

Spring 2000

The Planet, 2000, Spring/Summer

Shane Powell

Western Washington University

Huxley College of the Environment, Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/planet>

Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Journalism Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Powell, Shane and Huxley College of the Environment, Western Washington University, "The Planet, 2000, Spring/Summer" (2000). *The Planet*. 30.

<https://cedar.wwu.edu/planet/30>

This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Student Publications at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Planet by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

the planet
spring/summer 2000



Olympic
Pipeline
Explosion:
A Retrospective

June 10, 1999 Bellingham, Washington

It was summer 1999, and what should have been a season of sunshine and sleepy afternoons instead became for Bellingham a season of darkness and despair.

Billowing plumes of black smoke stretched miles high, leaving a city to mourn the loss of three young lives, a precious creek and a feeling of safety, once taken for granted.

Each quarter, the Planet attempts to embrace local issues with broader implications. Though the topic this quarter was an obvious choice, the task itself became more challenging than any of us ever imagined.

We spent the first two weeks of this quarter not only discussing the details of last year's pipeline explosion, but also trying to come to grips with the magnitude of the project we were taking on. The reality of our task hit us during our third meeting ...

I asked one of our staff writers to read the essay by Liam Wood entitled "Time Capsule," (which appears in Amy Codispoti's story "The Flyfisherman,") aloud. We listened closely as she read Liam's words: "I value many things, life being the first and foremost," he wrote. We listened to things he loved: flyfishing, snowboarding ... beauty and honesty. And the things he disliked: the rape and pillage of our wilderness areas, garbage left in rivers. And his dreams: "Ten years from now, I want to be kayaking a beautiful river with a beautiful woman."

When she finished reading, I looked up to find many of the room's faces full of tears. Surely, each one of us could relate in some solid way to Liam's words. Especially because Liam may have written for the Planet this year. Liam could have shared this class, his friendship and passion with us.

And in more ways than one, Liam did write for us. His essay read aloud invited each of us to suddenly take a piece of last year's pipeline tragedy a little deeper into ourselves and, in turn, into the stories we wrote for this magazine. Additionally, we published a beautiful essay written by Liam himself, entitled "Rocky Ford." Although each of the Planet's staff writers set out to write a unique story, we were all bound by a common theme — a theme which has become the subject of the largest and likely the most significant issue of the Planet magazine ever.

But if you read closely, you'll see that our theme is not simply tragedy and loss. Indeed these are heavy elements of this issue, but in these themes are powerful glimpses of hope. Hope for change. Hope for new perspective.

The Chinese use the same symbol for "tragedy" as they do "opportunity." This issue of the Planet has set out to show that indeed the two words are interchangeable.

Whether opportunity means helping to reform pipeline safety laws or simply taking a closer look at life's fragility and the need to care for our common community, it is there. As we recognize the anniversary of Olympic's disaster, we encourage our readers to help transform last year's tragedy into this year's opportunity.

We owe it to Stephen. We owe it to Wade. We owe it to Liam. We owe it to their families. All of whom this magazine is respectfully dedicated to.

— Shane Powell

Editor Shane Powell	Staff Writers April Busch
Managing Editor Christine W. Ross	Tiffany Campbell
Copy Editors Erica Oakley Kari McGinnis	Amy Codispoti Cole Cosgrove Ellen Hutchinson
Designers Melanie Crandell & Curt Pavia	Sabrina Johnson Scott LaMont
Assistant Designer Jamie Strand	Andrew Linth
Photo Editor Chris Goodenow	Kari McGinnis Tim Reid
Associate Editor Tiffany Campbell	Skye Thompson
Web Design Michael Lemmon	Katrina Tyrrell
Adviser Scott Brennan	Joe Wiederhold Liam Wood

Special thanks to: Floyd McKay, Carl Weimer, Greg Winter, Carol Brach, Cheryl Crooks, Brad Smith, The Bellingham Herald, Klipsun magazine, Ann E. Yow, Lauri, Dave, Margaret and the rest of the print plant staff and all those members of the community who kindly contributed pictures for this issue.

The Planet is the quarterly environmental magazine of Huxley College of Environmental Studies, written, designed and edited by students. We are dedicated to environmental advocacy and awareness through responsible journalism.

The Planet is printed on fontana matte 20 percent post-consumer recycled paper. The decision to use low-recycled content paper continues to be a difficult decision as we weigh the benefits of increasing our circulation versus setting an example and using recycled paper. We continue our search for affordable tree-free alternatives. The Planet is printed at Western Washington University Publishing Services.

Correction: In the Winter 2000 issue (pg. 19), the Planet mistakenly reported on the number of sheets of paper Western uses per day. Correct statistics were unavailable. We regret the error.

The Planet
c/o Huxley College, Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA 98225
360-650-3543
planet@cc.wvu.edu
<http://www.planet.wvu.edu>

Back cover watercolor painting: Wade King, age 5

Table of Contents

Skye Thompson	3	One Year Later
Amy Codispoti	7	The Flyfisherman
Amy Codispoti	13	Wrestling Without
Amy Codispoti	15	Grand Slam
Kari McGinnis	17	What Dreams Are Made Of
Kari McGinnis	21	Learning to Live Again
Kari McGinnis	25	A Missing Link
Tim Reid	29	So Others May Live
April Busch	35	The Neighborhoods
Cole Cosgrove	39	Eminent Domain
Tiffany Campbell	43	Whatcom Creek
Andrew Linth	47	Flash Point
Sabrina Johnson	51	A National Problem
Katrina Tyrrell	54	Acting Out
Ellen Hutchinson	57	The End of the Line: Politics and Pipeline Regulation
Liam Wood	59	Rocky Ford
Skye Thompson	62	Last Word

One Year Later

by Skye Thompson

For many in Bellingham the memory is stark and unforgettable: a towering wall of black smoke churning skyward with volcanic fervency. The column expanded from within itself, an infinite origami cloud blossoming six miles high. The explosion, caused by a burst gasoline pipeline, cast a heavy shadow over the entire region.

Now, one year later, our community is still working to make emotional and ecological sense of the blast.

From the air, Whatcom Creek resembles a hiking trail, a fluid path for aquatic life to travel between Lake Whatcom and the Pacific Ocean. The vibrancy of life in the stream is evident each fall when the ocean sends hundreds of salmon spawning up the stream. In the spring, thousands of smolt follow their instincts and their heritage down the watery path to the sea.

The lake sits above Bellingham like an upstairs pool, a natural water tower providing clean water with strong pressure for a town built below it on seaside tidal flats. The creek pours out of the lake, down slope onto the flats and into the salty water of the bay.

Unlike many urban places, Bellingham hasn't covered all its waterways with city streets. In fact, much of Whatcom Creek is open and accessible and some stretches are even celebrated as city parks.

Celebrating Whatcom Creek is appropriate because it has been the centerpiece of Bellingham since the town's beginning. Using the stream's rushing energy to power their sawmill,

Bellingham's first settlers milled lumber out of the surrounding forest. From those planks Bellingham was born.

That was the early 1850s. Since then, Bellingham's connection to the creek hasn't diminished, but it has changed. Locals today covet the lake and its outlet stream for clean water and natural beauty. So when a ruptured pipeline high on the staircase pumped 229,950 gallons of gasoline into the creek, public faith in the sanctity of the park evaporated.

It was 3:30 p.m. The broken pipe — a steel, 16-inch high-pressure line — spewed forth 7,000 gallons of gasoline per minute, more than 100 gallons each second. Quickly the creek turned yellow, and a curtain of vaporous fumes closed over the stream.

Liam Wood was flyfishing on the bank of the stream when that curtain enveloped him. He was a gifted nature writer and passionate flyfisherman. When the gas came, Liam couldn't escape. He collapsed and drowned in the stream.

If the leak had poured into a swimming pool the size of a football field the gas would have been 9 inches deep.

But the gas didn't spill into a giant swimming pool. Instead it gushed down the narrow slot canyon of Whatcom Creek, flow-



The burn zone at Whatcom Creek

photo courtesy of Joy Monjure



ing in a continuous stream more than three miles to the bay. And as the gas evaporated and fumes accumulated, the creek and the surrounding forest became explosive. The winding stream became a bomb fuse.

Wade King and Stephen Tsiorvas were playing outside. Wade, a Mariners fan, was the catcher for his baseball team. Stephen sang in the school choir and liked to skateboard and swim. It was the beginning of summer and naturally these two 10 year olds had mischief on their minds. But Stephen and Wade were smart. They knew that playing with fire could be dangerous, so just before 5 p.m.

the boys took their butane lighter to the safest place imaginable, the lush bank of nearby Whatcom Creek.

When the vapors ignited, a gargantuan fireball exploded around the boys. A torrent of fire raced upstream toward the leak and downstream toward the city. The two fireballs rolled like MAC Trucks through the riparian vegetation of the streambed, searing huge evergreen trees white and limbless. Where pockets of the yellow fluid pooled, massive explosions clapped

The two fireballs rolled like MAC Trucks through the riparian vegetation of the streambed, searing huge evergreen trees white and limbless.

like thunder, each concussion sending tremors through the city.

The gasoline burned for about an hour. Before the fire quit, it had raised a curtain of black smoke 1.5 miles wide and 6 miles high. As the sun set, breezes toppled the sooty tower and white ash fell like snow upon the city. A brown translucent film hung in the air, and through it the evening sky looked almost green, a nauseating oil slick upon the dying sun.

Stunned, the city sank immediately into mourning. The greasy brown haze that hung in the air also hung in our hearts. Quiet depression suppressed the community and for days people remained speechless.

In the ensuing year, Bellingham has begun to grapple with its grief. These first steps have been the hardest. When a sudden emotional vacancy is as large as one's child or as stark as a landscape wasted by fire, the task of recovery is daunting.

But Bellingham is pulling through. Progress here has been like the response of spring in a landscape emerging from deep exaggerated winter. The green of new life has infiltrated an otherwise colorless panorama.



So too has been people's emotional response. The spirit and emotion suppressed by the fire is returning. For many people, taking these first steps has meant volunteering time and energy toward helping others.

Levels of community involvement have been high. In October, on Make A Difference Day, 642 volunteers ages 5 to 75 donated 2,823 hours of service in more than 40 projects around Whatcom County. More than 120 volunteers planted trees and cleaned up Whatcom Creek.

This type of support is the foundation for both emotional regrowth and ecological recovery: People connecting with people and establishing new relationships through cooperative support. Like the roots of a tree, community can provide broad and stable support in times of hardship. As a community, the people of Bellingham have empathetically held up those who have lost the most.

Upon this substructure of support, families who lost children have become leaders in our community and nation. Their energy and articulate advocacy for safer pipelines and renewed ecosystems have become the voice of Bellingham and the basis of a

By speaking to Congress, the ball player's father fights for tangible meaning in his son's death.

broad national movement for increased pipeline regulation.

By speaking to Congress, the ball player's father fights for tangible meaning in his son's death.

By restoring the creek, the fisherman's mother restores a place where her son's spirit can endure and play. His spirit was happiest there in life, perhaps it will be happiest there after life as well.

The positive connections we share make us who we are. The

fabric of our community is made from the threads woven through it. Strangely, many of these threads aren't discovered until a crisis occurs. When tragedy laid bare the inner matrix of our community cloth, new

seams were built to hem that rip. This process pulled us even more tightly together and strengthened our community.

Most importantly, the personal connections established in the pipeline crisis are a place for us to remember those we lost. However they are memorialized, wherever they come to rest, the spirits of Bellingham's lost sons live within each of us. ☺



The Flyfisherman

by Amy Codispoti

Including "Time Capsule" by Liam Wood

Liam Wood loved flyfishing. June 10, 1999, was the perfect day to indulge in his favorite sport. Just four days prior, the young man had been set free from the prison formally known as high school, and this was one of the sunniest days to grace Bellingham in weeks. After picking up his diploma from Sehome High School, he headed off to his favorite local hideaway, Whatcom Falls, flyfishing gear in hand. The creek was quiet; few others were out of school that early, and it was a weekday. Whether or not Liam smelled the gasoline that had spilled into the creek via the burst pipeline no one knows, but his friends all agree that even if he had smelled the deadly fuel, his concern for the creek would have forced him to stay and investigate.

On June 10, 1999, young Liam Wood died in Whatcom Falls Park — a park he regarded as sacred, a place he revered for its beauty. At 18, Liam, full of contagious energy and an equally contagious inner peace, had affected the lives of everyone who had the privilege to know him.

"Liam loved Whatcom Creek," says Jane Nibler, one

of Liam's closest friends. "He was so excited that the salmon were finally starting to come back. I know that if he thought the creek was in danger, he wouldn't leave because he'd be so worried about it."

Jane smiles a private, thoughtful smile. She pauses before explaining how she came to know Liam.

"I met Liam the first day

of my freshman year, in orchestra. I was just standing there, and all of a sudden someone behind me picked me up and just put me in the trash can! He just laughed and laughed as I tried to get out."

Jane's smile lights up her eyes.

"Liam was such a riot! He had the weirdest random sense of humor; he could always

crack me up. And he was such a renegade. He always kept things interesting ... I miss him so much. Everything reminds me of him," Jane says.

"He kept me balanced," she continues. "I am a real goal-oriented person, and I am a very linear thinker and tend to be serious. But Liam never let anything ruffle him. He knew that whatever came his way, he could handle it. I remember once he said to me, 'Jane, go down to Boulevard Park, close your eyes and feel the grass growing beneath your fingers and listen to the gulls. Learn how to enjoy the moment.'"

Liam and Jane played violin in sixth period orchestra. Daily, the two would sit together, playing their instruments, whispering and stifling laughs.

Jane says Liam wasn't especially fond of high school. Although he was academically successful, the trivialities of school annoyed him. Liam's concerns rose beyond the walls of high school. Although he differed in this regard from his peers, Jane says Liam was a very well known and loved person at Sehome.

Six months before his death, Liam composed a miniature autobiography for a creative writing class.

It begins:

Today's date is January 20, 1999. It's a cloudy, rainy day and I am happy.

*Presently my life is great! I've just finished my second to last semester of high school and I don't have a care in the world! Partying every weekend and doing the things I love to do like flyfishing, snowboarding, dating, lifting weights and playing basketball. Other things I really like to do are: ice climbing, whitewater kayaking, hiking, running, watching movies, spending time with friends. I value many things, life being the first and foremost. I also value good, long-lasting relationships and courtesy. I value beauty and honesty, and good food. I value our wilderness areas and all creatures walking the earth. I value all people and I value diversity and human rights.**

Jeff Clark, an English teacher at Sehome High, taught Liam's Northwest Literature course fall semester of 1998. Jeff, an avid flyfisherman, designed the course to appeal to students who had an interest in the outdoors and an appreciation for the environment. Jeff says that at first Liam was quiet in the class — not shy, but preferred to keep to himself. But as the semester progressed, so did Liam's enthusiasm for the class. Once, Jeff mentioned his passion for flyfishing to Liam. Liam's hazel eyes immediately lit up, realizing the connection the two shared.

"He went fishin' all the time," Jeff says. "I knew he was catchin' a lot of fish and he knew I wasn't. But he never made me feel like I was a loser. He'd always give me little tips. We kind of switched roles ... he became the teacher and I became the student. It totally put a new dimension on our relationship. Even after he was out of my class, I would see him in the halls and he'd catch my eye



photo courtesy of Marlene Robinson

"It is just unfair, unjust and cruelly ironic that Liam died on a sunny afternoon fishing in a place that he loved and doing something that's not hurting anybody."

-Jeff Clark, Liam's English teacher at Sehome H.S.

Sehome Graduate Liam at WWU

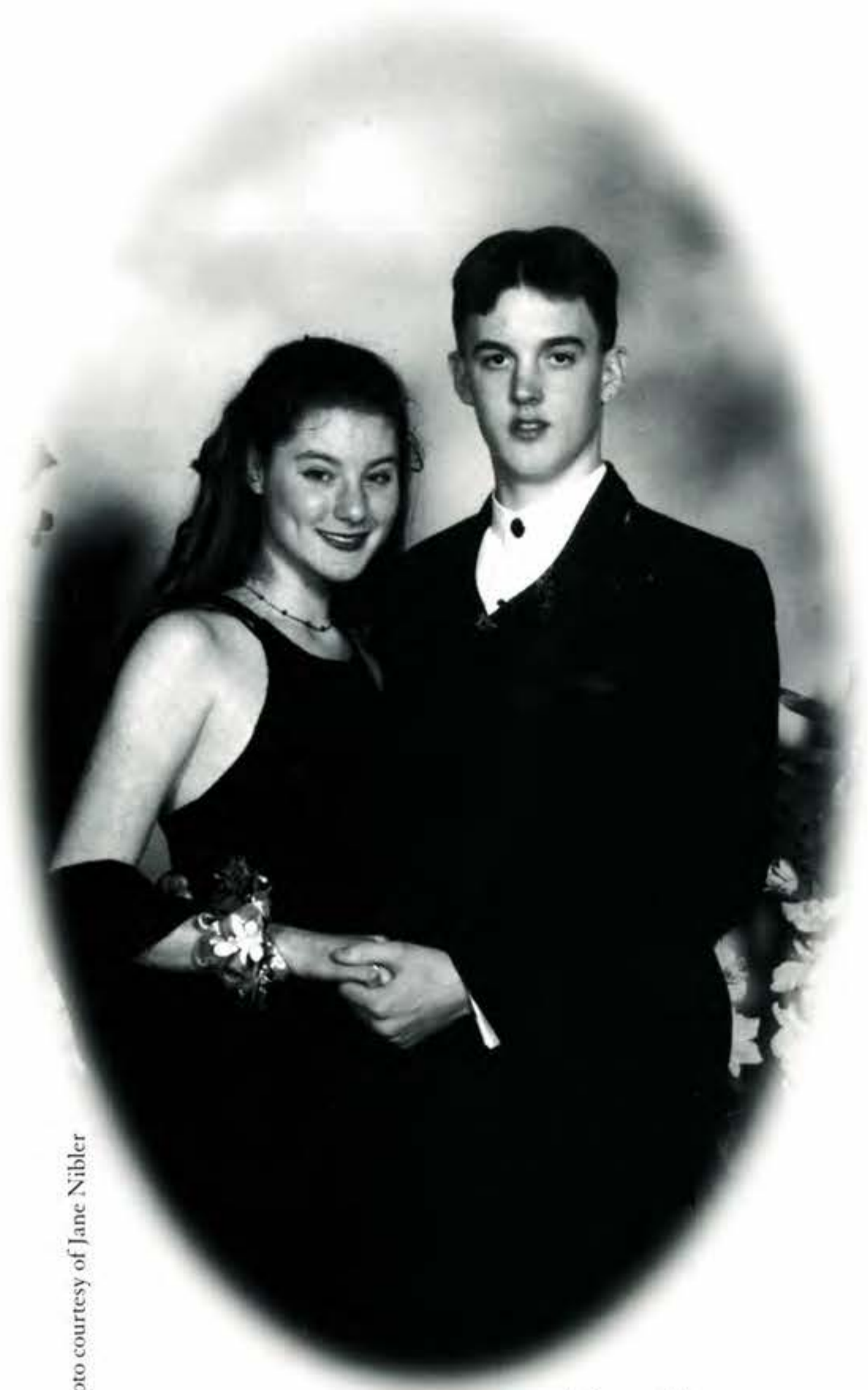


photo courtesy of Jane Nibler

Liam and Jane at prom

“Ten years from now I want to be kayaking a beautiful river with a beautiful woman. I want to be happy. That’s it.”

