

A Meaning for Life

Life is a process that ends in death, but we usually look at that process as the end of a long cycle. Yet death reaches various ages, even the young, and the way we cope when tragedy strikes our youth says volumes about our views on life. In this edition of FOCUS, we examine how the young die, how we grieve and, hopefully, something of how we live.

By Chris Bouneff

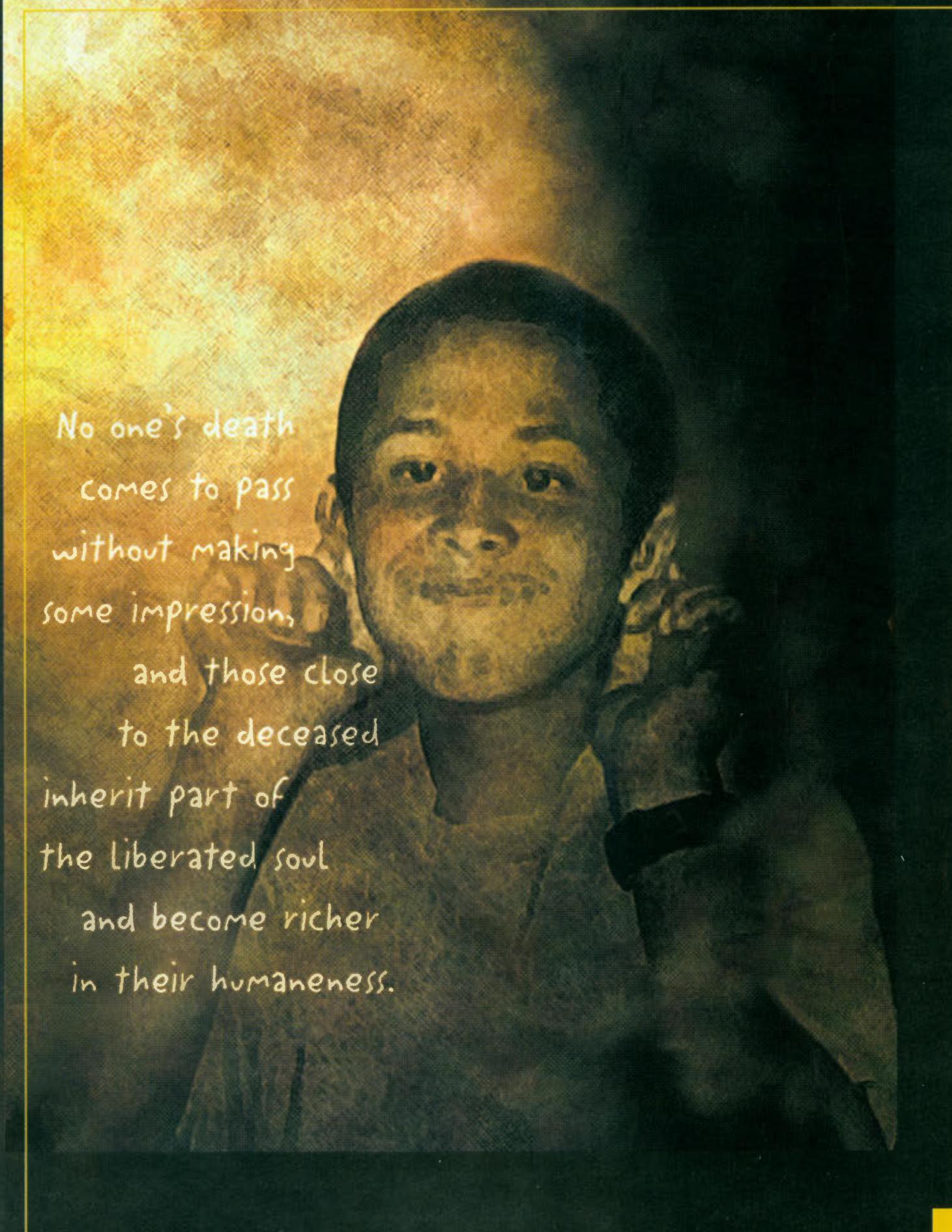
It's 2 a.m., and Eric Hernandez wants to use the bathroom under his own power. Usually he activates a small toy that giggles loudly to summon his mother or aunt, but on this February morning, he wants to make the short trip alone, like a normal 14-year-old boy.

