by providing the ongoing community and mentorship that therapy alone doesn't reach.

Community engagement is a cornerstone of our work. We partner with local children's bereavement centers, area Boys & Girls Clubs, local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies, and countless school districts, clinicians, and healthcare professionals – creating a strategic referral network that helps us scale our work.

BEYOND THE DATA



A letter from our Founder & CEO

Dear Partner,

More than 6 million children in the United States are growing up after the death of a parent. Without meaningful support, grief compounds—linked to chronic anxiety, depression, substance use, increased risk of suicide, and profound social isolation.

When I lost my mother Kit to breast cancer at nine years old, I desperately wanted to find others who could relate to my loss. Out of the gratitude I had for all of the layers of support my family received growing up, I channeled that experience into action and launched **Empower** in 2013 as a grassroots effort to bring grieving children together, which today supports nearly 1,000 children and young adults across the country.

Why Empower exists.
At **Empower**, we believe what happens after a parent dies matters just as much as the loss itself. We are the only nonprofit in the country providing community-based mentoring specifically for youth navigating parent loss, serving as a complement to therapy by surrounding young people with a "village" of understanding and support.

What you've made possible.
What began as a grassroots effort now serves families in 10 states. This growth reflects partners who saw both the scale of the challenge and the possibility for meaningful change. The impact in these pages—1,000+ youth served, 97% of mentor matches sustained, 1,000+ hours of community connection—exists because of donors who refused to let grieving children walk alone.

We're ready for what comes next.
With childhood bereavement now recognized as a critical public health issue, we're launching a $5 million campaign to eliminate waitlists, scale our proven model, and ensure every bereaved young person has access to the support they deserve.

To our partners: thank you. Your investment is measured not just in numbers, but in lives changed and in the quiet assurance given to a child that they are seen, supported, and never alone.

With gratitude,
Cara Belvin, Founder & CEO, Empower

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THE PROBLEM

EMPOWER

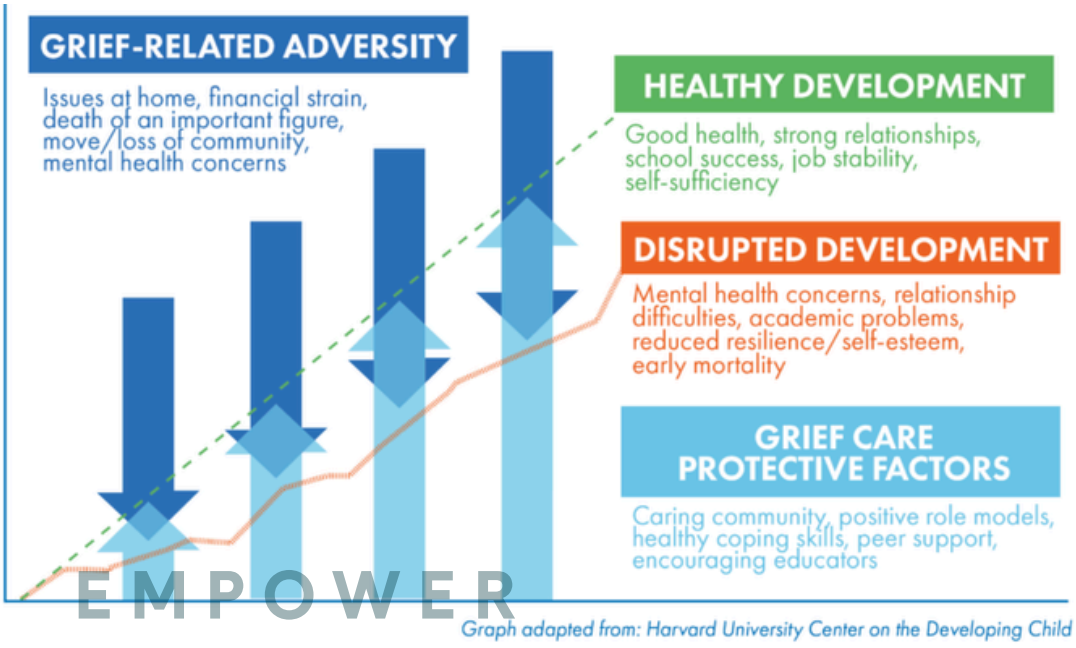
The loss of a parent changes the trajectory of a child's life.

- ✓ 3x higher risk of dropping out of high school
- ✓ 3x more likely to experience anxiety & depression
- ✓ Higher ACEs score, with risks that extend into adulthood

Without intervention, parental loss places children at higher risk for isolation, academic struggles, behavioral and relational problems, substance use, school dropout, and early mortality. The work we're doing now is also a form of preventative health for later.