-Liam Wood

and we’d stop and compare fishing stories. So, when the accident happened”

Jeff’s voice breaks as his eyes fill with tears. He lifts a cupped hand to his mouth, averts his dark eyes and stares across the green lawn.

“It is just unfair, unjust and cruelly ironic that Liam died on a sunny afternoon fishing in a place that he loved and doing something that’s not hurting anybody. To have this monstrous tragic accident come and happen, and kill him ... that makes it pretty tough for me to take.

“He was kind ... that was one of the things I really appreciated about him,” Jeff says, taking a moment to wipe fresh tears from his cheeks.

“Not everybody is kind,” he continues. “I work with a lot of adolescents. Their hormones are raging. They’re loud ... I mean, a lot of them are great, but kids like Liam are definitely the minority. That kid had a special quality.

He was not egocentric and could empathize with other people. There’s not enough people like him in the world.”

I don't really get angry about that much. I don't like it when people talk in movies. I don't like bread crumbs in the butter, and I hate it when people make stupid calls. I am pissed off about the rape and pillage of our wilderness areas and our salmon runs, and I hate it when fishermen crowd the rivers and leave garbage. My greatest joy these days is being with the people I love. My friends, my girlfriend, and my family. I love being with these people in the mountains and at parties.

Lately I've hurt about...well...nothing really!

My best memory is going down to Oregon with Evan. We had a great time. Fishing the most beautiful streams ever (and catching lots of fish), drinking beer with cowboys, running out of money, dropping lit smokes in our own laps, meeting gorgeous girls, and lots of other things. I also remember the

sun and the feeling of water on my legs and the smells of pine trees and dry earth, mosquitoes and powdered Gatorade.

“Neither Liam or I are especially religious people,” says Evan Scoboria, Liam’s best friend and devout outdoor companion. “But spending time outdoors, especially fishin’, is a real spiritual experience. You kind of find your soul.”

Evan casts his grey-blue eyes down to the table where he sits. Outside, finches and robins flit in the coolish early spring air. The sun is setting, sending warm golden beams across the softly rippling Whatcom Creek, which lies just beyond Evan’s back door.

“We used to go fishing every day,” Evan comments before gingerly sipping his herbal tea. “Before we got our licenses, either my dad or Bruce would take us out.”

Until he met Liam, Evan had never flyfished.

“I was just a pagan fisherman until Liam came along,” Evan says with a laugh.

Pausing, his eyes dance with thoughts of recollection, and a slight smile teases the corners of his mouth.

“Actually, it was fishing that really drew us together as friends,” Evan says. “We met in eighth grade, and Liam was this long haired skater dude, and I was just this nature kid ... kind of an odd match for friends. But, we had fishing in common. And Liam offered to teach me how to flyfish.”

The boys chose Lake Terrell as the destination for their first fishing trip.

“On the way over there, we got a thing of Sunchips and Gatorade, and that became our sort of hallmark. Every time we went fishing from then on, that’s what we got,” Evan says, chuckling.

Being of pre-driver’s license age tried the boys’ adventurous spirits. Constantly relying on Evan’s empathetic father to take them out, the teens remained somewhat restricted during the early years of their friendship.

However, during their sophomore year of high school, Evan got his own Volkswagen camper bus. The last month of school, the two became obsessed with planning what was to be their first independent road trip to Oregon. When the time of departure finally arrived, they packed every worldly possession of theirs in the bus.

“You know,” Evan says with a grin, “we were going to be gone for two weeks. We couldn’t leave anything behind!”

Another item of importance packed in the bus was an ottoman that belonged to Liam’s mom, Marlene. She had it handmade in Oregon, and wanted the boys to take it to be reupholstered.

“It was hard watching them take off in that bus, knowing they’d be gone for so long,” Marlene says with a soft sigh. “Letting go is a difficult thing to do as a mother. But, I knew it was something they had to do; I wasn’t going to stop them.”

Six hours later, in Oregon, Liam and Evan heard a strange bang emit from under the bus. Wondering what happened, Evan asked Liam to poke his head out the window to see if he could detect the source of the problem.

“Oh my God!” Liam cried hysterically, “Evan, there’s flames coming out the tailpipe!”

Fortunately, they were near an exit ramp. Evan quickly pulled off the freeway. But, unfortunately, they were in the middle of nowhere. The boys jumped out of the bus and started running. Momentarily, the flames started gushing out of the wheel wells and the back window burst out. The fire was located directly under the gas tank, so there was no hope for retrieving anything out of the bus.

“We couldn’t figure out what to do!” Evan exclaims, his eyes wide. “Finally, we were able to flag down a mini van that was driving by. The guy had a cell phone; we called the fire department. They said it would be quite a while before they could get there.”

Liam called Marlene and told her the desperate situation. After being reassured of their safety, Marlene jokingly asked Liam if he had managed to retrieve her ottoman.

“Liam was so offended,” Evan says, laughing at the memory. “He said, ‘Oh my God, Mom!’ and then Marlene just started to crack up. At the time, Liam was so ticked off.”

By this time, the flames had progressed into the nearby field. Evan proceeded to call his dad who also laughed at



Evan and Liam

the boys’ plight.

“While I was on the phone with my dad, the propane canisters that went with our camp stove exploded and the driver’s side bus seat was blown out through the windshield. ... In retrospect, that scares the piss out of me.”

When the fire department finally showed up, Liam and Evan were in utter shock. Not knowing what to do, they wandered down the road and discovered a pear tree.

“We just sat there for at least 20 minutes eating green, un-ripe pears. As we were walking back up to the scene, we saw the bus flip over and lurch forward like three or four times,” Evan recalls.



Jane and Liam

A tow-truck eventually arrived to remove the shell of the bus, and a red-hot cylinder fell out of the van. After unsuccessfully trying to put it out, the fireman left the burning metal piece in the road, and marked it off with red tape.

"We ended up going down to Liam's dad's house that evening," Evan says, admitting that his memory is somewhat blurry due to the shock of losing the bus. "My dad came down to pick us up to bring us back to Bellingham, and on the way up we stopped at the exit where my bus burned up, and there was this huge hole in the pavement where the cylinder was."

Evan brushes his dark hair away from his eyes, and laughs softly.

"Yes, Liam and I left our mark there," he says quietly. "Liam was such a good person to talk to. Even if we didn't have time for fishing, we would just hang out and talk. The night before he died, we hung out over at my house and talked to three in the morning. It's weird to say, but you kind of have a love affair with your close friends, even those of the same sex. Liam and I did. We were totally bonded together. I knew I could tell him anything. And I did. We could totally hug and say we loved each other."

Evan says one of the things Liam often talked about was graduating from high school so he could go to college

and study something he was passionate about. During fall semester of his senior year, Liam decided he wanted to attend Western. In his application to Western, Liam writes, "I am permanently in love with the northwest. ... I don't want to leave it just yet." He went on to express his interest in Huxley College and a major in Environmental Science.

I worry about getting accepted to WWU. I really want to go there. I worry if I will succeed in life and if I'll be adventurous and happy. I worry for friends who have no hope.

Ten years from now I want to be kayaking a beautiful river with a beautiful woman. I want to be happy. That's it.

Before I die, I hope to have children and I hope to have fulfilled my goals and ambitions to the fullest extent possible. I want to have fun and to love and be loved.

Liam was thrilled when he received word that he had been accepted to Western. His friend, Mike (Ted) Guidon, was also accepted to the university and they were planning on being roommates.

"We had it all planned out," Ted recalls, quietly. Wood was the perfect roommate.

"He was a down-to-earth person who said it like it was," Ted says. "I could talk to him about anything ... he was enjoyable to be around. He loved to have a good time."

What most impresses Ted is the deep sincerity and empathy that trademarked every friendship Liam had.

Ted says that the shock of his best friend's death hasn't completely worn off. He admits he doesn't laugh as much as he once did. He says Liam's humor is irreplaceable.

Ted's first year of college has been difficult without his friend, Liam. Ted admits that he feels Liam's life was cut too short.

"It is like he was ripped off. He was so excited to go to Western ... It's sad that he never had the opportunity," Ted concludes.

Jane agrees wholeheartedly, saying that Liam's life was unfairly cut off.

"Liam was at the highest point in his life. He had such an inner peace. Everything was working out for him," Jane says with bewilderment. "It is a small consolation for me to know that he was so happy when he died ... he just had so much more living to do."

Liam had his entire summer planned out: fishing and camping every weekend. But, Evan says that had he not died at Whatcom Creek on June 10, 1999, Liam would have been at the creek every day during the summer to help restore it.

"Liam had total respect for the places he experienced," Evan says. "He'd always talk about how beautiful nature was. So, it would have been hard for him to say goodbye to Whatcom Creek. He would have been upset at what happened. He had a good outlook on things and I am sure he would've felt the spirit of the creek, but he would've

been devastated.”

Liam had an innate appreciation for life early on according to friends and family. He had a philosophy based on the fundamental belief that all life, human and non-human, is precious and commands respect. Liam found his religion in nature. While observing the intricate perfection of an individual leaf's veins, or while casting his line into a salmon-blessed stream, Liam possessed a keen connection with the earth. His friends say Liam believed that our lives are directed by an unknown higher power; he believed every life had a purpose.

“The night before he died,” says Jane, “Liam and I went out for sushi, and we got into a talk about death and its timing. Liam said that he believed everybody deserved to live a full life, and that there was some sort of plan for our lives. Then he said that when kids die, it's fate. It's an interception. He didn't believe a young death was a part of the ultimate plan.”

Marlene finds comfort knowing that Liam experienced life more fully at a young age than many do by the time they are 50.

“He was fortunate that he discovered his passion so early,” Marlene says. “Many people spend their whole lives

without passion and realize too late that something was lacking. And, on the other hand, many people spend their entire lives on a quest trying to find what it is they are passionate about. Liam knew what his was really his whole life.”

Recently I've learned how to drink excessive amounts of alcohol without completely losing my mind.

Recently, I've learned about love and about trust. I've learned that everyone deserves a chance to do whatever they want. I've also learned not to judge others and to think they're cool until I find out otherwise.

Well, I'm not someone to say what I think is special about me. I don't like to brag. I can catch fish every time I go fishing (pretty much). I can climb ice and kayak raging water without dying and I can raise the mood if it's down. I can flirt well, and I am nice to almost everyone.

Hopefully in five years, this letter won't look too stupid and hopefully I'll be where I want to be and have done what I wanted to do.

Peace out. ☺

**(Excerpted from Liam's essay) People that are important to me are: my parents, Marlene and Bruce, Terry and Nadine and my beautiful sister, Bailey. Evan Scoboria, my closest friend and Ted Guidon, Adam Cline, Brandon Harbor, Owen Rhoades, Todd Jones, Angie Barnhart, Beth Jimmerson, Brant McAfee, Jordan True, Breanna Palmer, Trevor, Jeffro, Jessica, Katie, Jo-Jo, Monkey, Chris, all my relatives, Brian and Alisha McQuiad, David Whitmyer, Justin Ashworth and many others. (Shown below: Angie Barnhart, Evan Scoboria, Beth Jimmerson, and Liam)*



Wrestling Without



photo courtesy of Katherine Dalen

Stephen Tsiorvas

by Amy Codispoti

When he was 1 year old, Stephen Tsiorvas was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and asthma. The arthritis manifested itself in Stephen's legs, preventing him from walking for four months. However, this gregarious baby grew up and overcame these adversities, developing into a tall, lean and muscular 10 year old. No one suspected Stephen's disabilities. His friends thought of him as one of the toughest kids in the neighborhood and Ken Erickson, Stephen's Physical Education teacher, says he was

the strongest and most athletic fourth grader at Roosevelt Elementary School.

"I never saw a sign of the rheumatoid arthritis or asthma in my class," Erickson says. "Stephen was a very aggressive and enthusiastic kid. When we'd run laps, Stephen was right up in front. He excelled in P.E. and was very good at football; he was definitely above average. Stephen was a fighter."

Chris Kwaitowski, a friend and neighbor of Stephen's, remembers

Stephen's spontaneity and strange sense of humor.

"And he was very, very strong," Chris recalls. "He'd say, 'Hey, punch me in the stomach' and I'd say, 'Really?' and he'd say, 'Yeah.' I'd punch him in the stomach and he'd just start laughing."

Stephen loved to roughhouse and wrestle. At 95 pounds, Stephen was one of the bigger boys in the neighborhood; the only boy bigger than him was his friend Wade King. The children in the neighborhood say that Wade and Stephen enjoyed taunting each other and provoking playful fights.

"Wade and Stephen would always be on the ground, wrestling," Chris says.

Erickson says that although Stephen was never malicious or mean-hearted, the boy often found himself in the middle of boisterous activity.

"He was very involved," Erickson says. "Stephen might get knocked in the head by a basketball coming off the backboard, or he might get knocked over, but you'd never see him complain. He's just get back up, dust himself off and get back into it. He'd redirect his pain or upsetness back into the game. He was a tough, tough kid and wouldn't quit."

Behind his tough demeanor, Stephen was a gentle and kindhearted boy. Erickson says Stephen would go out of his way to help a kid who was having a hard time and would never put someone down if they weren't operating at the same level he was.

"Stephen was a happy kid and very accommodating. He was very popular among his classmates," Erickson says.

Unlike many 10 year olds, Stephen knew how to do his laundry and knew how to cook. His favorite things to cook were Top Ramen, scrambled eggs, macaroni and cheese, tuna fish sandwiches and quesadillas.

"Stephen made good sandwiches. They looked gross, but then you'd take a bite and it was good," Nathan



photo by Chris Goodenow

Stephen's stepfather, Skip Williams

Kruzan, Stephen's best friend, says excitedly as he pops up onto his knees. Nathan smiles, remembering all the tasty lunches Stephen made him while they were playing.

Apart from being a great cook, Stephen was a kind friend to Nathan. Nathan's face grows serious as he relates a time when some kids at school kicked a ball into the bathroom. Nathan remembers kicking the ball out of the bathroom into the hall where it smashed into a kid's face who was wearing glasses. The teacher shamed him, and all of the kids ostracized him.

"I didn't have any friends for quite a while. The only kids that would talk to me were this kid named Elliot and Stephen," Nathan says. "Stephen was really nice to me."

The boys were immediately bonded as friends and for a while they were closer to each other than they were to their own families. Nathan says Stephen felt more like a brother than a friend.

Taking credit for being the one who taught Stephen how to wrestle, Nathan laughs to himself.

"I almost wish I hadn't" Nathan comments. "Once he picked me up and threw me across the room against the wall, and that actually hurt."

Besides wrestling, the boys loved to construct little indoor forts with blankets. Nathan used his favorite "blanky," named Babo, and Stephen would use his favorite multi-colored quilt. Staying up until midnight, the boys talked and told stories. When morning came, Nathan says they could hardly stand to say goodbye. The week before Stephen died, Nathan stayed the night at Stephen's house.

"We stayed up late talking, and I asked him 'Who's your best friend in the whole universe?' and Stephen said, 'An alien.' I said, 'But you don't know any aliens!' and Stephen looked at me and said, 'I guess it's you, then.'"

Nathan stops talking momentarily to run off to his bedroom. He reappears with a large tub of Lego-like pieces,

including some action figures. His big eyes reveal his excitement as his hands busily dig through the various objects. He pulls out an action figure – a 6-inch tall, multi-colored knight. Nathan looks at the toy, saying that this was Stephen's favorite.

"Actually, this is the first time I have touched this since ..." Nathan says, his voice trailing off. He pauses after looking at the knight again, and sets it down on the floor. Quietly, Nathan resumes digging through the tub of toys.

This past year has been difficult for Nathan, coping with the loss of his best friend. His mother Teri says Nathan is just now coming out of a deep depression. The summer Stephen died, Nathan suffered from serious anxiety attacks. Although he is doing better now, Nathan is still dealing with the harsh realization that his best friend is no longer with him.

Up until the very end of his life, Stephen tried to put his friends first. His mother, Katherine Dalen, told reporters that on June 10, 1999, Stephen tried to save his friend Wade King by pushing him into the creek, and then jumped in after him in an attempt to save their lives.

Stephen Tsiorvas will never be forgotten. In a memory booklet Stephen's classmates created in honor of their friend, he is remembered as an incredible athlete and an all around goofy guy. He is remembered as someone who liked to roughhouse and someone who always put his friends first.

Stephen's mother, Katherine Dalen



photo by Chris Goodenow



photo courtesy of Frank and Mary King

Grand Slam

by Amy Codispoti

Wade King's passions can be summed up in two words: food and baseball. But, for many people, Wade will be remembered as a rare star that graced the sky for too short a time. His bright smile didn't merely light up his own face, but the faces of anyone who laid eyes on him. Loving to be loved and to entertain, Wade touched people's hearts in unexpected ways.

Father John Gibbs of St. Paul's Episcopal Church says he knew Wade before the boy was born. He was one of the first Mary King called when she discovered she was pregnant. When Wade was 6 weeks old, Gibbs baptized him, and when Wade was in the hospital dying at the age of 10, Gibbs was with him. Gibbs says Wade was no saint, but the young boy did have an unearthly, almost angelic quality about him.

"Sometimes you run across a child that seems to hear a different voice than the rest of us hear, who hears music we cannot hear," Gibbs says. "Wade was one of those kids. He always seemed to know more than anybody else about those things that you cannot quite put your finger on."

Wade was raised in a small community of teenagers giving him a sophistication that distinguished him from his peers.

"He could ask some of the hardest questions about theology, and I'd have to say, 'Wade, I don't know the answer to that. I'll have to pray and think about it and get back to you next week,'" Gibbs recalls.

When Wade was 5 years old, he came home from a day at Fir Creek Day Camp, sat down at the dinner table with his mom, dad and sister and announced that he had accepted Jesus into his heart and life.

David Hallegren, the program director at Fir Creek Day Camp, says that Wade understood how much Jesus loved him, and wanted



photos by Chris Goodenow

Jesus to be his best friend.

“Wade knew it was okay to share his faith,” Hallegren says. “He grasped the meaning of the gospel right away and wanted to know Jesus personally.”

Hallegren says Wade was a rambunctious little boy who always did everything 100 percent but that he was also just a normal, mischievous 10 year old who played hard, ran around and got in trouble.

Wade defined the word energy, says Sheryl Binning, Wade’s third and fourth grade teacher. And this passionate energy immediately drew Binning to Wade.