So he rises from his hospital-style bed, twists around into his wheelchair and moves the few feet to the bathroom. At the bathroom door, he rises again, loses his balance and falls. Hard. So hard that his mom, who sleeps lightly these days, hears the thud and runs to his aid. So does his aunt. And so does his older brother, who rushes from his bedroom downstairs.

They learn later that morning that Eric likely snapped a bone in his left arm, but doctors don't want to set the break. Eric has a tumor at the base of his brain. It incapacitates him, as his simple trip gone wrong demonstrates, and it will kill him sooner than any bone will heal.

We think of the process of death as something for the elderly, with a philosophical ending, a person ready for "my" time to go, a time for reflection and wisdom. Somehow, such passings seem natural even when steeped in sorrow, and they remind us of what we all face and how we want to face it.

But people of all ages die. Death doesn't always end with a life at full cycle, looking back on decades of memories. Even a 14-year-old boy, someone who should have more years ahead than behind, must endure life and death as the two meet, usually not in the harmony that we hope for.



No one's death
comes to pass
without making
some impression,
and those close
to the deceased
inherit part of
the liberated soul
and become richer
in their humaneness.



Chris Hernandez releases some anxiety with hospice chaplain Mary Cay Armer.

So, what is Eric's story? The tumor impedes his breathing and strangles his speech, and he struggles to take in enough air just to whisper several words. Mostly, he communicates with nods of his head.

Yes, he nods, he wants his family and friends to learn from his ordeal, but he can't say what, no matter how desperately we want him to answer. His actions and others must answer whether the tragedy that consumes a 14-year-old boy, his friends and family teaches us something of life and death.

Chris Hernandez, 32, is in her home three blocks from Boise State University, sitting in her usual chair at the kitchen table. She tells her son's story with a mix of documentary detachment, pride and grief. The date is Feb. 12.

Seven months earlier, Eric, a small-framed boy with closely cropped hair and a wide smile, played pool at BSU's Student Union and jumped from the footbridge into the Boise River. When school started, his interests turned to football and wrestling.

Headaches, however, forced him from the field; his speech and coordination faltered. Doctors found the cancerous tumor on Oct. 1. Because of the location, they said they couldn't operate and that radiation and chemotherapy offered little hope. Eric, they told his mother, would die.

Chris broke the news to her family individually, taking aside her other children — Robert, 13, Patricia, 16, and Manuel, 17 — and Eric's best friend, Brandon, 14.

Shortly after the diagnosis, Brandon captured a telling moment with his camera in the family's living room. Eric, always a jokester, mugged for the picture, puffing his small cheeks and pulling his ears forward for the fuzzy black-and-white print.

The response set the tone for how Eric and the family would deal with the coming months. Life would continue as normally as possible, and they would avoid direct confrontation with fear and the eventual outcome, seeing but not acknowledging the shadow that waited for the family.

"We just didn't talk about it," Brandon says of the photo's

message. "So we'd just go on and do the stuff we normally did. We didn't run outside anymore. We'd sit and talk and watch movies."

Eric fought through October, even though doctors at one point said he wouldn't last the month. November and December, confined to a wheelchair, he battled for the holidays. Early on, he had energy to visit the mall and drive a family friend's go-cart. When his strength failed, he played cards or sat at the kitchen window and watched the world pass.

In January, the family joined St. Luke's Hospice. The program, covered by Medicare and Medicaid, helps eligible families care for those with terminal illnesses at home.

But nothing could prepare the family for February.

As Chris finishes the story, Eric sits at the table in a wheelchair with his head slightly bowed. His body is swollen from the drugs that, ironically, attempt to control the tumor's swelling, and he has only whispers of hair, a byproduct of unsuccessful chemotherapy.

A poker face hides his feelings. That's typical Eric, his mother explains, never one to argue or reveal emotions. You only guess at what he feels from his body language: fear, depression, some moments of pleasure, mostly sadness. He still laughs at jokes but often with a polite smile more suited for a drab cocktail party joke.

Chris speaks for him. What does he miss? Playing roller hockey with friends in a nearby parking lot and roughhousing with his siblings. And the fiddle, his other passion in addition to sports. Eric loved to practice, but now his hands, although they can grasp large objects, are too bulky and impaired for the delicate fingering needed to play.

"Do you miss the fiddle?" Chris asks. Eric digs for a deep breath to talk, and Chris waits patiently, knowing that an answer will come, one or two words, maybe a sentence punctuated with a cough. This time, Eric just cries.

