

Survival of the Luckiest

*Death claims BSU student,
leaves survivor to ponder 'why?'*

By Bob Evancho

Juan Majalca sits at a table in the BSU Student Union. He's a bit uncomfortable with the subject at hand, but he agrees to talk.

"We all deal with death differently," he says with a shrug. "How do I cope with Andy's death? I try to keep my mind occupied and think positive things. I try to blur the accident away."

This is how Majalca deals with the death of his friend and fellow Boise State student Andres "Andy" Luna, who was killed in a one-car accident on Sept. 28, 1997. At 6:37 that Sunday morning, Luna, 23, fell asleep at the wheel of his 1993 Mitsubishi Eclipse and crashed on Interstate 84 near Glens Ferry. Majalca was his passenger.

Returning to Boise after a day and night of gambling in Jackpot, Nev., Luna and Majalca, both teetotalers, were fighting fatigue. "We got a little bit of sleep, but not enough," says Majalca. "Andy was just tired."

Luna and Majalca arrived in Jackpot around 1 p.m. Saturday. Their original plan was to gamble for a few hours and be back in Boise by 10 p.m. "We had some good luck playing blackjack," Majalca recalls. "I won about \$200 and Andy won about \$150; we ended up staying longer than we had planned."

The pair left Jackpot at around 4 a.m. "Andy was in a hurry because he told his girlfriend he would meet her [in Boise] at 7 a.m.," Majalca says. "We stopped in a motel parking lot in Twin Falls and slept in the car for about 40 minutes. I said, 'If you're still tired we can get a room in this motel and sleep for

a couple of hours. We can afford it with our winnings.' But he didn't want to do that."

They stopped at a rest area on I-84 between Twin Falls and Glens Ferry for another short respite. "I offered to drive, but Andy said no," Majalca recalls. "Then I said, 'Well, at least put on your seat belt; I'm wearing mine.' But he wouldn't do

that either. He was stubborn that way." Majalca then reclined his seat as far back as it would go and tried to nod off.

"We were going to switch and I was gonna drive when we reached Glens Ferry, but when we got there he just kept going," Majalca recalls. "So I was lying there, looking out the window, and a little while later I felt the car start to drift to the left. I looked up and said, 'Andy, are you OK?' and he

said, 'Yeah,' but he didn't do anything to put the vehicle back on the road and we started going into the median.

"So I yelled again, 'ARE YOU OK!?' and he kind of woke up. He suddenly realized what was happening and he jerked the steering wheel to the right to pull the car back on the road. But we were going 80 mph and he jerked the wheel too fast; the car started to roll. On the first impact, I was knocked unconscious. I don't remember anything else about the accident."

Luna's car slid sideways and then rolled, making one complete rotation before landing on its wheels. Luna was thrown from the vehicle and died when his head hit the pavement. Majalca survived because of his seat belt and his reclining

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Juan Majalca copes with his friend's death by resuming his studies at BSU.

position. "When I came to the first time, I was trapped and couldn't move; the roof was crushed in and was about an inch from my face," he says matter-of-factly. "If I had been sitting upright, I would have been killed, too."

Majalca suffered a concussion; lacerations to his head, hands and fingers; a bruised collarbone; and a dislocated shoulder. Twice he passed out between the time he was extricated from the vehicle and transported to Elmore Medical Center in Mountain Home. "I remember my head was bleeding and I remember two paramedics — a man and a woman," he says. "When they put me on a stretcher, I remember asking about Andy. 'Your friend was thrown from the car,' one of them told me. 'He didn't make it.' At that moment, I don't remember feeling any emotion. Not shock, not sadness — nothing."

Fluid formed between the socket and joint in Majalca's injured shoulder; the wreck left his head and hands bruised and battered. The doctors administered morphine and other drugs to kill the pain. As a result, he spent the ensuing days in a fog.

"Those first few days after the accident didn't seem real," he says. "It really didn't hit me that Andy had been killed until a week and a half later."

Five months have passed since Luna's death. Things have returned to normal — at least outwardly — for Majalca. He's working toward his degree in secondary education at BSU, holding down a part-time job and playing city league soccer. When asked how he's come to terms with the accident, his reticence is evident. "It's pretty painful to relive that morning," he says. "Sure I miss Andy. He was an awesome guy and my friend, a good friend."