“Wade’s sense of humor and mine just connected; we were very in sync. I must say, he got away with a lot more than the other kids did because of his sense of humor.”

Constantly telling jokes and ad-libbing, Wade was popular among his classmates.

“Wade always loved to perform and make people laugh,” Binning says. “I’d have to remind him to think before acting, because he was so impulsive. I could be angry with him, and he’d come over to me and smile, making me smile. I’d have to turn away from him to make sure he knew I was serious.”

His impulsive and impromptu abilities proved to be beneficial on the stage, one of Wade’s favorite places to be. In the fourth grade, Wade landed the role as Cornelius Washborn in “The Music Man.” Although he had the lead role, he was not spending time learning his lines. During rehearsals, he’d ad-lib lines, and periodically read off the script he was holding behind his back. Binning was a bit nervous, wondering if Wade was going to be able to carry the role. Much to Binning’s surprise and relief, Wade came through and learned all his lines. He played the part perfectly, with all the gusto and animation Binning could have hoped for.

Wade was affectionate. Every morning when his mom or dad dropped him off at school, he’d give them giant hugs and yell, “I love you!” Binning recalls. This little boy loved physical affection, and proudly lavished it on those he loved.

“Wade was very tactile,” Binning says. “And he was a big kid for his age. It didn’t matter if it was a boy or a girl,



photo by Chris Goodenow

he was very physical with the way he interacted with the class. He was like a big puppy. He was a hugger. You had to brace yourself when he hugged you, because of his size.”

Binning’s daughter, Shannon, often volunteered in the classroom, and it was no secret that Wade had an enormous crush on her.

“You’d have to pry him off Shannon,” says Lyndsay Gordon, Wade’s neighbor and classmate. “He was, like, in love with her. As soon as she’d walk in the room he’d get out of his seat, even if we were in the middle of class, and he’d run over to her and start hugging her. It took literally the whole class to get him off her. It was so funny.”

Chris Kwiatkowski and his twin sister, Carley, live next door to the Kings, and both were in Wade’s class. “He always shared his things,” Chris says. “He got a nice new, orange BMX bike for his birthday about a week before he died, and he said, ‘Hey, Chris, do you want to try my new bike?’”

“Yeah, he always shared things, but when he was in his rowdy mood he just really wanted to wrestle,” Carley adds.

Chris and Carley agree that Wade’s favorite sport was baseball. Wade was a left-handed hitter, and the team’s catcher. His teammates nick-named him the “Golden Catcher” and attest that he was also a strong batter. The week before he died, Wade hit his first and only grand slam at his Little League game. It was the bottom of seventh inning, and the score was three and two with two outs. Stepping up to the plate, Wade gripped his bat and gritted his teeth. As the ball came soaring toward him, Wade swung and made contact.

“He hit it to the moon. It was like one in a million. It was awesome,” Chris recalls.

Wade will never have the opportunity to hit another grand slam or to carry off the lead role of a school play.

His life abruptly ended on June 10, 1999, leaving many friends with a vacancy difficult to fill. Wade’s classmates say things are significantly different now that he is gone — quieter. Many of Mrs. Binning’s former students come back and visit her classroom in hopes of holding on to a solid piece of what they once shared with their friend, Wade. ☺



photo by Chris Goodenow

What Dreams Are Made Of

by Karl McGinnis



photos courtesy of Marlene Robinson

A purple white-water kayak hangs inside the small lean-to shelter at the side of the house. The young man who spent each day after high school graduation reading kayaking magazines and books, will never feel the refreshing splash of cold water on his face as he maneuvers the craft through river rapids. It hangs as a quiet representation of his adventurous aspirations left to linger in his parents' dreams. The June 10, 1999, pipeline explosion stole the reality of their son's life.

Liam Gordon Wood never got to see his graduation present. But, when he opened the life-size card his mother created with purple construction paper, he knew what adventures lay ahead. Marlene Robinson wanted her son to have something to open at graduation, but friends weren't bringing his kayak up from Oregon until the following weekend. She thought about writing a note inside a regular card, but decided her goofy son would get a kick out of a life-size kayak card.

A smile creeps across Marlene's face as she says how thankful she is that Liam knew his kayak was coming. Her eyes sparkle as she remembers how excited he was. But kayaking wasn't the only summer adventure Liam was looking forward to. He anxiously awaited the sunny weekend when he and his stepdad would strap on their mountain gear and challenge Mount Baker's glistening slopes.

Bruce Brabec explains that his stepson was finally at an age where he could participate in more high-risk activities. Bruce has climbed mountains around the world, and he was excited to share a weekend on Baker with Liam. At 18, Liam had the physical and mental strength adventures such as mountain climbing demand.

"Those are the kind of things that really strong relationships are built on ... dream kind of things," Marlene says, her voice trail-

ing off as she looks across the kitchen table at Bruce.

And those are the things that were Liam's dreams, dreams he captured with the written word. He wrote every kind of adventure story and often carried it to extremes—from fighting a Grizzly to kayaking white-water rapids.

"Testosterone stuff," Marlene says, adding that Liam never wrote much unless he had to for school, and even then he'd wait until the last minute.

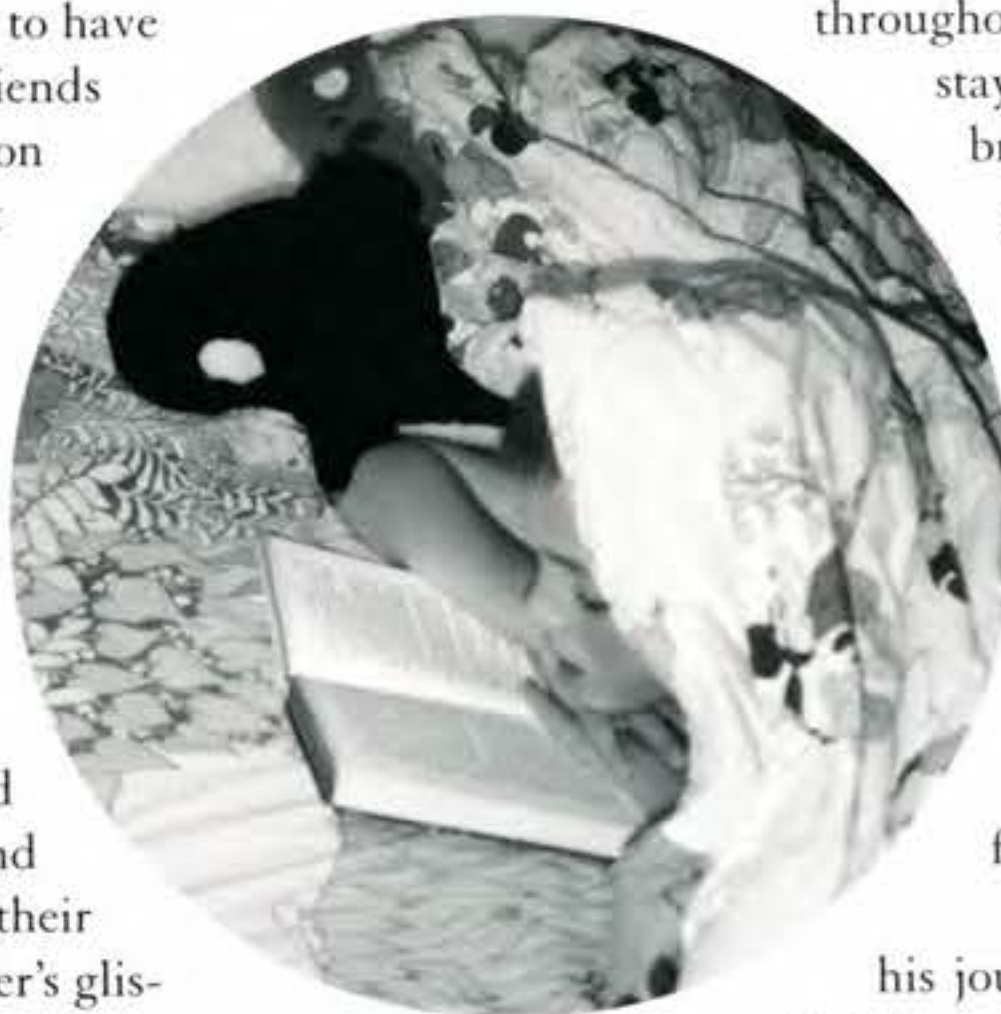
When he wasn't frantically typing out his latest man-versus-nature saga, Liam found time to read. Marlene, an avid reader, began reading to Liam before he was born and continued throughout his childhood. Sometimes, she says, he stayed up really late reading. A photo on the brick mantle behind the wood stove shows young Liam lying on his stomach in bed, reading with his Donald Duck comforter pulled over his head.

Liam's early love for the Hardy Boys eventually gave way to his two favorite novels—"A River Runs Through It" and "The River Why."

Marlene scoots to the edge of her chair as she opens a small book to a drawing of a river. Small letters spell out a quote from "A River Runs Through It."

"I can just imagine him sitting, writing in his journal and drawing this," she says, adding that he was 12 when he kept the journal. "You just know everything that's going through his mind; everything here means something about the ripples, about where the fish would be. This page really, to me, just talks about the intensity that he had about it."

Liam was 6 when he decided he wanted to be a fisherman. Marlene, having recently separated from Liam's dad, Terry Wood, didn't know where to go or what to do, but she bought him a little



pole and took him fishing. She went with him and tried to help him put the worm on the hook.

"It always seemed kind of gross to me, the worm and the fish slime," she says, grinning. She watched him fish for hours without catching anything. Even if the weather became nasty and she went to sit in the car, Liam kept casting away.

"He didn't catch a fish for two years, but it never swayed his desire to go," Marlene muses. During their trips to the creeks and rivers, Marlene noticed all the trash on the banks — hooks, line and beer cans. She figured since flyfishermen were usually considered environmentalists, Liam needed to be a flyfisherman. She took him to a local flyfishing shop and the people there took him in, teaching him how to be a flyfisherman, tie his own flies and build his own rod.

The fishing rod Liam was using the day he died leans against the mantle near the wood stove. Marlene gently picks up the pole, running her fingers lightly across its surface. Bruce watches her with gentle sorrow in his eyes. Friends of theirs cleaned it up for them, she explains. It still smells like gas, she says softly as she lifts it toward her nose. She holds it there for a silent moment before setting it down again. Turning, she pulls up the sleeve of her fleece.

"This was his watch," she whispers. "I wear it every day."

Liam was spending that sunny Thursday flicking his fly across the surface of his favorite fishing spot on Whatcom Creek when the pipeline exploded and sent flames raging along the creek. His arm was beneath the surface of the water, so it didn't get burned, Marlene explains in a tiny voice.

Everything had fallen into place for Liam that last year of his life. He left the narrow halls of Sehome High School, anxious to trek across the bricks at Western Washington University. He often teased Marlene and Bruce about how they couldn't wait for him to move out. He had developed a close relationship with his dad, Terry, who lives in Corvallis, Ore. with his wife, Nadine, and Bailey — the little girl they adopted from China, giving Liam the sibling he always asked for. He had a job he loved at H&H Outdoor Store.

"He had reached this beautiful culmination in his life. He was on top of everything. ... Some people see that as tragic, but I see it as an incredible piece of grace. For as short of a life as Liam had, it was such a great life," Marlene says. Bruce nods in agreement.

Bruce came into Marlene and Liam's lives at the perfect time — when Liam was 12. Bruce picked up where Marlene and Liam struggled the way preteens and moms do.

"As a step-parent it was easy to be his father. ... He was re-

ally willing to be my son," Bruce says. "Even though he had a dad and I wasn't trying to replace that, I had a role in his life."

Bruce says he saw Liam's passion for flyfishing as a way to connect with his stepson. Because he could never get excited about fishing, Bruce decided to share his passion for rafting with Liam. During rafting trips, the two enjoyed the water and adventure and were able to bring their interests together. It created a connection between them on another level.

All through his life, Liam needed to fish and be outside. As parents, Marlene and Bruce struggled with their worries about letting him go.

"It was such a conscious decision to be able to let him go from a relatively early age. ... " Marlene recalls. "I would try to control things to some extent, but I know I really let go of a lot and it was often really hard to do. As a parent, it's just so much easier to say, 'No you can't go there, it's too scary and dangerous.' And so it would be nerve racking, but in retrospect I'd have to say that I'm really really glad that I let him take those risks because they meant everything to him. Ultimately, especially given the way he died ... you just can't control things."

Bruce remembers the little steps Liam took up to the point where he was big enough to go on his own.

"When he was little we worried too much about letting him go do things. ... And then to have something bad happen that had nothing to do with the things you worried about ..." Bruce says, his voice softening into the heavy silence engulfing the room.

After the accident, Marlene and Bruce received a call from Mike and Elaine McRory, members of the Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association. Although they didn't know Marlene and Bruce, the McRorys suggested creating a park at the creek as a memorial to Liam.

"They've become close friends," Marlene says. "They've done a wonderful job of distracting me and pulling me into the environment that I love."

Marlene says she now feels more at home outdoors than she does indoors.

"Every day is a struggle these days, but I find that when I'm somewhere out hiking or working on the creek ... as long as I'm

out there in nature I have a sort of sense of calm. And I think it's a connection somehow. It's hard for me to put into words," she says in a tear-choked voice. "I think it is something very spiritual. ... I really have a strong sense of (Liam's) presence when I'm out there. I often imagine him being there with me. ... I think that nature somehow takes us away from words



Photo by Kari McGinnis

Marlene Robinson is working to create a park along Whatcom Creek as a tribute to her son, Liam Wood.

and explanations. It takes us beyond that and I don't think, I mean there just don't seem to be any explanations for me around this, so to get beyond this is helpful."

As Marlene's eyes well up with tears Bruce slides his foot across the floor and rubs it against hers.

"She looks for moments all the time," he says quietly without taking his eyes off her. "Even while walking to work; she started walking to work last year after the accident. It's only a mile, but we were like everyone else – just got in the habit of driving to work."

Bruce and Marlene feel that walking to work is a time to be with Liam.

"The whole connection to gasoline and cars is difficult for us now," Marlene says, adding that they made the change to step away from being so dependent on the car and gas, but it's become more than that.

"There is that whole thing about taking the time to slow down, to pay attention and to not be rushing everywhere, to not be contending with traffic and lights and business," Marlene says.

Working on the creek helps Marlene feel close to Liam. The project also fosters her appreciation for nature and shows her the importance of urban creeks. She says that whether people participate in restoration or simply walk through the park during their lunch breaks, being near the creek might lead them to think about the environment. In turn they might implement changes in their own lives, such as walking to work or deciding not to use pesticides on their lawns.

Bruce and Marlene joined SAFE Bellingham as members of the steering committee and they're watching federal legislation closely.

"Our larger goal around the pipeline issue is to see improved safety standards," Marlene explains. "It was imperative that we work on the federal stuff first because that's what's happening. Any civil action ... we have time for that and we only have so much energy. We'd prefer not to be working on pipeline issues at all."

"I feel like we've been really picky in choosing what we've been involved with because we really want to monitor or take care of our energy," Bruce says. "It takes a lot of energy to speak out about pipelines both in terms of trying to remember it all and learn it, as well as the toll it takes being out in the public about something so personal."

As the executive director of Northwest Youth Services, Bruce finds himself naturally looking beyond the pipeline issues to the connections with people.

"When people talk about their kids or talk about the family, they're thinking differently about it," Bruce says. "They're going home and looking at their kids differently ... maybe stepping back and not getting so attached to a problem they're caught up in with their kid because they're staying connected to the love they have."

Marlene agrees, explaining that she believes people in this country focus too much on business, profit and getting things done.

"What it means is that individuals and families and relationships get lost so that we have this corporate culture that really presses people to spend a lot of time and energy working to the detriment of their relationships," she says. "I think that people talk all the time about feeling really torn between their families and their work and not having enough time, but when something like this happens so close to you, you can really draw the line."

Drawing that line has always come easy for Marlene. She chose flexible jobs that allowed her the time and freedom to be with Liam. Her position as one of two staff members at Whatcom Community Foundation is no exception. The foundation not only gave her support and offered her as much time as she needed after Liam died, it created an endowment fund for the environment in Liam's name.

"From the time when I began thinking about being a parent I found ways to balance it and it always worked for me," Marlene says.



"I think one of the things that's been an incredible solace to me is feeling as though I don't have regrets around those issues, that Liam and I really did spend time together, that we were really good friends and we knew each other."

Marlene's voice becomes hoarse as she recalls a moment about two weeks before Liam died. They were in the kitchen and out of the blue Liam asked her if she loved him.

"I told him that I loved him so so much and he said, 'sometimes that's just a good question to ask' ... I'm so glad those things got said."

Marlene feels the loss is different for Bruce than for her because his relationship with Liam was partly based on faith in the future.

"So while I miss ... I just miss Liam, for Bruce there's that added thing – not only missing Liam, but knowing that they had so much relationship building to continue to do and so much happiness ..."

Simple things trigger memories of Liam.

"In a lot of ways I'll try to connect to the feeling of him being here, being alive," Bruce says. "Sometimes it's a very conscious decision, but sometimes it's beyond words and the earth, beyond thinking ... it just kind of happens."

Bruce leans back in his chair as he recalls a day when Marlene was gone and he decided to put on some of Liam's CDs. It wasn't music he would listen to unless Liam happened to be playing it.

"I was just having the grandest time, you know just cleaning house and then Marlene came in and it was almost like I'd gotten caught. I remember it was the weirdest feeling because I didn't want to have it on when Marlene was home because I didn't know if that was something she would like" Bruce looks intently in Marlene's eyes as he wanders back in his mind to that day. "She just came over to me and I just started crying. It was such a warm, comfortable feeling, but it was very connected to the past, too. It's a slippery slope and I just fell right over."

Little sounds that might have once been taken for granted remind Marlene and Bruce of Liam. Tearing the plastic off the top of a yogurt container and other sounds associated with him getting food out of the refrigerator trigger memories.

"Some days they surprise me and some days I purposely do them," Bruce says, laughing at some of the funny things that make Liam feel alive to him.

"Liam was just a goof ball. He was so funny," Marlene says. "And that's something I miss in myself that I lost. I feel like I used to have this very happy sense of humor and it's really not there for me anymore, but I sure like to remember his."

The soft music floating from the speakers can't disguise the silence where teenage humor once filled the space with easy laughter.

The notes float around a house full of pieces of a life lost. Stretch, the turtle Liam brought home from his fifth-grade classroom, sits expectantly in his aquarium beneath the wood-stove mantle, which is adorned with photos of the loving boy. Across the room, a wooden skeleton sculpture stands with stick arms outstretched. A red heart radiates a feeling of life inside the blue and black paint that outlines the skeletal form.

Marlene laughs slightly as Bruce turns on a lamp, revealing a poem inscribed on the sculpture:

"We have come only to sleep, only to dream, it is untrue, it is false that we have come to live upon the earth. We sprout like grass of the springtime. Our hearts open their blossoms. Our body becomes a flower. It gives a few flowers and then withers" – Netzahualcoyotl. The poet-king of Texcoco. Thirteenth Century Mexico.