Chris rarely reveals bitterness or sorrow and says she cries only in her quiet moments. She also maintains some hope, telling

hospice chaplain Mary Cay Armer during an afternoon visit that Jesus can deliver a miracle. But she also is resigned — she and the doctors are helpless.

“Well, what can I do?” Mary Cay asks.

“The same thing we can all do,” Chris replies.

“Pray?”

“Just pray,” Chris says.

Her sister Gloria comes to the kitchen table, and the three join hands and pray to the Lord as the coffee maker bubbles in the background.

A day passes, and Chris tells Tina Blood, the hospice nurse and a 1980 BSU alumna, that she wants to maintain a household focused on life rather than death to boost Eric’s morale. “Even if he lays there and doesn’t say a thing, you don’t change what’s normal,” Chris says.

Hospice nurses check on Eric twice a week, monitoring his medication and vital signs and delivering prescription refills. Though they work in a rotation, by the luck of the draw Tina has seen Eric regularly since the family joined hospice in January.

She walks into Eric’s bedroom for his checkup. The trappings of any 14-year-old boy decorate the room. Posters and autographed jerseys of Jerry Rice, Joe Montana, Steve Young and anything else with a San Francisco 49ers logo cover the walls. Pictures from happier times not so long ago — Eric wrestling, Eric in a wheelchair at the Halloween dance — clutter the short dresser. Eric is in a twin-sized hospital bed, just below a window that frames a basketball hoop standing outside.

Tina is a gregarious, friendly figure who jokes with Eric and to whom Eric responds with a genuine smile his mother says is still worth a million dollars. He lies there, mostly helpless, as Tina raises the legs on his sweat pants to check the swelling in his legs.

With a touch of her hand, Tina tries to let Eric know that she’s there for more than medical reasons. “Just to reassure him,” she says later of the touch, “when I see the 49ers from now on, I’ll think of him.”

Tina admires Eric’s will but worries that she and others can’t penetrate his fortress. Other patients, she says later, come to terms with their fate, find peace in their lives and with their families and resolve issues. Eric can’t or won’t.

Eric’s health nosedives when he develops pneumonia on Feb. 13. He fights off the infection, but after that, he mostly lays in bed hooked to an oxygen machine and watches television. A burst of energy occasionally surges through him, and he’ll play cards with his mother or sit at the kitchen table.

Brandon continues his afternoon visits, but the two friends can’t talk as they once did. So they watch cartoons, Eric sometimes staring at the TV and other times trying to sleep while Brandon sits on the floor with his knees to his chest.

On Feb. 18, the entire family is home for a night, and they express hope that Eric will live until his mother’s birthday, which is a week away. And for one of the few times since his diagnosis, they talk together about their feelings.

In Eric’s illness, his older brother Manuel sees a lesson: Live for today because you don’t know what will happen tomorrow. Eric’s sister and younger brother, however, can’t explain the anger and grief they feel.

Gloria, Chris’ older sister, has worked at a nursing home and witnessed death, so she takes comfort in her faith. Eric, she says, will be in heaven, a better place than this, and he’ll be happy.

Chris comes into the living room, and she and Gloria swap stories about their childhood and how each escaped tough lives. They lived in sparse conditions as children, existing in pup tents for three months after their family moved to Idaho. Chris married at 15, partly to escape home, and had four children by 19. Once

Human Values

By Jackie Schnupp

In an era in which the material value of personal possessions is first closely scrutinized in order to be ultimately priced, Alan Frankle is attempting to evaluate perhaps the most personal possession of all: a human life.

Frankle, a professor in Boise State’s department of marketing and finance since 1984, has spent more than five years conducting research in the area of forensic economics.

Put simply, he is trying to determine the legal value on human life, whether that life is lost or altered due to an accident or adversely affected due to work changes such as downsizing. “We are talking about earnings potential and economics, rather than the intrinsic value of a life,” Frankle says. “We’re not trying to say that someone who makes \$1 million per year is a better person than someone who makes \$1,000 per year — it is a strictly economic analysis.”

