

KATE'S CLUB

Room for its mission

Addressing grief:

Organization that helps children cope has grown by leaps and bounds. Now, it's moving to Atlanta to be accessible to more.

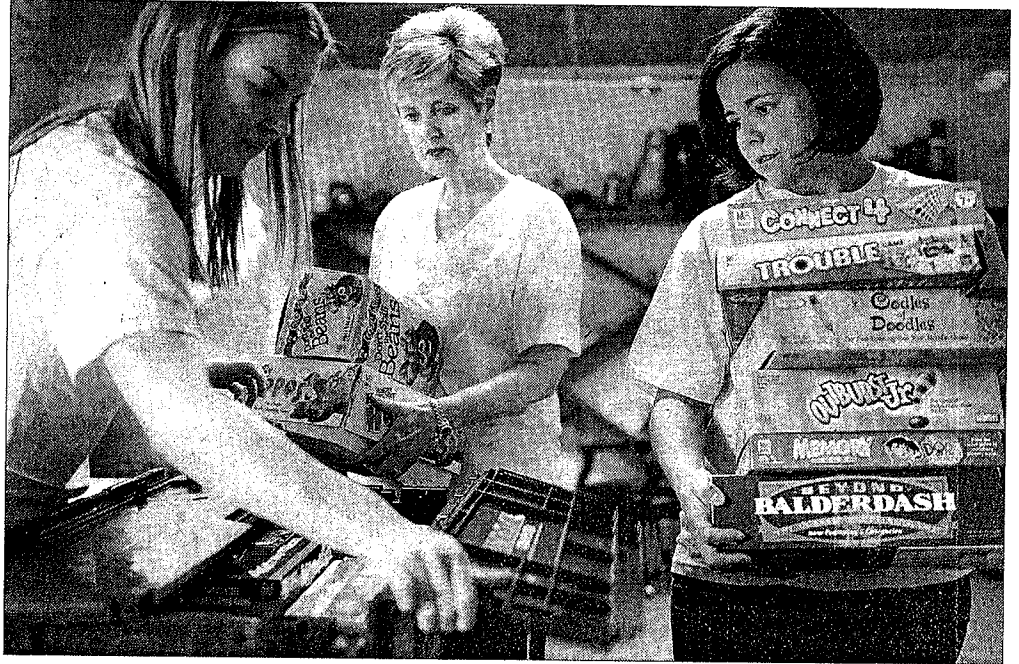
By H.M. CAULEY
For the Journal-Constitution

When Virginia-Highland resident Kate Atwood started the nonprofit Kate's Club five years ago, she never imagined it would become her life's work. But in a few short years, the support group for children dealing with grief has blossomed into an extensive outreach program.

Over the next few weeks, volunteers and staffers are moving the club to a new level, literally. They're packing up and moving from a small office park in Cobb County to more centrally located and expansive offices at the corner of 17th and West Peachtree streets in Atlanta's Midtown. The new facility will have space for four offices, therapy rooms and a large clubhouse where kids can gather, and will be close to MARTA.

"We started out as a recreational and social group that got together once a month and explored Atlanta," said Atwood, 29, who lost her mother when she was 12. "We'd go to baseball games, go bowling and form friendships, all around the commonality of loss. It was myself and six to eight kids. I'd rent a minivan, pick them up and go. Now, we have just under 200 kids in the program, and we're adding families at a rapid pace."

In the past five years, the organization has morphed into more than a social club that organized activities. "We are now a full-service group, providing therapeutic support groups and an overnight camp in the summer," said Atwood. "We've crossed the bridge to providing year-round programs. And it's not solely about supporting their griefs; it's also about



Photos by ELISSA EUBANKS / eubanks@ajc.com
Kate's Club program manager **Eynv Wade** (from left) and volunteers **Pat Hanlein** and **Misty Alexander** pack up the club's Marietta office as they move to a larger, more centrally located spot in Midtown. The organization founded by Kate Atwood helps children deal with grief.

developing young lives in a positive way."

The growth has also included three full-time staffers and a larger budget. In the past two years, the club's budget has doubled, from \$190,000 in 2006 to \$380,000 in 2008. The funding comes from fundraisers, family and private foundations and individuals. (Kate's Club was recently awarded \$25,000 from the Community Foundation of Atlanta.) And there are more age-based programs being developed to cater to the needs of kids ages 5 to 18.

"We've had a lot of great growth over the last 18 months," said LeighAnn Costley, the club's chairwoman of the board. "Moving to a new facility is the next step in reaching more kids."

Costley got involved with Kate's Club three years ago when she was looking for a community project. "I wanted to find a small organization where I could make a difference, where I could be hands-on," she said. "I don't have a personal loss, but I am a mother, and what this organization does for kids really appealed to me."

Costley also saw a growing need for grief support among children. "In 2006, we ran a pilot program with the Atlanta Public Schools where we



Atwood, whose mother died when she was 12, founded Kate's Club five years ago and has seen it grow quickly.

were in five schools doing grief counseling. We realized there are so many kids out there who need this service — boys, girls, all faiths, all races. It also highlighted our transportation challenges, which is one reason why we wanted to be in a central location. Those kids in the APS program could never get to Marietta on the weekends."

The club is also experiencing another change as Atwood moves into a part-time role, focusing more on fund-raising and advocacy instead of day-to-day details.

"I've given my life and time to this organization for

five years," said Atwood, who left a career in sports marketing to launch the club. "In a lot of ways, I was walking the walk with these children and that was an interesting dynamic. But it's time for me to move along, which is exactly what we hope for our children as well.

"In my mind, 'Kate' isn't me; it's the name of someone who didn't let grief stop her life. She still fulfilled her dreams and led a happy life. And that's my goal for all the children in this organization."

More information about Kate's Club is available online at www.katesclub.org.