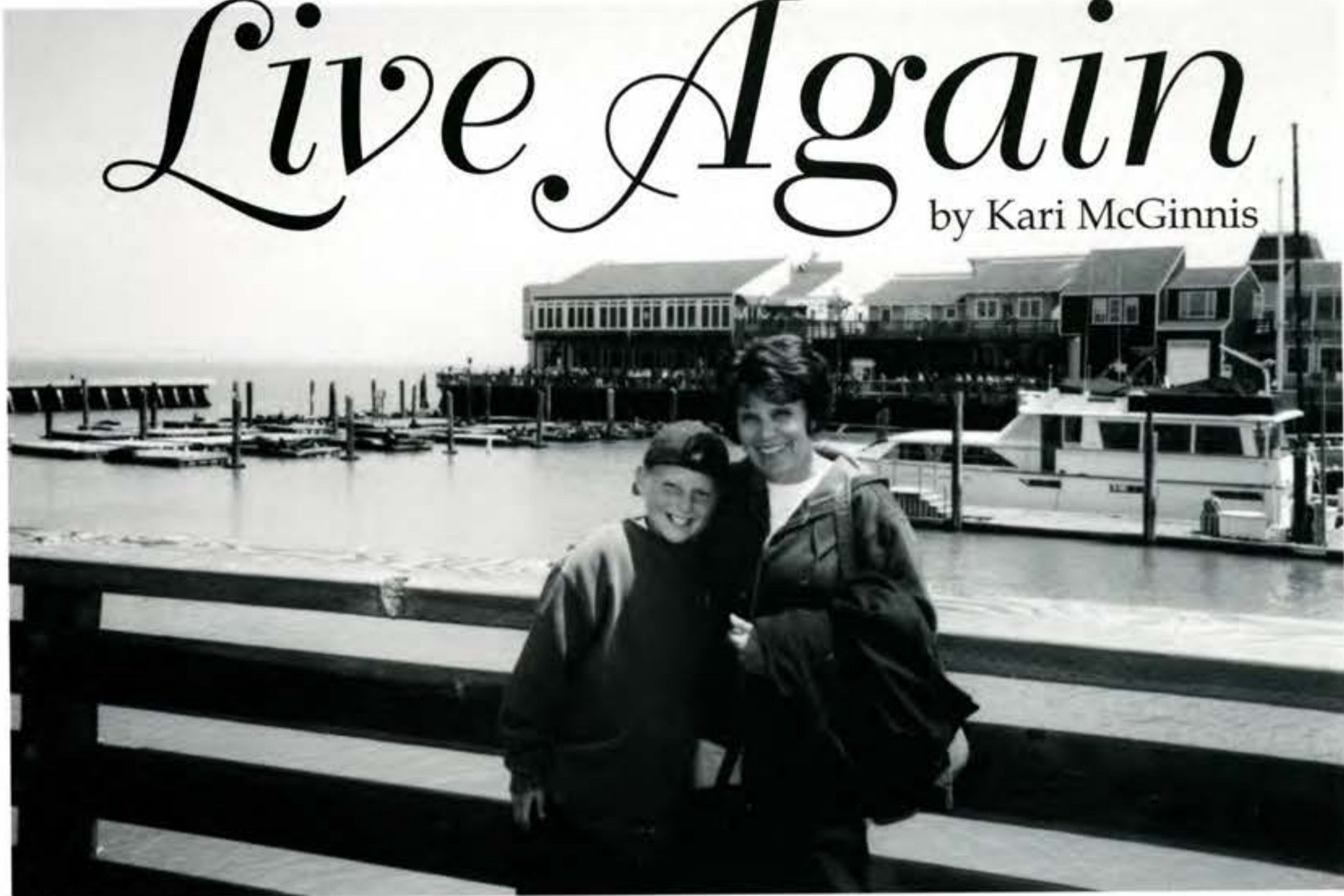
The soft music continues as Marlene explains how the art piece was the first thing she and Bruce saw when they went to Evergreen AIDS Foundation's auction in September. "When we saw it, we looked at each other and just sort of said, 'Well I guess that's for us,'" Marlene says.

Bruce turns the wooden boy around and his eyes trace the words: "The dead are like our children, they need us. As long as we honor their memory, the dead will never die." ©

learning to

Live Again

by Kari McGinnis



photos courtesy of Frank and Mary King

Wade and mother, Mary King

The count is two and two. The pitcher checks the runner on first out of the corner of his eye before he sends the ball sailing directly over home plate. Before it can smack the catcher's glove, Frank King brings the bat around and makes contact. Safe on first, Frank leads off, confident as his son, Jason King, 26, steps up to the plate.

Jason brings his bat back and waits for his pitch. He wallops the ball into the outfield and father and son round the bases toward home. A few of their men's league teammates shout out, but one voice is distinctly missing. The June 10, 1999, pipeline explosion silenced 10-year-old Wade King's cheer.

The bright-eyed little boy who was a catcher just like his dad and his big brother, loved being around action, especially baseball.

"He was virtually born on a baseball field," Frank says. "His brother was playing for Sehome High School when he was born. I mean he grew up on the field."

When he started playing T-ball, Wade crouched behind the plate with all his gear on. When he went to Jason's games, the big kids would put the catcher's gear on him.



He was so small that with all that gear on he couldn't move.

"At [Jason's] baseball games he was always the bat boy and he'd run around the bases and he'd always be dirtier than Jason was after the game," says Jessica, Jason's wife. "He'd be this little dust pile – Pigpen from Peanuts. Even in his own games, he wouldn't have any reason to slide, but he'd slide."

Like little boys everywhere, Wade shadowed his big brother. Even though Wade threw right-handed, he swung the bat left-handed because he learned by mirror-imaging Jason.

"Wade watched Ken Griffey Jr. and he watched Jason ... he watched all the greats swing the bat so he had this picture-perfect swing," Jessica says as she holds a photograph of Wade and points out that the ball is about 2 feet away, but the swing is perfect.

She lays the photo back in the pile inside Frank's briefcase where he keeps them among endless pipeline documents and reports. There aren't any photos of Wade hanging on walls or adorning shelves in the

Kings' home. Constant reminders such as photos of her son would be too difficult for Mary King to see every day.

Mary's days were filled with being Wade's mother for 10 years. After Wade died, Frank says Mary gave up.

"She didn't want to be here. I kept saying, 'I want Wade back,' and she kept saying, 'I want to be with Wade.' It was a real difficult time until probably the tail end of last September and then they finally put her on some drugs. But then of course you think, 'Is this what the rest of our life is? To be on mood-altering drugs so that we can stay out of the depression of losing a child in such a horrific way?' And it doesn't matter how it happens ... because you're not supposed to lose a child."

Now Mary wakes up each morning and wonders what to do with her day.

"The biggest obstacle for me is trying to find a purpose," she says. "I'm still searching. I'm still trying to put a picture together of who I am. I'm not sure sometimes. Being a mom, I felt, was the most important thing I could do ..." her voice trails off as she stares out the window in silent contemplation.

The smell of rhubarb-strawberry cookies fills the air. The kitchen shelves hold a collection of every type of cookbook imaginable. But for four months Mary didn't cook or bake anything. She couldn't do anything that related to being a mother.

"Things that we did before are really hurtful – the reminders," she whispers. "Maybe in time the things that are familiar will be comforting. Like his room. I mean we can't go in there. We absolutely can't. It's horrid. And that has not changed. Last summer I would go in there and just get totally nuts."

Tracy Bell, 28, says sometimes it doesn't seem like her little brother is really gone.

"It's just a kind of weird feeling and then you go, 'Oh yeah, it is real,'" she says. Tracy helped her mom realize that she needed to go through Wade's clothes and donate them before they went out of style. Wade was always interested in fashion, probably because Mary works at the Gap. Mary smiles as she recalls how Wade would lay out his outfits right down to his dress socks. The memory, like so many others, is sweet, but the feeling of loss it

invokes is more than a smile can hide. As the tears spill down her face, Mary says she simply couldn't get rid of his little socks.

"Some days I just don't know if I can do this, if I can put one foot in front of the other," Mary says, crying. "It's like being paralyzed with grief. It's like having your leg or arm cut off, part of you, and you have to learn to go on without it. You really have to recreate yourself, to change so much."

Mary's search for a purpose led her to The Nature Conservancy, a private nonprofit organization, where she hopes to find a connection with Wade by volunteering to work with eagles. After Wade died, Genni Morrill, a friend who started doing some housekeeping for Mary when she was pregnant with Wade, brought a rock with an eagle carved on it to his grave and said, "Soar with the eagles, Wade."

Mary, who fondly recalls Wade's love of mythology, has read that birds are a mythological symbol for the soul.

Ever since Wade died, the family has seen eagles and had experiences with birds that make him seem close by. Mary's face lights up as she tells how her sister-in-law was on a walk when a bluejay followed her and swooped down near her, chirping.

"And she said she finally turned to it and said, 'OK Wade, I'll tell your mom that you're OK,'" Mary says, her voice cracking. After a long pause, she quietly recalls a weekend the family

went to an inn in Langley and they'd just gotten into their room when Tracy saw an eagle swoop right by the window. Mary's voice is barely audible and her tears flow freely down her cheeks.

"It was like Wade saying I'm with you ... and I know that's what he's doing because he'd never be left out."

Wade had a way of being part of everything. Jason says his little brother was simply so likable that he often ended up the center of attention. An eagle got Jason's attention one day when he and a friend

were out on his boat fishing. They were filleting the bait and hucking the part they didn't use when an eagle came soaring down and grabbed the scraps right out of the air.

"Whenever I'm out at the islands and see an eagle, it feels like Wade's around," Jason says, adding that he and Jessica often



Wade and Jason King

take their boat out to the San Juan Islands. "I find more solitude in that right now than I would in church," he says. Jason hasn't been able to go back to church since Wade's funeral. "Probably part of it is just not wanting to be around people a whole lot. It's nice to have people around you that support you, but after awhile you have to kind of wean yourself off of that so you don't feel so pitiful.

"Never a day goes by that the first thing on your mind isn't ... you know, not necessarily the disaster, but something to do with Wade or his life. More and more it's becoming positive – little things you did or little things he used to say, little weird habits he had. I don't think that will ever go away and I hope it doesn't because you have to be reminded of that sort of stuff. I'm always going to have that hole. For a while it's like a whole half of you is gone."

Mary is finding little things to help fill the hole in her life. She fills part of her days walking. While she won't walk through Whatcom Falls Park the way she used to, she found a different path that leads to Skutter Pond. The area is full of red-winged blackbirds and sometimes she sees a large eagle up in a tree.

"I get back there and I hear the sounds and I feel sad, but I feel really connected to Wade. ... That's about as close as you can get, is nature, and it's so beautiful. On the other hand just looking at the black on those trees makes my stomach

churn," Mary says, adding that she and Frank used to drop Wade at the bus stop every morning and then walk through the park. Frank doesn't go walking anymore.

Now he gets up in the morning and the first thing he does is read the paper to see what's happened with the oil industry in the last day. He goes to work at Import Motors, which he has owned for nearly five years, but his mind is never fully devoted to his business. Frank has made pipeline reform his business.

He has gone from not knowing anything about pipelines to knowing every detail that could ever be applicable, more than anyone would ever want to know.

"The more I find out about (the pipeline industry), and the more I find out about the Office of Pipeline Safety, the more frightened I become about what's going on in this country," Frank says. "I mean all you have to do is read these laws and you see that they're all written so the pipeline industry can get out of them. Imagine that it's not even a violation to have a spill."

Frank's office window faces Whatcom Creek where it exploded. The table in the center of the office is cluttered with various pipeline reform bills and other related material. A painting Wade created hangs on the wall next to a shelf filled with photographs of the little boy who was the light of his family's life.



photo by Chris Goodenow

Frank and Jason King





photo by Chris Goodenow

“I cannot allow Wade to be buried along with the pipeline and for his life not to have meant something.”

- Frank King

“The love that I have for my son ... I cannot allow Wade to be buried along with the pipeline and for his life not to have meant something,” Frank says. “If this was the way he was meant to go ... I have nothing to gain by trying to make change, nothing. In fact, I probably have a lot to lose because I take a lot of time away from my business and put pressure on the people who work for me to get the job done without me.”

Frank is fighting for critical change beyond what’s included in the reform bills being considered. During his trip to Washington, D.C., in April for the conference on pipeline safety, Frank came up with two laws.

“I call the first one Stephen’s law,” he says. “That is that there can be zero tolerance for spills. ... The other I call Wade’s law, and it’s simply if you don’t cooperate, you don’t operate.”

Frank pulls a book out of his briefcase.

“I’ve been asking this question ever since this accident happened ... ‘Why has Olympic Pipe Line been allowed to continue to operate south of Bayview Station when their employees won’t tell anybody what happened?’ It’s unconscionable.”

He opens the pipeline regulation book and reads: “If the Department of Transportation investigates an accident, the operator involved shall make available to the representative of the department all records and information that in any way pertain to the accident and shall afford all reasonable assistance in the investigation of the accident.”

Frank shakes his head as he tosses the book back in his overflowing briefcase and looks out the window. The legislation has given him something to focus on, but he realizes that there will

probably be moments for the rest of their lives that bring tears and sadness. Wade was involved in so many things that without him, the family’s days seem empty.

Tracy laughs as she remembers how Wade’s energy wore everyone out. Sometimes he stayed with Tracy and her husband, Lynn, at their house on Lake Samish. They spent days out in their boat, pulling Wade on skis or on a skurf board.

“If he fell down he’d get right back up and go, go, go,” she says. After a long pause she adds, “I just want my brother back and to forget this happened.”

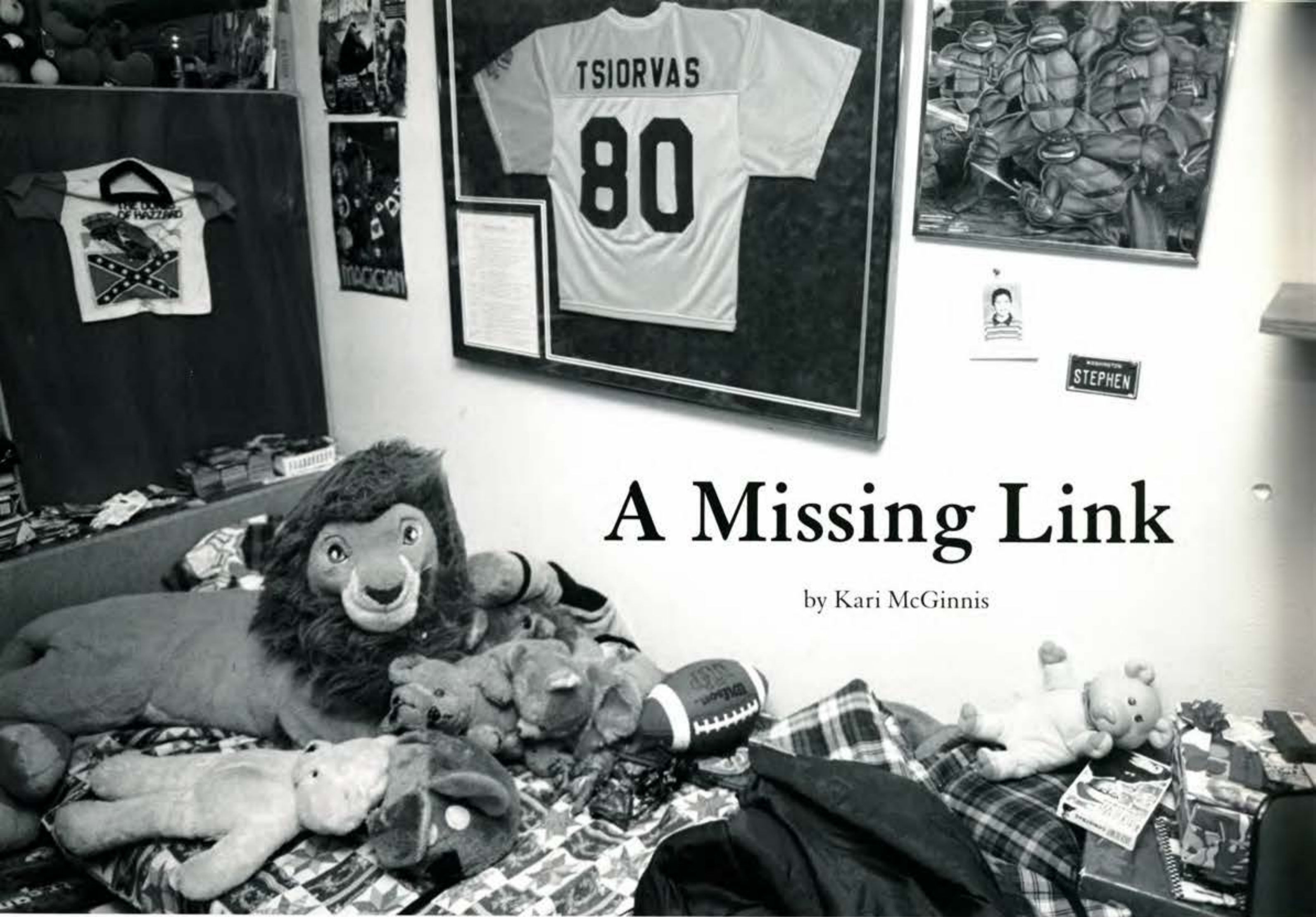
But outside the Kings’ kitchen window, the tree Wade spent hours climbing stands as a constant reminder of what is missing. Mary worried about him falling out of that tree; she never imagined something like the pipeline accident.

Jason says Wade’s death brought the family closer together and made them stronger.

“You have to be strong or you won’t survive,” he says. “Time is the only thing that helps you deal with the biggest loss you could ever experience.”

Frank and Mary struggle with their loss every day, but time eases the pain.

“Probably until January I cried myself to sleep every night,” Frank says. “I don’t do it every night now, but I still have moments because I miss that little guy so much. You know ... we shouldn’t have to go by a little league baseball field and see little kids playing baseball and feel sad. Or go by a bus stop and see little kids waiting for their bus and feel sad. ... That’s not the way it’s supposed to be.” ☉



A Missing Link

by Kari McGinnis



Andrew, George and Stephen Tsiorvas

photo courtesy of Kathrine Dalen

A stuffed lion stretches across the top of the small bed. The curve of its body marks the place where 10-year-old Stephen Tsiorvas laid his head each night. Not only was the lion his pillow, but it was one of many prizes collected during a childhood full of luck. Stephen won the stuffed Lion King character in a drawing contest.

"He hated that movie, but he loved that lion," Stephen's 18-year-old brother George Tsiorvas says, shaking his head and grinning.

Katherine Dalen, Stephen's mother, laughs as she recalls Stephen's uncanny knack for winning things. The last time he picked out her lottery tickets he won \$10, she says. He won more free bottles of pop than anyone she knows.