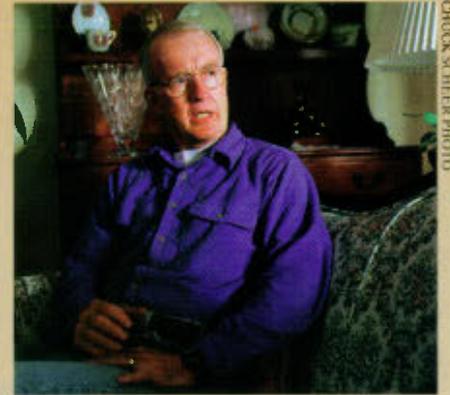
When it comes to litigation, Frankle says the easiest cases are those pertaining to professional employees with proven work records and histories of earnings. The histories can then be used to predict into the future, with allowances for variance in the value of the dollar, permitting a fairly straightforward analysis of the value of that person’s life. The hard part comes when the case involves a younger child, whose potential has yet to be proven; with no hard facts to draw upon. “In those kinds of cases, the value is always a guesstimate,” Frankle says.

In more recent years, some expert legal testimony has introduced the theory of “hedonics” to help determine a judgment. This theory attempts to establish the worth of family and friends, as well as illustrate the joy in life an individual has experienced, all of which combine as part of that person’s whole value. A few states have accepted hedonics, but most have not.

Frankle’s interest in business evaluations began about five years ago, when he assisted in a study for Idaho Power as the company began to downsize. “We developed a way to systematically determine employee contributions,” says Frankle. “The business aspects of my research definitely show up in the classroom, and especially in the counseling of students. I feel I am far better able to assist them in putting together a portfolio that will be of the most value to them.”

Frankle intends to eventually write a series of articles and manuscripts on forensic economics that outline his own findings and analyses.

“I think we are making definite progress in this field,” he contends, “but we are just not quite there yet.” □



CHUCK SCHIEF PHOTO

divorced, she worked non-stop providing a life for her children that she never knew existed as a child.

The family talks of the past and the future, about hardship and sadness, and about life and death. The past roars alive, but the future doesn't exist beyond a couple of days and lacks in dreams.

"I can't see the future anymore," Chris says. "I can't see the future for my kids because this has changed them forever."

On Feb. 25, Eric presents his mother with two surprises. One is a certificate marking Chris' 33rd birthday that the children made and signed, even Eric in his weak hand. The other is a series of seizures that every few minutes pulls his body to the left.

The worry on Chris' pale face is clear, and her normal talkative self recedes into uneasy jokes with Eric as they sit at the kitchen table and wait for the next seizure. The doctor returns Chris' phone call and says Eric could be rejecting his medication. More likely, the tumor has reached its peak and Eric's time is near.

For the first time, Chris speaks about more serious subjects than Eric's favorite dinners. How many children will she say she has when people ask? Three or four? What kind of coffin should she pick out? What music should be played at the memorial service?

Chris called Eric's ordeal a death watch in the past, and now she's learned that the months of preparation, of knowing the future and the eventual end, didn't prepare her. Eric fights on. But the shadow is descending.

In early February, Chris told hospice chaplain Mary Cay that she wanted to be with Eric when he died. "I don't want him to die by himself," she says. "I want to be there. Nothing is scarier than being alone."

She was there, March 3, at 7:30 in the morning.

Family and friends knew the outcome; they had five months to adjust. But they spent that time struggling to maintain a life rather than mourn a death. The end, when it came, devastated them. "I'm ready for it, but I don't think I can handle it," Brandon, his best friend, said a week before Eric died.

At the funeral four days later, Chris walked in a daze as a line of people hugged her. Mourners filled the Cathedral of the Rockies; most were Eric's classmates at East Junior High School.

Mary Cay delivered the eulogy and asked the audience to look at the impact one 14-year-old boy can have on the world.

Is that what Eric's ordeal taught us — that we touch the lives of others? Is that the ultimate message of life and death?

In their search for meaning, family members talked about Eric's smile, his humor and his friendliness. They talked about his fight, how he clung to life despite the losing battle and how he tried to savor his favorite dinners and go-cart rides.

Chris took pride in his graceful passing: Eric never complained or showed anger. Some friends didn't know what Eric's death meant, but they knew they would miss his generosity, his loving spirit and his companionship.

Each mourner heard a different message and tried to relay it through the clichés we use to explain the secrets of life locked in words like love, hope, despair and grief.

Maybe we're too close to the end to see the ending. Eric's statement on life and death will come later, Mary Cay says. "I don't worry about figuring all these things out today," she says. "It won't be all real clear today or tomorrow or next week. It will unfold for me as I go along."

Maybe we won't find the words to talk about what we learn, but we will feel it and see it, like a wisp of smoke. Try to grab it, try to assign words to it, and it eludes our hands, but there it is, a presence nonetheless. □



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