Graph adapted from: Harvard University Center on the Developing Child

Caring Community

Empower creates welcoming, community-based spaces where grieving children and young adults feel seen, supported, and safe. Through year-round events, including on emotionally difficult days like Mother's and Father's Day, we reduce isolation and foster a sense of belonging.

These gatherings are non-therapeutic, volunteer-driven, and rooted in community connection.



Peer Support

Grief is isolating by nature, and many bereaved children believe they are the only ones in their world who have experienced this loss. Peer support helps break that isolation by connecting children and young adults with others who share the lived experience of losing a parent.

Through these shared connections, participants feel understood, build meaningful relationships, and realize they are not alone.



Our Theory of Change

Research from Judi's House and the Harvard Center on the Developing Child shows three protective factors can dramatically change a grieving child's trajectory – and they work together. Community events create the space where mentors and peers first connect; peer relationships deepen the trust a young person brings to their mentoring match; and a consistent mentor helps them stay engaged with the broader Empower community over time.

EMPOWER

Positive Role Models

The Empower Mentor Program provides year-round support by connecting children and young adults who have experienced the loss of a parent with caring, compassionate adult mentors who can relate to their grief. Many Empower mentors have experienced parental loss themselves.

Loss is survivable

Through these relationships, mentors help participants build confidence and resilience as they navigate challenges. Research from MENTOR shows that mentoring strengthens connection and helps young people overcome obstacles.

What changed: 2026 outcomes

95%

Felt less alone & more connected





97%

of mentor matches sustained over one year

100%

Remained in school & on track



90%

Improved resilience & confidence

THE OPPORTUNITY

Empower has spent a decade refining a model that works. We now serve families in 10 states — but demand is *outpacing* our capacity.

Childhood bereavement is finally being recognized as a critical public health issue. We are ready to meet the moment.

$5 Million · 3 Years

Serve More Youth

Increase youth served annually from 850+ to 3,000

Support Without Delay

Expand our mentor pool so every child can be matched quickly with a mentor

Expand Access

Add staff to reduce barriers in existing markets and responsibly enter new communities

What's ahead: In 2027, we will serve 1,000 youth, make 40 Mentor Matches, host 20 events across 10 states, and eliminate the waitlist. By 2029, we will serve 3,000 youth, make 100 Mentor Matches, and host 30 events across 10 states.

Grief is lifelong, but it should not be a lifelong barrier to wellbeing. Your investment ensures that a child's trajectory is defined not by what they lost, but by the community that refused to let them walk alone. Join us in building a world where every bereaved young person has a path toward hope.

2026 Impact at a glance

1,000+ youth

served after parental loss through Empower programs



2,000 volunteers

supporting grieving children as positive role models and caring community

10 states

MA, RI, CT, NH, ME, NY, CA, CO, FL, and NC

10,000+

hours of community connection delivered







50

mentor matches made

10

community events hosted

WHERE YOUR DOLLAR GOES

2026 Operating Budget: $735,000



85%
Program
≈ $624,750

11%
Fundraising
≈ $80,850

4%
Administration
≈ $29,400

Your investment directly supports:

- Mentor Program matching and management
- Year-Round Events
- Volunteer training, support, and technology infrastructure for scheduling and communication

Every dollar ensures grieving youth receive consistent, comprehensive support through mentoring relationships and community connection.

85¢ of every dollar goes directly to programs for grieving children and young adults.

THE STORIES

Stories of Loss & Love
Meet a Mentee, a Guardian, and a Mentor, and see firsthand what presence makes possible.

The Mentee's Journey: Meet Estelle



Estelle was six when her mother died from substance abuse. The years that followed brought instability, and she eventually lost contact with her father. What she needed most was consistency, care, and someone who truly understood loss.

She found that in her Mentor, Paula, who lost her own mother at fourteen. Paula doesn't try to "fix" Estelle's story. She simply shows up, steadily and authentically.

Some of their most meaningful moments are everyday ones, like logging driving hours in Paula's Jeep as Estelle works toward her license. Each of these milestones is met by someone who understands its weight, and who knows who should be there, but isn't.

Today, Estelle is thriving academically and emotionally, and she has accepted an offer to play women's hockey at a local boarding school. Before she left, the two spent several days biking, enjoying the beach, and sharing a lobster bake. Distance hasn't changed their bond. Estelle calls Paula "family." Paula feels the same.

This is the power of mentorship: a steady presence that helps a young person write the next chapter of her story.

Supporting the Whole Child: Meet The McManus Family



When Donnette's sister, Kimberly, passed away in 2019, just five days after giving birth to her daughter Kennedy, she went from being a mom of one to raising four children overnight—Kimberly's three daughters, Kamyla, Kaley, and Kennedy, plus her own son—terrified and scrambling for resources. Finding Empower changed everything.