"I have a feeling God scoped it out and knew it was going to be a short life, so he packed all Stephen's luck in early," she says.

Stephen's luck ran out on June 10, 1999.

Stephen's room is a place where his family continues to discover who he was. As the youngest child, his character reflected influences from six siblings, including Katherine's children from her first marriage — Bredon Kiddle, 26, and Emily Kiddle, 23.

Stephen's 16-year-old brother Andrew Tsiorvas plops down on the bed next to the lion. He stares at the ceiling for a moment and then picks up a stack of empty Kool-Aid packages from the shelf at the head of the bed. Katherine smiles at her son as he begins counting the points on the back of the packages.

"Who knows what he was saving those for," she says. "But

photo by Chris Goodenow

that's how we know him — by his collections.”

Piles of role-playing game cards and an assortment of books clutter the shelf above Stephen's bed. Katherine reaches to the top shelf and pulls down a book about dinosaurs. As she flips through its pages, she says she understands why it was his favorite. Its pages are filled with colorful drawings of every type of dinosaur imaginable. Stephen spent hours looking at the pictures and reading about all the different dinosaurs. When he was outside digging with his friends, sometimes they would search for dinosaur bones.

His vivid imagination and outgoing spirit helped Stephen fill his days with childhood adventures. With big brothers to keep up with, Stephen never let his juvenile rheumatoid arthritis slow him down. By the age of 4, he was clamoring up trees, racing his bike and playing football and baseball as if he didn't even have a disability.

“We have this attitude in my house that there are no physical disabilities,” Katherine says. “It's how much ability you do have.” She remembers when Stephen was 1 year old and his arthritis left him sitting in the corner staring out the window and watching his brothers play.

“He would try so hard to stand, try so hard to fight his way through it and he just got depressed,” she says softly, her eyes staring into the distance. “It was enough to break your heart.”

But he didn't let it keep him down for long; Stephen was a fighter. Although he didn't walk for four months, the mischievous baby found ways to make sure he was always part of the action.

“He's one of those little buggers who likes to be absolutely in the middle of everything, whether he's going to get stepped on or not,” Katherine says, a smile spreading across her face as she remembers how Stephen would crawl into the middle of George and Andrew's wrestling matches. “In his diaper and bare body, boy he was going to be right in on it, chewing on somebody.”

The rambunctious little kid wanted to be involved with everyone.

“That was the thing about Stephen, he was nice to everybody no matter who they were,” Andrew says. “He could make friends with anyone. He always wanted to box with everybody and he constantly wrestled with my friends.” He laughs as he explains that Stephen even had a way with women. George nods his head and begins laughing as he recalls the time he took Stephen to a job fair with him.

“I'd have to go chasing him around and when I'd find him there was always a beautiful woman there,” George smiles as he tilts back in his chair. “So I'd introduce myself and then I'd start to introduce Stephen and she'd say, ‘Oh we've met.’”

Katherine tries to be there for her kids. Sometimes, she says, she feels they haven't had enough of a chance to talk about Stephen's death, but that they understand how hard of a time she's had and know their feelings are important to her.



Katherine Dalen and Skip Williams

“That was the thing about Stephen, he was nice to everybody no matter who they were.”

-Andrew Tsiorvas



“Stephen seems to me to be the one who binds multiple communities together because he touched all their lives,” her voice trails off and she takes a deep breath. “And I miss him a lot. I mean look at what I’m missing — all that bubbly, talkative, I-know-everything-in-the-world stuff.”

Her home has an emptiness to it without Stephen that is magnified because two other kids have moved out since the accident. A year ago, seven people filled the rooms with playful laughter. Now, George and Andrew are the only kids Katherine and her fiancé, Skip Williams expect home at the end of the night.

Stephen’s stepbrother, Taj Williams, left to live with his biological mother after the accident. The 15-year-old was at home when the explosion stole his little brother’s life. Katherine says Taj assumed an incredible amount of guilt, which led him to take his teenage rebellion to the extreme.

“Stephen was trying to get Taj to go down to the park, or Andy or somebody. And he ended up down in the park with Wade and they ended up dead,” Katherine says, trying to explain the impact the tragedy had on her stepson. “Taj was thinking, ‘I should’ve been there with him, I should’ve been playing with him, I should’ve paid more attention. ... I should have done all these things that I didn’t do, so I’m a terrible person.’ And we were really worried about him.”

Katherine and Skip tried to enforce house rules and help Taj with his feelings, but he got tired of dealing with everything.

Stephen’s stepsister, 18-year-old Akilah Williams, wanted to have a place of her own while attending Western Washington University, so she also moved out shortly after the accident.

Katherine’s love for all her children is apparent when she opens her wallet and pulls photos of each of them out. She lays school photos of George, Andrew and Stephen next to each other on the table and smiles, pointing out how much they resemble each other.

The things George and Andrew miss the most are those moments of brotherly love — the times they would chase Stephen down and give him wedgies or sit on him until he laughed so hard he got sick.

“Stephen would never get out of my seat,” George says. “So I’d throw him on the couch or sit on him.” Despite being smashed by his brother’s 6-foot-2, 300 pound body, Stephen laughed and laughed and wouldn’t hesitate to initiate another match.

Katherine watched her boys roughhouse, but always made sure they had blankets and teddy bears to remind them of their softer sides.

Teddy bears crowd Stephen’s bed beneath his blankets.



photo by Chris Goodenow

Stephen’s 16-year-old brother Andrew Tsiorvas plops down on the bed next to the lion. He stares at the ceiling for a moment and then picks up a stack of empty Kool-Aid packages from the shelf at the head of the bed.

Katherine says he inherited everybody else's bears because they knew he would keep them safe and that they could come and get one whenever they needed it.

Stephen had so many teddy bears that many of them are packed away in bins along with some of his toys, shoes, clothes and books. Katherine says she is not ready to let him go yet. She leaves most of his things the way they were before he died so that he knows he always has a place in their lives. She sleeps with his favorite blanket and keeps his favorite shirt beside her bed.

One of the hardest things about losing Stephen is that they had so many plans. She knew the upcoming year would be the last the family had together before the older kids moved out, so she planned to buy sleeping bags for each of the boys so they could go on a family camping trip.

Instead, Katherine is fighting for pipeline reform. She shakes her head in disgust, looking at a document outlining the number of deaths caused by pipeline accidents in the last 15 years.

"For some odd reason it's hot this time, and I want to keep it hot," she says with determination. "It's important because we've got people to take care of. It needs to be hot, and it needs to stay hot, and it should have been hot before my son died. It should have been important."

Katherine says the blame for the accident needs to be placed where it belongs.

"If somebody hits my car and I take it to a shop and the mechanic tells me my car is not safe to drive, but I chose to drive it

anyway without getting it fixed and kill someone ... I'd be to blame," she says, her face tight, revealing the pain she still feels from her loss.

"It's really important to me that the ethnic minority communities get involved in this," Katherine says. "My fear is that white, upper-class and middle-class America is going to get their pipelines taken care of and Native American, Chicano American, African American, Asian American communities are going to end up waiting for another accident to happen because their communities don't seem to be important enough to deal with."

Katherine says she hopes the pipeline issue reaches beyond the next election. She says her vision for America is a place where corporate responsibility extends to every environment and every community.

She doesn't want other families to face the grief her family continues to struggle with. While she continues to try to protect her other children, she says she realizes that they have to live their own lives and they have to experiment to find out about their environment and discover their limits.

"I like to say that people's lives are stories that they write on this earth," Katherine says. Parents write the beginning of their children's lives; children write the middle of their own lives and the end of their parents' lives, she explains.

"Stephen was supposed to write the end of my life, but instead I wrote the end of his. And it doesn't end full; it ends with a lot of promise and a lot of future and a lot of hope." ☉

Stephen Tsiorvas' shoes

photo by Chris Goodenow



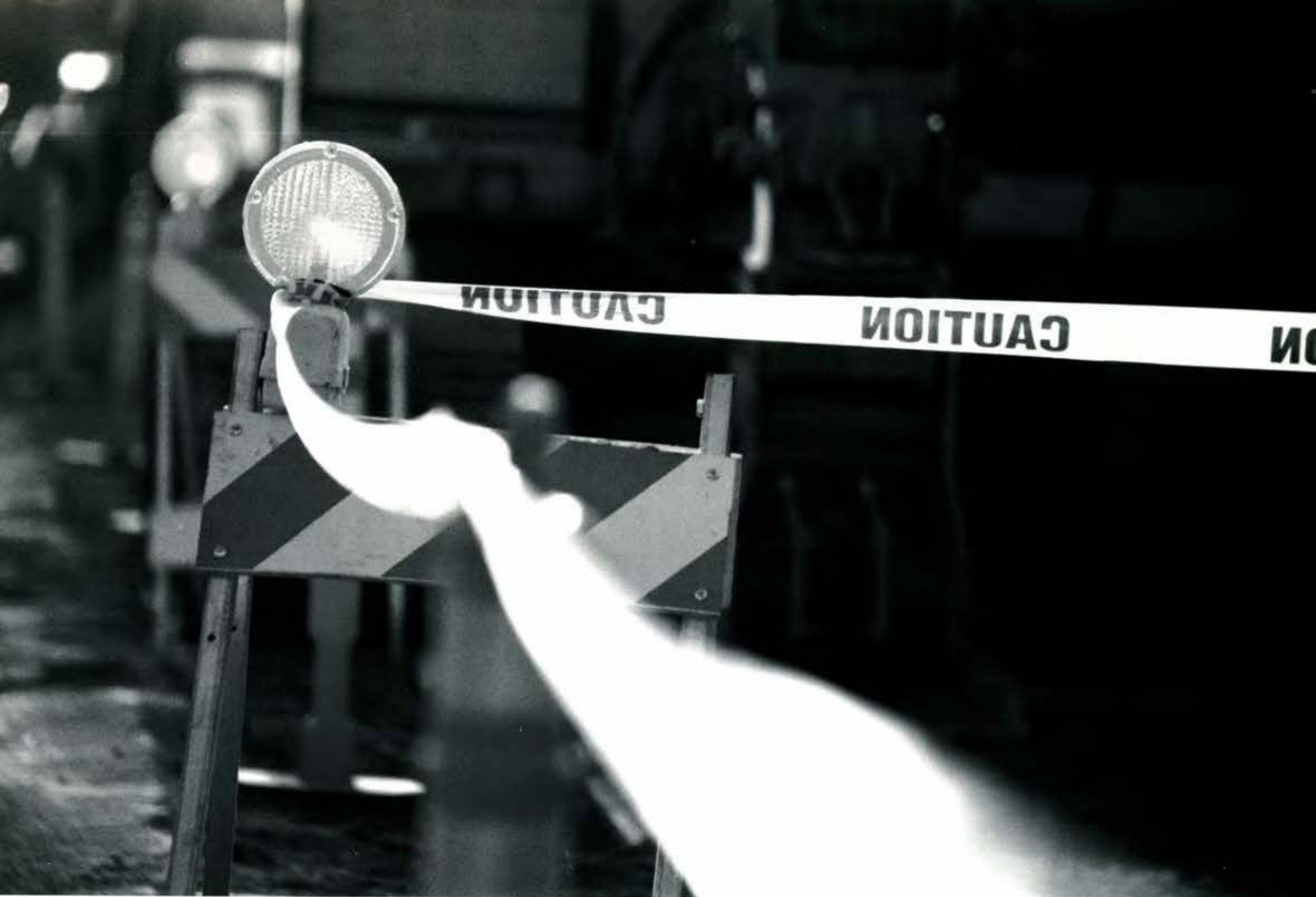


photo by Chris Goodenow

So Others May Live

by Tim Reid

Last year, 229,950 gallons of gasoline spilled into Whatcom Creek, creating an inferno that took the lives of three boys. In one agonizing twist of fate roaring flames greedily devoured the unique spark inside each boy.

The boys' families still suffer the pain of their loss. The healing has begun, yet the emotional destruction the boys' families have endured, and are still dealing with, can only be imagined.

Yet, there are others who are dealing with the emotional and psychological repercussions of that afternoon. They are the professionals and volunteers who were on call and responded to the needs of their community. Blessedly, many were not directly involved in the discovery or treatment of the three boys — but those who were have been changed forever.

Each has a story to tell. Some are reluctant to share their stories, each one dealing with the images, sounds and smells of that fateful day as best they can. Some have chosen to lock the painful memories away in the closets of their minds.

But there are those who, nearly a year later, are finally able to share their stories of that day. They hope that the telling their stories will help heal themselves and others too.

May we all finally heal — but never forget.

AT THE BRIDGE:

4:24 p.m.: 911 operators received a report of a chemical odor on or near the Whatcom Creek bridge on Bellingham's Woburn Street. Within minutes, Fire Capt. Jeff Jaquish arrived at the bridge and reported gasoline visible in the creek. Immediately, Bellingham police and additional fire units were dispatched to investigate the extent of the spill and control traffic.

4:33 p.m.: Bellingham Fire Department's Battalion Chief Ron Morehouse arrived on scene and took charge. Morehouse assessed

the situation, determined a plan of action and decided how best to deploy his personnel to handle the growing crisis.

A 29-year veteran of the Bellingham Fire Department, Morehouse has seen a lot. But nothing prepared him for how the creek looked prior to the explosion.

"The creek didn't look like it had any water in it," Morehouse recalled. "The creek was so full of fuel that the water was a light brown, kind of a frosty color. Sort of like engine oil looks when it's got water in it."

Firefighters and emergency service crews were sent to locate the fuel source and evacuate the park. All roads in the area were blocked off. A creek-side residence and business evacuation plan went into effect.

He remembers those intense moments.

"I thought, 'People need to be evacuated. Traffic has to be stopped from getting near the creek. Wow. Look at those vapors. They must be 15-to-20 feet above the creek. They are so thick I can just barely see across the (Woburn street) bridge. Are vapors moving out of the creek's channel? What do the air samples say? People have to be notified, kept out of the area. Where are my people? Are there people near the creek? How far has the gas gotten down the creek?'"

5:02 p.m.: A boom ripped through the air and a wrenching shudder shook the ground. The explosions had begun.

"I don't know if I heard or felt the first explosions or not. I'm sure I did, I just don't remember," Morehouse said. "But when I saw the ball of fire coming down the creek, all I could think was, 'wow, this is going to be awesome.'"

As the wall of flames, more than 70-feet high and 150-feet wide, raced down the creek, it devoured everything in its path.

"I was mesmerized by the size and beauty of the flame as it came toward me," Morehouse recalls. "I was so awestruck by the flames ... I almost forgot to get out of its way."

The amount of fuel spilled was staggering.

"The thing about the fire was that I could visualize 5-to-10,000 gallons of fuel on fire. That's a tanker truck," Morehouse said. "There was no way I could even imagine over 200,000 gal-

lons of gas on fire. You just can't train for that kind of thing. And it just kept coming.

"What scared me most was I knew I had people down next to the creek just before it exploded," Morehouse said. "After it caught fire, I remember thinking, 'Do I still have people down there? Have I lost anyone?'"

The whole emergency service community shared the fear that firefighters and other emergency workers might be lost in the explosion.

"I can't describe how relieved I was when everyone checked in," Morehouse said. "I was sure that we had lost some good people in the explosion. I still can't believe we didn't lose any personnel. We were so lucky."

In the park:

"My partner, Ryan Provencher, and I were dispatched to investigate the chemical smell at the creek first," said BFD firefighter Kelly Devlin. "We get calls like this all of the time. Usually, when we get there the smell is gone. But when we got to the creek at the (Woburn) bridge, we could see right away that there was lots of gas in the water. It wasn't the rainbow sheen you usually see. The creek was yellow with the stuff.

"Right away, Capt. Jaquish dispatched us to go down Lakeway and get into the park to evacuate people and see where the gas was coming from," Devlin said. "We didn't find the gas, but we did find people."

By themselves, Devlin and Provencher tirelessly searched a large portion of Whatcom Falls Park in their attempts to locate, and as calmly as possible, evacuate anyone who was in the park or by the creek. But, people were everywhere in the park: joggers, walkers, bicyclists, and people playing with their children — all enjoying the beautiful evening.

What Devlin and Provencher didn't realize was just how much danger people were in.

"We knew there was gas in the creek. But creeks just don't catch fire," Devlin said, still stunned by what happened. "You never expect to see something like that happen."

Now age 28 and just over 6 feet tall, Devlin's rangy build,

"I've never had anyone or anything affect me like this ever ... I don't know why this has affected me so much. But something inside me has been lost forever."

-Brad Bannerman, Paramedic

"Here I was trying to be professional and this boy was tearing me apart with his courage."

-Brad Bannerman, Paramedic

relaxed smile and his open and easy-going personality radiate the confidence of a person easily trusted — someone to depend on in a crisis. Amazingly, at the time of the explosion, Devlin had just passed his one-year probation period as a full-time firefighter with the fire department.

Devlin's dark brown eyes lose their focus as he continues his story.

"I remember the explosions started behind me and Ryan as we were getting people out of the park. I remember hearing someone yelling over the radio, 'Look up the hill. It's running (the fire), it's running. Get out of the way,' and thinking 'they're talking to me.' Ryan and I ran. As we ran, I remember hearing the explosions, then looking over my shoulder and seeing the trees along the creek going up in balls of flames. We were only wearing our bunker gear. No respirators or anything."

Without a hint of bravado, Devlin tells how he and Provencher, even with the fire and explosions, continued to run through the park, clearing everyone out. They made repeated trips back toward the flame-filled creek to look for potential victims and or survivors.

"Really, I don't think of myself as a hero. That's what everyone else tells me I am," he says. "I was just doing my job."

SEARCH AND RESCUE:

When the call went out, emergency service crews from not only Bellingham and Whatcom County responded, but so did Western Washington University's police force, the U.S. Navy's Search and Rescue helicopter from Whidbey Island, and EMS personnel from Skagit County.

Whatcom County Sheriff's Chief Civil Deputy Ron Peterson coordinated the county's search and rescue efforts. Born and raised in Bellingham, Peterson, 53, has been with the Whatcom County Sheriff's office for more than 27 years.

Peterson, with his deep voice, silver gray hair, weathered countenance, and piercing blue eyes, exudes confidence. A Vietnam veteran and seasoned sheriff's deputy, one can tell by the stories he shares that Peterson is a man who has been in bad situations before. In contrast to his tough and capable image, Peterson tells his story with heartfelt, honest emotion and exceptional candor.

"I had been driving on Iowa Street and I remember looking in my rearview mirror and seeing the flames as the creek exploded," Peterson says. "With the sound of the explosion and the flames, the first thing that went through my mind was that there had been a napalm strike.

"I'd seen lots of (napalm strikes) in Vietnam. I think that, rationally, I knew it couldn't be one but that's what went through

my mind at the time. But, once you see something like that you never can forget it," he said with a catch in his voice. "My guts just bunched up and I had a real bad feeling.