Does he feel any guilt because he survived and Luna did not? "No," he replies. "It was his time; it wasn't my time."

If that's the case, does Majalca believe that his life was spared and his friend's was taken by some type of divine intervention? "Death is part of the evolution of life," he responds. "Sure, I feel lucky and I'm thankful to be alive, but I don't think about me being alive and Andy being dead in any religious or spiritual terms."

Perhaps he discusses his friend's death in such stoic, measured terms because of his upbringing. Raised in foster homes while growing up on the mean streets of East Los Angeles, Majalca says he has lived a life bereft of compassion.

"I grew up not knowing the meaning of the word love," he says. "I've had to deal with life's setbacks on my own my entire life. I

grew up not sharing my feelings. Because of that, I still tend to keep my emotions inside.

"People have told me that keeping your feelings inside isn't healthy; that it's the wrong thing to do. But for me, I think I'm handling Andy's death correctly. Maybe if I had grown up in a normal family, I would cope with this differently. Maybe I could lean on people more."

But he doesn't lean. He just stares straight ahead, hoping the interview will end soon.

"Yes, it was a tragedy; my friend died," he says. "But I can't stay in the past and dwell on what happened. I have no control over the past. I can't be crying every day and repeating it over in my mind."

"I've gotta try to blur it out and deal with it ... get on with my life. Sure, it hurts. I feel the pain and the loss. But I don't cry or get sentimental. I guess that's just the way I am."

Sometimes tragedy strikes, snatching a young life away long before it should end. And those left behind are forced to carry on. But how?

"If this were to happen to someone else," Majalca says, "I guess my advice to that person would be find someone to listen. Make sure you find someone to listen."

So who is listening to Juan? □

"A baby in a mother's womb has no comprehension of life outside the mother's womb. If somehow you could get in and try to tell the baby about the mountains, the trees and the clouds, the oceans and rivers, the baby couldn't comprehend it.

"But when a baby is born it enters a world it never knew or dreamed existed. But more important than that, it sees the mother who's carried it and loved it all of its life face to face. And so when we enter in life beyond death, we not only enter an existence we could never comprehend, we see the holy one who has carried us all of our life."

For Mawson, her spirituality, as manifested through her church, gave her structure during a time described as every parents' nightmare—a phone call that your daughter has been seriously injured in an automobile accident and is not expected to live.

The one-car rollover happened just outside Burns, Ore., as Kasie and a friend drove to a church camp for training to become camp counselors.

The driver survived and later told Mawson the two girls were trying to change places while the car was moving so Kasie, who did not have a driver's license or had ever driven before, could drive.

During the switch the driver lost control of the car. Kasie was ejected and suffered mas-

sive head injuries, which left her comatose. She was taken to a Burns, Ore., hospital and then flown by helicopter to Bend.

The six-hour drive to Bend is what helped Mawson deal with the situation, she says.

"The doctor had told me over the phone

'A lot of people feel like life is meaningless if there is no afterlife.'

that she would not survive. He said he would not resuscitate, that her heart was weakening. We basically knew she would not live. Of course the whole time I was praying.

"They always talk about making a bargain with God. It wasn't really a bargain. It wasn't like 'I would hate You if she died. I know she's gone. I just want her to live until I get there.'" Kasie died the next morning after her parents asked doctors to remove life support.

"Once we got to the hospital and we saw her, it was real. I think I became calmer. It was like I knew what I had to do. I had to

relieve her. You always wonder how you're going to react. I just wanted her to go in a very dignified way, and she did," Mawson says.

The first calls Mawson made when she received word about her daughter were to church leaders who were close to all three of her children. They later made calls to inform others of Kasie's death.

Mawson said the family underwent counseling as a family and individually to work through their grief. But it wasn't until Mawson met another mother with a granddaughter Kasie's age that she really began to heal.

The two women spent many hours together scraping and painting and fixing up an ailing old house that would soon become Mark's House, a gathering place for the church's youth groups. The house was donated by local philanthropists Warren and Bernie McCain after the death of their own son. As the house began to heal, so did Mawson.

Kasie was cremated and the family buried her ashes on the beach of Camp Magruder on the Oregon Coast, her destination the day she died. Mawson thinks of Kasie every day and prays to God to care for her.

"God knows what it's like to lose a child. I think that made me feel a lot closer to Him. I think that's why I never felt like He made it happen. He's been there." □

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