“Mother's Day comes up every single year, and Empower has been the only place that they can actually feel safe and free to talk about their mom in a way that someone is not going to pity them, but really understand what it means to lose a mom.

Now Mother's Day is on our calendar, part of our culture, something we look forward to, and what surprised me most is how much I've received as a caregiver too. My life is enriched in ways I never expected. Empower is part of who we are, and I know these girls will carry it with them for the rest of their lives.”

Click HERE to hear directly from Donnette, Kennedy, Kamyla and Kaley's maternal Aunt and guardian.

Paying it Forward: Meet Ryan



Ryan lost his dad when he was 11. His dad struggled with alcoholism for years, but when he was sober, he was basically his best friend, and then he was gone. Growing up, Ryan didn't have a lot of structured help to process that. It was really just peers who had also experienced loss; they’d find each other at a party and end up in the corner talking about it for hours, because there was nowhere else to put those feelings.

Now he’s 26, and a Mentor at Empower, and Ryan said, “Honestly, the best way I can describe why is this: Growing up bereaved is basically like studying for an exam that never comes. I've just been pushing it around in my head, the strategies for how I've dealt with it, and I realized this was a perfect way to manifest that.”

What he tries to give his mentee is something simple but real: the living proof that you can come out the other side. He’s just an adult who is fine after that. He’s happy, has great personal relationships, and the things that came with losing his dad have actually made him a more empathetic person. Ryan hopes his Mentee is getting some of that from him too.

Alumni Spotlight

Empower's impact doesn't end when a young person becomes an adult. We're proud of what our mentees go on to achieve – in school, in their careers, and in their relationships – because they had steady support during the hardest years of their lives.

Meet Caroline.

Caroline was one of the very first girls to walk through Empower's doors – one of the original participants at our earliest community events. For a long time, she'd carried her mother's death alone, certain that no one else her age understood what that kind of loss felt like. At her first Empower event, that changed. Sitting alongside other girls who had also lost their mothers, Caroline realized for the first time that she wasn't the only one – and that realization became the foundation for everything that followed.

When Empower launched its Mentor Program in 2015, Caroline was matched with a Mentor who gave her something she'd been missing: steady, consistent support through the ordinary and difficult moments of growing up. With that support behind her, Caroline graduated high school and moved into her first full-time job. Life brought new challenges along the way, including a period of housing instability, but Caroline met it the way she'd learned to meet loss: with resilience. She secured her first apartment entirely on her own – a milestone she credits, in part, to a community that never stopped believing in her. Today, Caroline is thriving, building a life defined not by what she lost, but by everything she's since built for herself.

Meet Katie.

Katie lost her mother when she was just 13 years old. With her father absent, Katie's older sister stepped in to raise her and their younger sister – suddenly responsible for a family reshaped by grief. Katie was one of Empower's earliest participants, attending our very first Mother's Day Retreat in 2014 and being matched with a Mentor the following year.

For years, that mentor relationship was a steady thread through Katie's life – but it was during her senior year of high school that it mattered most. As graduation approached, Katie's grades began to slip. The idea of reaching this milestone without her mom there to see it felt unbearable, and she found herself pulling away from finishing. Empower and her Mentor stepped in. Her Mentor showed up in the most tangible ways – picking Katie up from school and driving her to her volunteer site so she could complete her senior capstone project. With that support, Katie finished her project and crossed the graduation stage.

Katie went on to become a teacher, choosing a career built around showing up for young people, much like her Mentor once showed up for her. She recently moved into her very first apartment. Today, she's doing well, living independently, and building a future her mother would be proud of.

THANK YOU

Letters from the children and families we walk alongside

Dear Empower,
I used to think I was the only kid whose mom died. Now I have friends who get it and a mentor who shows up for me. Thank you!
– Chase, age 10

After we lost her dad, my daughter stopped talking about her feelings. Her mentor gave her a safe place to be sad – and to be a kid again. I finally see her smile.

– Jackie, mom of a 12-year-old

Father's Day used to be the worst day, and it's still really hard, but this year I made new friends who were going through the same thing at Empower and I didn't feel alone.

– Leah, age 8

When my sister passed, I became a guardian overnight and didn't know how to help the girls with their grief. Empower showed up – at graduation, on the hard holidays, and on every ordinary day in between. We aren't doing this alone anymore.

– Rachel, Aunt & Guardian

My son is 16 and doesn't open up to many adults. His mentor lost his own father young, and somehow that changed everything. He's back on track in school and talking about college.

– Matthew, dad of a 16-year-old

My mentor taught me it's ok to miss my mom AND be happy.

– Madison, age 11

Letters shared with permission from Empower families.