"I had just seen firefighters go by me on the road that I have worked with for over 20 years. Some of them, I had even gone to school with. All I could think was, 'My God, I've just lost some of my best friends.' I remember repeatedly asking, 'How many? How many are there?' I couldn't stop myself. I was sure that we had lost a lot of firefighters in the blast.

"I could smell the burning petroleum and I had a flashback," Peterson said quietly. "Suddenly, I wasn't smelling just the burning gas, but the smell of burning flesh and stench of dead bodies too. All those bad memories from Vietnam filled my head.

"The bad things I hadn't thought about in 20 years came back. Even a year later, I still have the smell in my nose from time to time. You just never forget."

Despite the terrible memories and fears, Peterson activated the county's search and rescue volunteer teams, ensured that the Navy's SAR helicopter was on-site and personally flew over the fire for hours searching for victims.

"I couldn't let what I felt stop me from what I had to do. I had to keep my emotions in check," Peterson said with a determined gleam in his eyes. "But, when I got home, I let my emotions go. I cried with my wife about the boys. It's so much harder to deal with when it's kids."

Ron Morehouse



photo by Tim Reid



photo by Tim Reid

Ron Peterson

"With the sound of the explosion and the flames, the first thing that went through my mind was that there had been a napalm strike."

- Ron Peterson, Whatcom County Sheriff's Chief Civil Deputy

"So Others May Live:" Bellingham Mountain Rescue's motto.

A hero unwilling to be identified. A hero hesitant to tell his story. A hero dealing with his memories.

He was one of the volunteers from Bellingham Mountain Rescue who discovered the body of 18-year-old Liam Wood in Whatcom Creek. He braved the fires and risked being burned during his search for survivors or victims. He asked not to be identified.

"I can't take the risk (of being identified)," he said. "The company I work for owns part of the pipeline. If they thought I was bad-mouthing them or the pipeline I could lose my job."

"The one thing I can't seem to reconcile with myself is that I looked at Liam Wood, lying there, face down in the creek and walked on by because I couldn't tell that he was a human being," he said with a tightness in his throat. "I thought that he was just another burned log floating there. That's how burned he was."

"I didn't realize for over 20 minutes that it was a person," he said. "I will never forget when we finally realized it was a body and knew that there wasn't anything we could do to help. He was dead."

THE RIDE TO THE HOSPITAL:

"We got the call that there were some badly burned boys — boys that needed assistance," Brad Bannerman says. "When my partner and I got to the scene we saw the two boys standing in the yard with their backs to each other so they couldn't see each other. But it didn't matter. Their pupils were white from the burns, so they couldn't see anyway."

Brad, 39, a 17-year veteran of the department, has spent his last eight years as a paramedic. As an instructor and mentor for many new paramedics, Brad is a highly regarded member of the team.

"Brad's an excellent paramedic," Morehouse said. "He is very well thought of and he has a better bedside manner than most doctors I know. He never gets upset and is rock solid in an emergency situation. He's good people."

A consummate professional, Brad says that taking care of 10-year-old burn victims Stephen Tsiorvas and Wade King was the most pivotal point in his career.

Because of his involvement with the boys, especially Stephen, who he transported to the hospital, Brad is no longer serving as a paramedic.

"I've never had anyone or anything affect me like this ever," Brad said as tears built up in his eyes. "I don't know why this has affected me so much. But something inside me has been lost forever."



photo by Tim Reid

Kelly Devlin

Brad told his story of that day in a voice nearly strangled by emotion.

"When I first saw the boys, I realized that Stephen was in the worst shape. He was burned really badly. He had circumferential burns around his whole body and his lips and eyelids were gone. Wade was in bad shape too, but his face wasn't as badly burned. So, being the lead paramedic on the scene, I took Stephen."

"My partner Steve James and I loaded Stephen into the ambulance and had the driver head for the hospital."

With tears flowing down his face, Brad continues.

"You know he never cried out or complained? He asked me my name. Can you believe that? Stephen was having trouble speaking as the burns in his trachea compromised his airway. But he turned his head and asked me how bad he was hurt and what was going to happen to him.

"I felt he deserved the truth. So, I told him he was badly burned and that I was going to have to give him some medicine to keep him from moving and I was going to have to put a tube in his throat so he could breathe.

"He said to me, 'I can't see you, but it's okay Mr. Bannerman. Do whatever you think you need to do.'

"Here I was trying to be professional and this boy was tearing me apart with his courage. Then he asked me, 'Am I going to die?' I knew the answer was yes, but I couldn't tell him the truth. All I could say was, 'We're going to take good care of you.'

"My partner took over talking to Stephen for a while so I could take care of Stephen. But, due to his burns, the medicine didn't work and I couldn't find a vein in either of his arms to put an IV in. His breathing was getting increasingly labored as the burned skin of his chest and throat tightened. All I could think was, 'My God, I'm going to have to cut this boy's skin so that his chest can move and he can breathe.' I was horrified at the idea and told the driver to go faster."

The tears continue to flow as he describes the rest of the ride.

"The only thing I could do was hold his hand and try to keep him calm. I know he couldn't feel my touch because of the burns,

but it didn't matter. His hands were curled in fists like talons and he couldn't even move his arms. But I held his hand anyway."

"When we finally got to the hospital, I made sure that someone took over for me and kept talking with Stephen after I left. In just a period of minutes, a part of my soul was linked with Stephen's forever."

After the fire died down and the crisis was over, Brad went home and cried. It was then that his time with Stephen overwhelmed him.

"He cried for hours and hours," said Trisha Bannerman as she squeezed her husband's hand. "He didn't sleep for five or six days. I didn't know what to do. He was always so strong and suddenly he wasn't any more."

"I was in bad shape emotionally and psychologically. I couldn't work either. I was on medical leave for quite a while," Brad said.

"My dad was so sad all of the time," Brad's 13-year-old son Derek said. "It was hard to be around him. I was frustrated 'cause there wasn't anything I could do. He just cried all the time."

"He would walk into walls like they weren't there," Trisha said. "A couple weeks after it happened, I was cooking and the sounds and smells were too much for him. He ran from the room with his hands over his ears. When I found him later in his office, he was lying on the floor curled up in a ball crying uncontrollably."

"Really, I don't think of myself as a hero. That's what everyone else tells me I am. I was just doing my job."

- Kelly Devlin, Bellingham Fire Department

"He just wasn't him anymore," Trisha said tearfully. "And that was what was so hard."

Tormented by his dreams and by his memories of Stephen, Brad resigned from being a paramedic and now spends his time as a regular firefighter for the department.

"I think it is the best decision for me. I don't want to have to be the one making the life and death decisions anymore," Brad said.

He plans to continue as a firefighter and continue training new paramedics while he receives counseling.

"I know that I still need to see someone to talk about what I've been through," Brad said. "I'm going to have relapses into depression every once in a while. But, with the love of my family and the support of my friends, I know that I will get better — in time." ☉

The following is a letter from Brad Bannerman, a paramedic with the Bellingham Fire Department, to Katherine Dalen, the mother of Stephen Tsiorvas.

Dear Ms. Dalen

I felt compelled to write to you and express my deep condolences for your tremendous loss. Stephen touched a lot of people in many, many ways. I have been personally touched by Stephen in a very profound way. I am the Paramedic that treated and transported Stephen on that terrible afternoon.

I am probably one of the last people he was able to talk to following his horrific ordeal. I want you to know that Stephen was not in a great deal of pain, due to the depth of his burns, during the ride to the hospital.

I have never been exposed to anyone as brave and unselfish as your son Stephen. During transport, his main concern was for his friend Wade, whom he repeatedly asked about. At one point, Stephen asked me what was going to happen to him and wanted to know my name. At that time I explained to him that he was very badly burned and that I had to give him a shot of medicine to paralyze him and then put a tube down his throat to breathe for him.

He then looked up at me and said, "It's okay Mr. Bannerman. Do whatever you think you need to do."

Unfortunately, the medicine that I gave him wasn't as effective as usual, due to his burns, so he didn't become paralyzed until after we had him in the emergency room. Never once did he complain or even cry out. I was able to hold his hand and try to comfort him throughout the ride and only wish I could have done more. I have a 12-year-old son and cannot begin to fathom the depth of your loss.

I have been on the fire department for 16 years and have never had an incident or a patient that has impacted me to this extent. My partner, Steven James, and I have been unable to return to work since this incident and are receiving counseling that I hope will bring some healing. I know that Stephen would want us to move on and help other people so we are trying our best to deal with this. In my extensive experience, I have been witness to many acts of bravery and heroism but all pale in comparison to what I witnessed by your son that day.

I feel somewhat selfish writing this letter to you, as it is a part of my healing process, but I felt very compelled to tell you how proud you can be of your son. You must be one fantastic

mother! I truly believe that Stephen is now an angel that will watch over us for the rest of our lives and am deeply honored to have been even a small part of his life. I will carry a part of Stephen with me for the rest of my life and will hopefully, someday, be able to use my experience with him to better myself and the people I come in contact with.

That day has made me realize how short and precious life is and has brought me ever closer to my son. If you ever need anything, please feel free to contact me. I would be honored to help in anyway possible. Thank you for bringing such a wonderful person into this world.

Sincerely,

*Brad Bannerman
Bellingham Fire Department*



Brad, Trisha and Derek Bannerman

The NEIGHBORHOODS



photos by Evan Parker

“It’s a pretty sad neighborhood. I was down there when they pulled the boys out.”

- Don Moen

by April Busch

This year, a yellow, nylon rope – fading and fraying against the spring-green growth of the park – frames Whatcom Falls Park’s creek-side trails. The ropes are visible reminders of the charred creekbed lying just beyond view.

The ropes mark time in a timeless place and appear out of place as they mark an unnatural event in a world of natural cycles.

But as the trail winds onto Iowa Street, the roped off areas naturally foreshadow the quiet of the park giving way to the muffled stillness of the street where two 10-year-old boys lived. Like the park, the people on this street that parallels Whatcom Creek’s windy east – west flow, are still recovering from the rupture in Olympic’s pipeline that spilled 229,950 gallons of fuel into Whatcom Creek and exploded June 10, 1999, burning two miles of creek and park land.

On the eastern end of this established street, directly north of where the pipeline broke open, 72-year-old Don Moen has lived amid the decorative fences, blossoming shrubbery, and manicured lawns for almost 15 years.

On a sunny spring day, reminiscent of the day the creek caught fire, Moen’s voice drops and his face braces against memories of the explosion.

“It’s a pretty sad neighborhood,” Moen says. “I was down there when they pulled the boys out.”

“I don’t go down that way anymore.” From the sheltered courtyard of his house Moen looked west, toward the river. “Right after it happened, for two or three months, I’d wake up in the middle of the night with nightmares.”

When describing the neighborhood where people still garden, wash their cars, and exchange words over rakes, Moen says, “It’s a lot quieter here. The kids used to be in the street all the time-skateboarding. They were very athletic kids.”

Quietly he notes, “I’ve just stopped dreaming about it.”

Looking west from Moen’s driveway, the top of Lauren Kwiatkowski’s brown shoulder-length hair and the back of her husband Larry’s tie-dyed T-shirt are visible as they tend the flowerbeds in their front yard. The Kwiatkowskis, with their young son and daughter, have lived next door to the King family for seven years.



"I don't know, (the pipeline explosion's) just sort of tainted the neighborhood somehow," Lauren says, resting both hands on the handle of her rake. "I always really loved living here and I feel okay with the pipeline not running. But I don't know how I'd feel if it ever opened up again - if I'd ever feel safe."

Because the park was closed for a long time, the Kwiatkowskis haven't used it as much as in the past and Lauren says that every time she goes into the park it's a reminder of what happened.

She had hoped the neighborhood would become closer — and for a while it did. But then it became private again, partly out of respect for the families, she says.

Lauren says she would like to see the pipelines shut down and sold to someone who would take responsibility for them. Larry mentions that he doesn't know who was responsible for the explosion, but Lauren quickly interrupts, "Oh, I know it was Olympic. That's my feeling."

"I don't trust Olympic," Lauren says. "I don't think they should be allowed to run through the city."

Nodding his head in agreement, Larry says that by insisting on naming other parties in lawsuits to deflect culpability, Olympic isn't looking very responsible right now.

"That's the thing, I mean, why don't they just say, 'We made a mistake'? I mean it's a big accident, a big mistake, but they've got to take the blame for it."

Retired insurance salesman Jack Freeman has lived in the same cul-de-sac as the Kings for 10 years. He agrees that Olympic Pipe Line Co. appears negligent by not just stepping up and taking responsibility. He would like to see the pipeline, which runs the length of his backyard, moved out of any residential neighborhoods.

"I found out about the pipeline when I got my plat map that comes with the title for a house," Freeman says. "I didn't think much about it then, but I sure think about it now. I just don't know how safe this thing is, considering it's age."

"I would hope that Olympic would have to make a guarantee that this thing wouldn't rupture again, but who knows," he said.

Freeman and his wife used the park a lot before the explosion, but he says now he's only gone through once since last June.

"We sure miss it," he says warmly. "But there's not much to do, just make your wants and desires known and hope that people will help carry the ball."

Freeman is frustrated that no one has asked him or his neighbors what they want, since they're almost at ground zero where the pipeline exploded and it still runs right behind their property.

Retired Equilon Refinery worker Tony Fisher has lived on the cul-de-sac west of the Freemans for 25 years. He says he speaks out about the need for more pipeline regulations whenever he can.

"I've tried to be outspoken that I don't think they regulate the pipelines nearly enough," he says, contrasting it with the thorough safety measures he saw taken in the refinery.

He hopes that being outspoken about pipeline regulations will encourage other people to do the same. From his front yard he can see Stephen Tsiornas's house across the street to the left and the yellow ropes of the park to the right. Fisher believes the Olympic pipeline tragedy has brought people in the neighborhood closer together.

"People feel like the park has been violated," Fisher says. "My daughter, who's 22 and has a little girl, did a lot of walking in the park and has strong feelings about, you know, never wanting to swim there again because of the pollution factor and ... the unknown."

"Quite honestly, I don't feel as safe," he says. Fisher is afraid the pipeline will rupture again in one of the residential neighborhoods.

"I'd like to know what happened (in the explosion)," Fisher says. "Olympic is bringing up the possibility of third-party damage, but there's always that possibility. It's Olympic's responsibility to insure the integrity of the pipeline," he says, adding that he would like to see increased regulation, a better use of new tech-





nologies to inspect the pipeline, and regular visual inspections.

“(Olympic) appeared to have great trouble using their technology. I’ve got no confidence in them. I don’t think they’re regulated nearly enough,” Fisher says.

“If they have to claim eminent domain over the federal government, so be it. I know that wouldn’t be very easy from the pipeline (company) standards point of view, but that’s not my concern. Money shouldn’t be an issue when talking about insuring public safety,” he says. The federal government should have the toughest regulations possible, he adds, but if not then the state should enforce what’s necessary to keep people safe.

“We’re still affected by the tremendous grieving process of this tragedy,” he says, looking toward the park. “It hurts your feelings so bad to know the boys were just being boys, playing in the park when this happened.”

Down the road from the park, Kristen and Doug Krussow hang out with a friend in front of the house they bought two years ago.

Doug Krussow, who works in the oil industry, knew the pipeline was in the park and why it was there before they moved into the neighborhood.

The city and the county governments are being just as careless as Olympic is purported to be, according to Krussow.

“My question is where were (politicians) when they were putting in all these houses. You know, you go half-a-mile over here, you’ve got this whole new Barkley development going in and they’re building right on top of the pipeline — even after this incident.”

As he discusses Kulshan Middle School, Krussow grows frustrated. “Five or seven years ago the city ok’d building a junior high right over there and it’s within a rock’s throw of the pipeline. I mean, why? Why is the city allowing that? I think it’s important.”

Krussow says that the security of the park has been shattered for some people in the neighborhood.

“You think of a park and you think, ‘Oh, I can go in a park,’ especially in a city like Bellingham,” Krussow says. “You go in a park and be safe. I think a lot of people, (the explosion) really, really hurt them and really terrified them that they could go in a place that seemed so benign and have something so tragic happen.”

“You expect to go out on the freeway and somebody can get killed, you know,” Krussow adds. “You don’t expect to walk into a park and have somebody die, especially so horribly.”

Cost should not be a factor in proper pipeline regulation, Krussow says, adding that expert knowledge and the latest technology should be used to keep the pipeline up and monitored at all times to make it as safe as possible.

“I feel pretty confident that when and if they reopen the pipeline, it will be with the best technology they have,” he says. “You know, they’re not going to just go, ‘well, reopen it.’ With what’s happened they’re not going to just reopen it with the status quo.”

Krussow believes that like all accidents, this too will fade over time, but people should always be aware of what they share their community with. He hopes awareness can come out of this.

If she looks left into Whatcom Falls park when she crosses the street to St. Clair playground — just around the corner from

the Krussow's, 11-year-old Elizabeth Johnson sees the yellow ropes put up after her classmates, Stephen and Wade, were killed.

The western end of Iowa Street runs into St. Clair children's playground and winds back into Whatcom Falls park along the water. Elizabeth Johnson's family home is buttressed between Whatcom Falls to the back, Iowa Street to the front and St. Clair across the side yard.

"My brother and I were home alone when (the explosion) happened," Johnson says.

She said the explosion affected some of the students in her class more than others.

"Well, they were crying a lot," Johnson says. "And this one girl never says 'explosion.' She says 'the E-word.'"

Though the kids try not to think about it, Johnson says when

the adults in the neighborhood get together with one of the boy's parents they often cry. None of her friends' parents worry about them playing at the park, and Johnson herself hasn't altered her playtime in Whatcom Falls Park.

"It doesn't really worry me because I know that the pipeline isn't open," Johnson says, but then grows contemplative. "But if it ever does open again I might not go there alone."

In many public and private ways this street will never be the same for the people who have retired here, raised their kids here, walked through the park from their backyards and barbecued with neighbors. Though the pipeline tragedy has affected everyone, there is healing and they all hope that better things will come out of this: more pipeline regulation, better technologies and higher accountability by the industries operating in their backyards. ☉

"People feel like the
park has been violated."

- Tony Fisher





eminent domain

by Cole Cosgrove
photos by Chris Goodenow



Like a fuse, Olympic Pipe Line Company's 16-inch wide, half-inch thick steel pipeline winds through the city of Bellingham. Since its 1964 installation, the fuse was relatively quiet. Buried 3 to 4 feet underground, it pumped gasoline, diesel and all the jet fuel used by SeaTac International Airport — about 12.8 million gallons of highly-volatile fuel per day. The fuel flowed unnoticeably under the front lawns of homeowners, under hiking trails at Whatcom Falls Park, under the grassy field of Highland Heights playground and under Kulshan Middle School's front parking lot. Out of sight, this underground pipeline inconspicuously transported fuel. Inconspicuous, that is, until June 10, 1999. The fuse ignited. Explosions rocked the silence. A tower of smoke billowed five miles high. People who happily ignored the pipeline's nearby easement, which attractively offers extra land for soccer fields or gardens, could no longer overlook the pipeline that now fit the stereotypical profile of a serial killer: the quiet, unassuming neighbor who always "kept to himself," suddenly and dramatically exposed.

"I'd feel perfectly safe living next to the pipeline," said Olympic Pipe Line spokesman Pearse Edwards, who does



“I’d feel perfectly safe living next to the pipeline,” said Olympic Pipe Line spokesman Pearse Edwards, who does not live next to the pipeline.

not live next to the pipeline.

Pearse Edwards wasn’t moving into a house with a pipeline running through its back yard the day Whatcom Creek ignited.

But Jan Dustrude was.

“We got the keys the day of the explosion,” she said, regarding the house she moved into on Clearbrook Drive on June 10, 1999. Dustrude and her husband have two children under the age of 10. Dustrude said they asked about the marker in her back yard, indicating the location of the TransMountain pipeline.

“The realtor said this pipeline was inactive,” she said.

What the realtor didn’t tell her was Olympic’s very-much-active pipeline ran less than a block away. But she, of course, found that out for herself on June 10.

Dustrude’s neighbor, Karin Maya, wasn’t aware of the pipeline in her back yard until she was excitedly signing the final papers.

“It wasn’t in the initial stats when we went to buy the house,” Maya said. “That would have made me step back and do a lot more research.”

Ron Bauleke knew the pipeline was there; he was just never concerned about it. He and his wife Cindy had previously lived near a pipeline and never thought twice about it, he said.

"I was never concerned," he said. A "No Fear" T-shirt aptly sums up his attitude. "It's been there forever, nothing had happened before."

After their children moved out of the house and went to college a few years ago, the Baulkes thought about selling the spacious house on Evening Star Lane. That is, until the explosion dropped their property value.

Events like fiery eruptions tend to scare away potential buyers (unless, apparently, the potential buyer is Olympic spokesman Pearse Edwards).

Gasoline explosions also scare Jan Vanderstoep, who lives adjacent to Olympic's pipeline on Cascade Place.

"I absolutely hate it," she said. "We were told by our real estate agent it was just natural gas, not gasoline and airline fuel. It makes us very nervous. Our property value has just dropped."

State law requires sellers to disclose conditions that could affect the property's value. Such disclosure reports may not mention a pipeline less than a block away. Comparatively, the burn width at Whatcom Creek was 150 feet on either side.

Appraisers, however, are required by state and federal law to note, "adverse environmental conditions present in the improvements on the site or in the immediate vicinity of the subject property."

Pipelines, especially those that leak and ignite, are considered such a condition. Exactly how much a pipeline affects property values is a question that falls to Whatcom County Assessor Keith Willnauer.

"We're aware of the presence of stigma, and really the job beyond that is trying to quantify that," Willnauer said. "Are we concerned about it? Obviously, yes. Do we intend to take it into account in our appraisal process? Absolutely."

Willnauer is researching the work of other assessors from around the country who have previously dealt with pipeline spills in an attempt to find how pipelines fit into the appraisal equation. When Willnauer calculates property values he bases his estimates on previous sales. Since he doesn't have enough sales data yet, he looks at how much houses have sold for in other areas where spills have occurred.

Since Willnauer does not yet have exact figures, he said he is hesitant to admit pipelines reduce property value.

But living next to a pipeline that spills gasoline isn't exactly like living next to a golf course.

Phil Barrett, Jr., his wife and 18-month-old son, moved into a house near the pipeline during the time of the lowered real estate prices. When looking for a house, Barrett said they looked at five houses adjacent to Olympic's pipeline. They made an offer much less than the asking price on the five-year-old house, and the sellers accepted. Barrett said he is not concerned about the pipeline restarting.

"I think it's going to be a long time before it reopens," Barrett said.

Steve Fedenuik has been living near the pipeline for more than 20 years and he doesn't care whether it is running or not.



"I have no concerns," Fedenuik said. "We never did have concerns. In fact, 20 years ago I cut down about 20 trees off the property and built a big bon fire right on top of the pipeline; the line is only about four feet under."

Fedenuik, ironically, is not wearing a "No Fear" T-shirt. He is, however, mad at Bellingham Mayor Mark Asmundson for "making a big fuss."

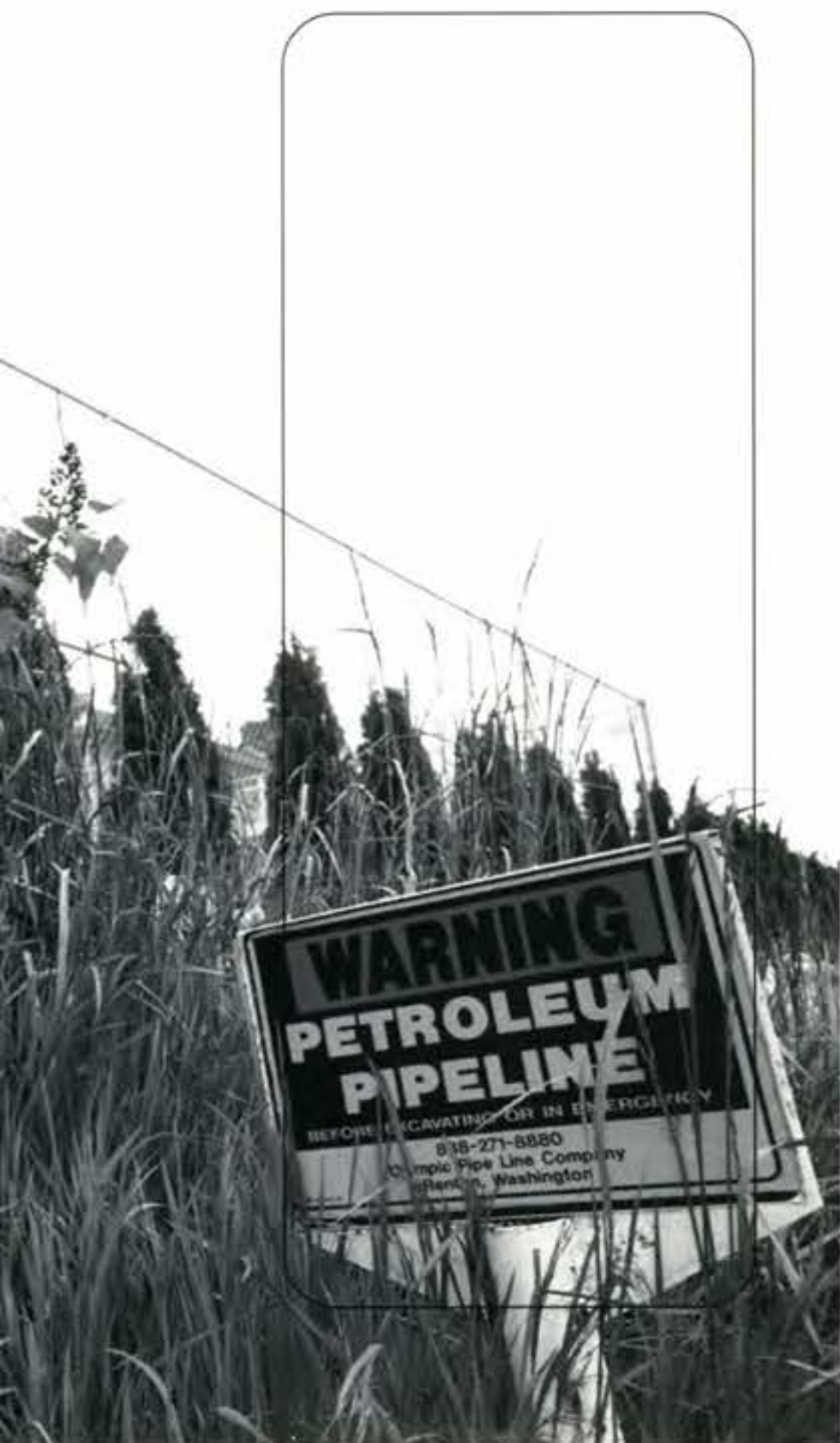
"Property values are down because he makes a lot of noise," Fedenuik said.

Fedenuik doesn't say anything about the noise of 229,500 gallons of gasoline igniting in a public park. He was RV'ing in the Midwest at the time, well out of earshot.

"The noise" Asmundson is making is the sound of increasing pipeline regulations, generally welcomed by people who live near the pipeline.

"I definitely appreciate the stricter regulations," said neighbor Ron Bauleke regarding the city's stricter pipeline safety requirements.

Interstate pipelines, like Olympic's, are a federally regulated industry. City governments do not have regulatory authority over pipelines. Bellingham, however, is unique because the pipeline passes through city-owned land at Whatcom Falls Park. Thus, Olympic must sign an operating agreement with the City of Bellingham.



For reasons unknown, Olympic allowed its previous contract to expire in 1995. So Bellingham is now able to negotiate stricter safety agreements with Olympic, on the condition that Olympic needs city approval to use city land. Olympic and the City of Bellingham signed a temporary license agreement that expired on May 4, 2000.

One demand in the temporary agreement was a pipeline relocation feasibility report to determine the possibility of moving the pipeline outside of city limits. The City of Bellingham and Olympic agreed on independent third-party contractor GeoEngineers, Inc., who submitted the relocation feasibility report to the City of Bellingham and Olympic.

“A significant motivator behind the evaluation of relocating OPL’s pipeline is to remove the line from proximity to residential areas, particularly high-density residential developments,” James A. Miller, principal of GeoEngineers, wrote in the report. “Such relocation would expose fewer people to potential hazards in the event of a pipeline accident.”

The study determined the three possible alternative routes were not any safer than the current route. The best alternative adds 23.1 additional miles to the pipeline, statistically increasing the risk of a spill, and crosses four major rivers not affected by the current route. The river crossings are of concern to the study because of the recent listing of salmon under the

Endangered Species Act. Additionally, the best alternative route is upstream of two public water systems, traverses extensive aquifer recharge areas, crosses more than six times as many acres of wetlands and crosses tribal lands and treaty right areas that are avoided by the existing alignment, according to the report.

“No substantial benefit to public safety or the environment has been identified for this action,” Miller wrote in the report. “The feasibility of obtaining the necessary permits and approvals for re-routing the pipeline is low.”

So why doesn’t the City of Bellingham at least deny access for Olympic to run the pipeline through Whatcom Falls Park? According to its Website, the City of Bellingham sees it as an opportunity, in the best interest of community safety, to allow Olympic to continue to use the city-owned land because the city can set the strict operating conditions. In the long run, if Bellingham completely denies access through the park, Olympic, as a Department of Transportation entity, could exercise its right of eminent domain—the taking of private land for public use—and run the line through a neighborhood, condemn houses for land use and avoid the city’s additional safety requirements.

One of those safety requirements was a hydrostatic test of the 10 miles of pipeline that runs through Bellingham. The hydrostatic test involved pumping water through the pipeline at 135-140 percent of maximum operating pressure. The water test hadn’t been done since the pipeline was laid, Olympic spokesman Pearse Edwards said.

“During the first round of tests, 10 miles through Bellingham, we did have one failure,” Edwards said. “As a result of that we tested the other 29.5 miles from Ferndale to Allen Point and that tested out fine.”

When Olympic performed the water testing, Kulshan Middle School principal Sherrie Brown said she paid close attention, as the pipeline runs through school grounds.

“When they did the water testing, one part of the pipe was split and didn’t go through the water testing very well, up by Woburn Street,” Brown said. “But the part by our school tested out fine.” Brown said the tests help to reassure her the pipeline will be safe when it restarts.

“I think there’s enough people who are really watching it to keep it safe,” she said. “I think it’ll be passing a lot of scrutiny. They’ll be making sure it is safe enough.”

Olympic can restart the pipeline after it meets the City of Bellingham’s requirements and then gets approval from the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Pipeline Safety Office. Olympic applied for restart in January, but hasn’t heard back yet, Edwards said. Until then, people like Jan Dustrude can only sit and wait.

“I think if it doesn’t get resolved in a safe way, we would think about moving,” Dustrude said. “I’m hearing conflicting stories about pipeline safety. That is what’s really irritating and doesn’t give us piece of mind. I’m definitely concerned for the safety of the kids.” ©



Whatcom Creek

by Tiffany Campbell

photos courtesy of Joy Monjure

After ducking under the fraying yellow ropes, after passing signs that warn of “hazardous waste,” after following the trail lined with green sentinel Douglas Fir trees, we descend into the gorge.

The burn zone is impossibly still, save for the scraping of our boots and the rattle of loose rocks on the trail.

The tangled brush slowly gives way to a thin film of new vegetation that glows against the charred backdrop. Trees still line Whatcom Creek, blackened and stripped by the June 10th fire, leaving only the trunks thrust skyward.

Clare Fogelson, environmental resources superintendent at Bellingham Public Works, says restoration groups are still waiting to see which ones will survive.

I am told, as I stand a little above the creek and its gray waters, that the contrast between Whatcom Creek a year ago and

today is nothing short of spectacular. Much of the plants’ root systems were left undamaged and were therefore able to resprout quickly. Water quality has improved significantly. But all I can think about is how beautiful it must have been.

The June 10, 1999, pipeline rupture spouted a deluge of gasoline that eventually ignited, and in a flash flood of fire, scorched the wildlife and vegetation that once made the creek its home.

“It’s unique because it was so much hotter than the average forest fire,” said Virginia Stone, a Huxley College graduate student who has done extensive water quality studies on Whatcom Creek. “Forest fires normally don’t burn in riparian zones, whereas this one was centered in one.”

While devastating for the riparian, or streamside, zone, the speed of the fire may have actually saved some vegetation from wholesale extermination.

**The burn zone is impossibly still,
save for the scraping of our boots
and the rattle of loose rocks on the trail.**

Early reports estimated 30,000 dead fish, along with a few dead birds and rodents.

Forest fires typically burn much longer, and may smolder for days. This fire was different—the fuel was gasoline, instead of vegetation, and it scorched the area, rather than actually consuming it, said Mary Jo Sanborn, an employee of Bellingham Public Works.

“There’s been quite a bit of regrowth, since many of the root systems weren’t necessarily burned,” Sanborn said.

Of course, the creek has had one year to recover after 229,950 gallons of fuel filled the streambed of Whatcom Creek.

“One of the theories,” said Mark Henderson, a water quality specialist at the Department of Ecology, “goes that there was so much product in the creek, it displaced the water in the creek, just pushed the water aside ... and went right down into the sediments.”

Initially the kill zone for aquatic life extended more than three miles to the mouth of Whatcom Creek at Bellingham Bay, and the riparian area was burned for more than 1.5 miles.

The fireball wiped out understory vegetation such as bushes and grasses, and much of the canopy vegetation. With the loss of the vegetation came the loss of habitat for all of the life forms in the riparian area. The foliage usually provides shade to keep the water temperature in the mid-50 to low-60 degree range. Higher temperatures can be lethal to cold-water adapted salmon. Sediment, with no vegetation to hold it in place, eroded into the creek.

“We don’t have any good base data on fish use in the stream

(prior to the explosion),” Fogelson said. “We do know what we collected dead out of the stream—several thousand dead fish of all kinds.”

Early reports estimated 30,000 dead fish, along with a few dead birds and rodents. Fogelson was unable to comment because the long-term restoration plan is not yet published, but acknowledged that the figure was within a reasonable range.

“Everything in the creek was dead,” Henderson said. “All the way to the bay.” Worms floated dead. All types of insects were gone.

“There was a bunny running around in circles right next to me. Its face was burned, probably blinded. It was awful. Bodies everywhere,” said Bruce Barbour, who is involved with watershed projects at the Washington Department of Ecology.

In the summer following the explosion, the assessment was grim and emergency restoration plans began immediately. Olympic Pipe Line Co., took responsibility for the emergency clean up. So far, Olympic has paid for all the restoration proceedings and hired professionals to do the jobs. Not including legal fees, Olympic has spent more than \$50 million so far, according to Brian Connolly, Olympic’s chief financial officer.

Emergency restoration officially ended in February 2000, and long term restoration plans are currently under way.

“Olympic and their managing partners have taken full responsibility for the financial obligation for emergency restoration

“There was a bunny running around in circles right next to me. Its face was burned, probably blinded. It was awful. Bodies everywhere.” -Bruce Barbour, Department of Ecology





photo by Chris Goodenow



... they've also taken the initiative to fund some of the early action restoration plan elements," Fogelsong said.

"A lot of times (after a spill) they focus on remediation and clean-up right away, and the restoration is something that comes later, once they've decided what the damage has been. ... It can take years before restoration really gets started," Sanborn said. "This group decided that they wanted to do emergency restoration right away, by using the JRC."

"I use a medical analogy," said Fogelsong, who chairs the Joint Restoration Committee (JRC). "If the stream is a patient that received a traumatic event, emergency restoration is stabilization of the patient ... long term restoration is bringing the patient up to its preexisting condition and improving the patient's health."

The JRC organizes this unusual approach of early action restoration. The committee acts as a technical advisory committee, Sanborn said, that works with Olympic to come up with restoration plans. Representatives, like the Department of Ecology, advise and oversee restoration activities.

The committee is made up of representatives from the city of Bellingham, the Washington state departments of Natural Resources and Ecology, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Nooksack Tribe, the Lummi Nation and Olympic. The committee makes recommendations to the trustee group, which includes any agency that represents some sort of public resource that was damaged or lost, as well as Olympic.

Any action on Whatcom Creek has to have full and total agreement by all the members of the JRC. Any disagreements that may arise between the agencies on the best way to proceed have to be worked out before anything progresses.

The gasoline that soaked into the ground is a defining factor of the ecological damage. Normally in oil spills the gasoline doesn't actually soak in: the properties of oil cause it to float. Because the leak went undetected for so long, however, the gasoline not only inundated the creek, it saturated the soil.

Once water started flushing out the gasoline, Sanborn said, the assumption was that the product would leave the system.

But anytime anyone kicked at sediment in the creek, the telltale dull rainbow sheen would appear.

Crews responded with a process called agitation, which involved literally moving every rock through the whole burn zone of the creek, with both human crews and machinery, bringing the gasoline to the surface.

"One of the people in the office called it 'Shake n Bake', where they'd shake the sediments during the day," Henderson said. "They had all kinds of crews out with shovels and rakes just getting the gasoline to break loose of the sediments ... and at night they'd open up the dam on Lake Whatcom and flush it out."

Once the gasoline hits the air, it "volatilizes," which means it literally "goes to air" or evaporates. The whole creek was agitated three times, often rock by rock, until the gasoline was no longer readily visible.

A surface clean up was not enough. Gasoline also penetrated the groundwater by the Bellingham Water Treatment Plant near where the leak occurred. In that area all the groundwater flows into both Whatcom and Hannah creeks, so the gasoline seeped continuously.

"It went down into the ground and hit the bedrock and came out through seeps along Whatcom Creek," Henderson said. "It was so thick it was coming out like vegetable oil. It wasn't just a sheen on the water—you could have gotten gasoline off the water."

Now, a vertical-extraction well pumps out the vapors and liquid, which are treated and disposed of. It will be in place for at least three to five years, Fogelsong said. Another pump injects the soil with oxygen to help push the vapors out.

Literally tons and tons of contaminated soil (some 5,000-plus cubic yards) had to be trucked from the burn zone and disposed of as hazardous waste at refineries in Bellingham, Tacoma, and Oregon, and new soil had to be brought in.

"The stream remediation project included a re-sculpting of



the streambed itself,” Fogelsong said. “Steps were taken ... to improve some of the fish characteristics.” This process includes adding woody debris, like tree trunks, to the channel banks, which provide cover and refuge habitat for the fish until the vegetation can recover.

“It had to be put back some way, any way ... if they were correct about what the limiting factors were in their analysis, then yes, the stream is probably somewhat more fish friendly,” Fogelsong said.

Concern about the salmon’s fall migration also prompted studies on the toxins in the creek, and how they might affect the fish in their various life stages.

“I don’t think we can say it’s had no effect,” Fogelsong said. “But I think the gamble’s paid off. We haven’t seen complete decimation.”

In the first weeks of April, 26,000 trees had been planted. The trees were all native species, mostly conifers, with wild cherry, alder and cottonwood.

“We’re making suggestions to the contractors. The plantings will be done on a performance-based schedule, which means that when we get the canopy back that’s required to replace the loss, then that’s when the project is successful,” Fogelsong said. “It’s not going to be tied to a certain amount of plants going in.”

Fish migration is now studied in the creek. Special attention is focused on the macro-invertebrates, the bugs, clear indicators of the health of the ecosystem, not to mention the source of sustenance for salmon. The JRC is reviewing a long-term restoration plan developed by Olympic with direction from the JRC. Once it is approved, it will be available for public review in June. The long-term plan will address such sweeping concerns like invasive species control and salmon health.

“The restoration plan will outline the long term programs that will be in place to compensate for the loss ... there will probably come a time in the future where the city and its local partners will continue to restore the stream on its own (without

Olympic’s financial assistance),” Fogelsong said.

“When you talk about having the creek back, different components are going to come back accordingly ... water quality has improved significantly daily ... on the other extreme, you have 80 to 100-year-old trees that were burned. To replace those, it doesn’t take a mathematician to know it will take 80 to 100 years to replace them.”

“Something that’s getting lost in the whole story is that this community put a lot of effort in getting life back into Whatcom Creek,” Barbour said. “We visited 400 businesses door-to-door, asking them to take a look at their waste streams. We said ‘Let us come in and take a tour of your shop, and we can keep that ounce of oil out of the creek.’ Everything has an impact. And people were beginning to get it.”

The Bellingham community has always cared about the health of its natural resources. Helping to restore the creek is not just a job for the professionals; it will take the work of the whole community. In efforts to heal the creek, we may be able to help begin to heal this community. As I stand on the creek’s bank, I can see the scars, see that it will take a hundred years before we can say Whatcom Creek has recovered. The clean up has been impressive and to a certain extent, successful—but perhaps the mess should not have been made in the first place. ☺

“It was so thick it was coming out like vegetable oil. It wasn’t just a sheen on the water—you could have gotten gasoline off the water.”

**- Mark Henderson,
Department of Ecology**

Flash Point

People in Bellingham remember the day Olympic's pipeline exploded the way people a generation ago remember the day an assassin's bullet killed President John F. Kennedy. The pipeline explosion rocked the community and blistered the land. Some heard of the disaster on the evening news. Others, however, heard it firsthand. An entire business community on Iowa Street felt the shock as their usual work-place security shattered. Here are some of their stories:

“I panicked for my family. At that point I knew it was going to be ugly.”

-Guy Abbott

Guy Abbott: Bellingham Chrysler

“I was just standing outside. Police and firefighters were running up and down the street. There was something in the air. You could feel it. Something wasn't quite right. We could see up the road that they were blocking off traffic. Maybe this was something they planned to do as a precautionary measure for a job that had to be done.

“All of the sudden the explosion went off. A ball of flame came up seconds later. It was mass pandemonium. Once the fuel lit and burnt there wasn't much anybody could do, but wait for it to finish burning.

“The flame came down the creek and surrounded us for a second. I was running in to our office during the concussion. It bowed the windows and forced me through the doors into the building.

“Immediately afterwards the police told us to evacuate the place. They didn't even know what was going on. It was very traumatic.

“The first 10 or 20 minutes we were flying by the seat of our pants as to what exactly happened. I live on St. Claire Street so I was very concerned about what was going on at my house. I panicked for my family. I knew at that point it was going to be ugly.

Interviews by Andrew Linth
Photos by Chris Goodenow



From left to right:
 Guy Abbott, Bellingham Chrysler
 Jeff Cyr, Gold's Gym
 Todd Smith, Wallen Insurance, Inc.



“The traffic immediately gridlocked. People just stopped and watched the curtain of fire go up and down the creek.”

-Mark Allaway

“At 8 p.m. my sister called my family and told us about the tragedy. The King and Tsiorvas families are all people we know. Liam Wood was a friend of my son’s and was supposed to go out with him that night.

“We can replace a lot of things and we can fix a lot of things, but we can’t fix what happened to those kids and their families. They were all exceptionally good kids. We don’t ever want to go through something like that again.”

Mark Allaway: Cruisin Coffee

“There weren’t any customers, so I was cleaning up. All of the sudden, the building shook. I thought it was an earthquake. It sounded just like thunder during a storm.

“I looked and saw a big poof of black smoke and a wall of fire as high as the trees. Then I thought it was a bomb, or maybe construction and someone had hit something.

“I stopped and wondered what I was going to do. The traffic immediately gridlocked. People just stopped and watched the curtain of fire go up and down the creek.

“A policeman on a motorcycle was evacuating everyone telling them to get out. A guy said something about a

gas main under the road and that caused a little panic.

“I locked up everything and high-tailed it out of there. Being on foot was lucky because the cars weren’t moving at all. The explosion was massively frightening.”

Don Buys: Vacation Land RV Sales

“I was checking on an RV in front of our shop and I heard an explosion. I ran out towards the road to see if it was right in front of the shop. I saw a lot of the black smoke coming and I thought ‘What in the world is this?’

“I didn’t know if a building had blown up or if an airplane crashed. It was scary. All of the sudden a ball of smoke and flame was coming right at us. It looked like it was heading straight for us.

“I didn’t know it was in the creek. I thought it was bombs, an airplane crash and all kinds of weird things. I saw it coming and I was afraid of our propane tank, so I immediately hollered into the shop and told everyone ‘Evacuate the building!’

“We all ran to the street. The police cars were very prompt. They said it was some kind of an oil spill, which didn’t tell us much. By the time we got to the road we saw

the flames go right by the back of our shop. It was scary.

"I definitely panicked, especially because I didn't know what it was. I thought, 'If our propane tank goes up in flames, that's it.' I am generally very protective of our inventory, but I let go and decided that we should run for our lives.

"Once the fire went by I immediately went back to the fence. The 25-feet of trees between my fence and the creek absorbed most of the heat, protecting my inventory. I hope



Carey Ross

that they take care of the pipeline because we can't do without it. They have to take every safety precaution they can."

Jeff Cyr: Gold's Gym

"I was working behind the front desk and had only been at the gym about 10 minutes. I heard a humongous explosion and it rattled the whole building. That was the initial explosion.

"A second explosion happened a few seconds after that and everyone started freaking out. People started trailing out of the gym really fast. It was mayhem immediately.

"I was scared. I didn't know what was going on. Some people started screaming about a gas leak and asked if we had gas heating. I said yes. Then somebody said, 'GAS, this place is going to blow' and people started panicking.

"I had to make sure the locker rooms, tanning booths, and day care were all cleared out. The people in the day care did a really good job of clearing that place out.

"A lot of people got in their cars and drove off. The parking lot was pretty full so there were a few accidents. Most people just left their cars or started running down the road.

"I stepped outside the building to see what was going on. I saw a humongous pile of smoke billowing up. I thought the gym was going to be engulfed in flames. I didn't know if the fire was going to run right behind the gym.

"I went back in with two members and made one more round to make sure everyone was out of the gym. They were

really good about helping clear the building out.

"One of the employees who was just getting off and worked the shift before me had a kid in the daycare and couldn't find her. She was very afraid. So we made one more round.

"At that point I was really scared because I had been outside and seen the smoke coming. I thought the gym could go up in flames at any moment. Everyone was out of the gym at that point so I locked the doors.

“I sort of had the sudden realization that it could have been a fairly dangerous situation I was entering into. ... It was totally overwhelming.”

- Carey Ross

"I got in my car at the corner of the gym and I could see the smoke piled up all behind the gym and the flames were coming around the sides. They were probably 50 feet away from me at that point. I thought that maybe I should leave my car and go. I was very panicked at that point. Everything was touch and go.

"I picked up Leah, the lady with the missing daughter, and a member who had just left their car in the parking lot. I picked them up out in the middle of the road. Somebody across the street who worked across the street had picked up her daughter and she was waiting in the truck.

"The traffic was just crazy. The roads were filled up with cars and most people had just abandoned their cars at that point. All of Iowa Street was mostly cars that had nobody in them. So we went up through some parking lots and ended up finding a way out. Traffic was horrible. It took about 35 minutes to get across town to Builder Alliance where Leah's husband worked. I dropped the people off there.

"I called my mom because she had been watching the news and she was worried. So I let her know I was all right.

"It was total mayhem. I drove away and remember looking back at the gym thinking 'Wow, that place isn't going to be there tomorrow when I have to go to work.'"

Mike Dougan: Diehl Ford

"Prior to the explosion I was sitting in my office. It was a nice summer day. The showroom, being glass, just started to

shake. It shook two or three times. We ran out to see what it was. We could see a lot of smoke and debris in the air. A couple minutes after that you could see it coming this way.

"A couple guys said that whatever it is it is coming down the creek. We know a lot of guys that work on Iowa Street so we figured someone probably got hurt. Shortly after that you could see the flames reaching as high as the trees. At first I thought it was one of the other car dealerships.

"It was just huge. It was something you could never really imagine. The smoke was really high and fast. We didn't really worry about the inventory so much as hoping that nobody got hurt.

"Shortly after that the Bellingham police told us to evacuate the building because there was fire coming down the creek. We didn't know it was a fuel line.

"We have almost 100 people working here so everyone took off running or left in their cars. Things were pretty organized.

"The next day black ash and dead fish filled the creek."

Carey Ross: Der Hamster

"I was listening to KUGS and I heard there was some kind of explosion. So I went outside and saw the big smoke plume. So we decided to go check it out.

"We initially thought a gas station had blown up. I knew they were pulling tanks at the BP on the corner. There wasn't a huge emergency response yet because we got down there before they could get there. It was something of such magnitude that there was sort of a little bit of scrambling before everyone really knew what was going on.

"The street was closed off right after we had gotten there. I was on a cell phone trying to get some news but I couldn't get through. I'm guessing the lines were jammed with emergency calls.

"The thing that struck me was that it was very quiet – no traffic. Once I got down closer to the creek it got especially quiet, no birds, no nothing. It was just quiet-quiet-quiet. The only thing I could hear was the water and the crackling of the fire. I could certainly smell it.

"There was just wild stuff happening. I got down there and wandered around for a little bit and everything was still pretty much on fire. I sort of had the sudden realization that it could have been a fairly dangerous situation I was entering into ... It was totally overwhelming."



Mark Allaway (above), Mike Dougan (below)

photo by Andrew Linth

Todd Smith: Wallen Insurance, Inc.

"I was sitting at my computer and the lights flickered a couple times. A few minutes later there was a crowd of people out in the parking lot and they were looking up at the sky.

"It was like it was right out of the movie Superman. I went outside looked up and could see the smoke billowing. I thought it was Wholesale Auto Parts burning. All I could see was flames and smoke. I didn't know it was all the way up the creek at the time.

"Things started to get a little bit hectic around here. A person on a bicycle was going around telling everyone to get out of here, meanwhile my wife called. We live on Alabama Hill. She was standing in our back-

yard and thought it was the neighbors' house burning below ours.

"She grabbed our scanner and heard that they were evacuating the creek all the way to the bay. She told me to get out of my office, and get out of there now. I ran around and told everyone to get out.

"At this point I was totally panicked. We couldn't get out. Everyone was going towards the explosion.

"It was unbelievable. The fire was a curious attraction. It caused stress and panic. Once I was out, I just wanted to get home." ☉





A National Problem

by Sabrina Johnson

On March 30, 1998, at 3:48 p.m. a recycling company employee smelled gas at Morgan Falls landfill in Sandy Springs, Ga. He went to investigate and found gasoline flowing up from the ground near a Colonial Pipeline Company 40-inch steel pipeline running from the landfill. Thirty thousand gallons of gasoline escaped. Cleanup efforts only recovered 17,000 gallons. By September 1998 costs of cleanup efforts and repair exceeded \$3.2 million.

On July 21, 1997, at 2:33 p.m., a 20-inch steel natural gas transmission line ruptured and released gas near an intersection adjoining a subdivision in Indianapolis, Ind. The gas ignited and burned, killing one person and injuring another. It destroyed six homes. The National Transportation Safety Board determined the probable cause to be the pipeline's failure to have adequate controls in place to ensure that drilling operations would not cause damage to the pipeline.

On June 10, 1994, a 2-inch steel gas service line, exposed during excavation, separated from the wall of a retirement home in Allentown, Pa. The gas flowed underground, passed through openings in the building foundation, migrated to other floors and exploded. The accident left one person dead, 66 injured and resulted in \$5 million in property damages.

At 4 a.m. on July 8, 1986, a gas pipeline owned by Williams Pipeline Company, ruptured, sending vaporized and liquid gas into the streets of Mounds View, Minn. Twenty minutes later a car passed and ignited the gas. Two people burned to death. The city attempted to prevent the pipeline from resuming operation until safety concerns were dealt with. Pipeline company officials then went to federal court and secured a permanent injunction blocking the city from taking actions restricting their operations.

It's a story Bellingham residents know too well, but it is not a story exclusive to Bellingham. Hundreds of communities around the country have their own stories, sharing eerie similarities. When Olympic's pipeline exploded on June 10, 1999, how many people in this community knew it was not an isolated accident?

According to the Office of Pipeline Safety, 6,107 accidents, 408 deaths and 4,061 injuries occurred due to pipeline accidents from 1984 to 1999. Texas was hit hardest with 1,654 accidents, 46 deaths and 2,190 injuries. Each state has its own statistics, and not one state has escaped accident-free. Washington's damage totaled 47 accidents and five deaths, resulting in more than \$10 million in property damage.

Most of these incidents get little or no publicity. Large-scale accidents, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill, receive attention because of their huge environmental destruction. According to a report put out by The Wilderness Society, during the 12 months following the Exxon Valdez spill, pipeline accidents occurred every day of the year and in every state.

These are accidents, but they happen everywhere. They are unavoidable. Unfortunately, they happen everyday in the United States.

Few people hear about accidents outside their community. Pipeline accidents usually don't generate extensive media attention or government reaction because they don't create sensational television footage. It's not as exciting as a tanker accident leaving blackened beaches and oil-soaked birds. Pipeline accidents injure a few people or damage the environment and are then swept under the rug as if they will be forgotten.

It is becoming clear, however, that people are not forgetting. James Pates, a city attorney in Fredricksburg, Va., has been working on pipeline regulation and safety for the past 10 years.

"Fredricksburg has the unfortunate distinction of having twice lost its water supply to oil spills," Pates recalled. "Once in 1980 and again in 1989.

"The first time they spilled 94,000 gallons of heating oil into the Rappahannock River, which is our sole water source. We lost our water supply for about a week. In December 1989 virtually the same thing happened again. Two hundred and twelve thousand gallons of kerosene leaked into the river and shut down the water supply."

Pates said a phenomena called "railroad fatigue" caused both accidents. This is a problem that occurred before the pipeline was put into the ground. When the 30-inch pipeline came to Fredricksburg it was improperly loaded onto the train car. Jostling led to tiny hairline fractures that went undetected until 1980. Over time, high pressure led to the pipeline's failure.

"The first (accident) may have been compounded by error," Pates said. "After the second accident we tried to really investigate and educate ourselves."

Pates and other concerned citizens went to the Office of Pipeline Safety with their concerns and said they were met with casual disregard.

"Frankly, we were certainly not comforted by what we learned from OPS. They did not have any interest in helping us," Pates said with a hint of irritation in his voice. "They were more interested in helping the pipeline operators than helping us."

Colonial Pipeline Company, which operates the pipeline, was fined \$50,000 by the state of Virginia for violating the Clean Water Act. The company also paid Fredricksburg \$400,000 in damages. Four hundred fifty thousand dollars, however, will not cover the damage these accidents caused.

OPS did not require Colonial to test the remaining pipeline after the

first accident. OPS did require testing, however, after the second.

Following the accident, OPS required hydrostatic testing of the pipeline. In hydrostatic testing the empty pipeline is filled with water. The pressure is increased so cracks and weak spots will explode. The good news was the pipeline only exploded in one place. The bad news was it was the same spot that malfunctioned in the first accident. Pates said he blames Colonial Pipeline Company for not fixing the pipeline properly following the first accident.

"One thing I've observed is that generally the clean up and response time of pipeline companies is generally pretty good," Pates said. "On the prevention side we are 30 years behind where we are with clean up. It's far more important to prevent accidents than to clean up after they happen."

The city of Blenheim, N.Y., learned this the hard way.

Blenheim city supervisor Bob Mann became involved with pipeline issues after a propane pipeline traveling through the town ruptured and exploded.

Early on March 13, 1990, someone noticed a leak and called assistant fire chief Robert Hitchcock. He went to the nearest intersection, about a half-mile from the leak, to direct traffic away from the road. The leak, however, occurred at the top of a narrow valley above the intersection. The propane became a thick fog, filling the intersection and surrounding area with propane.

Hitchcock's daughter was leaving for school that morning. As she approached the intersection the fog was so thick she could not see. She tried to stop. She struck Richard Smith's car in front of her. Soon after the collision the gas ignited. Hitchcock received third degree burns all over his body. His daughter had severe burns on her face and hands. All of the cars stopped in traffic were on fire. Nine houses and several buildings also caught on fire. Hitchcock and Smith died as a result of their burns. All nine houses were destroyed. The fire burning at the leak burned all through the night, nearly 24 hours, before it finally died out.

Mann said the pipeline ruptured because repairs during this time were done improperly, causing uneven pressure.

The town of 334 was unprepared to deal with the situation.

"I didn't know what was in the pipeline," Mann said. "If we hadn't had the accident, I still wouldn't know."

Mann said the response from the pipeline company was swift and provided \$250,000 above its settlements with people who lost their homes.

"It's easy to look back and see many of the mistakes that were made by both the town and pipeline company," Mann said. "If such an incident were to occur again, I know that we are better prepared than we were then. However, I also know that we are nowhere near as prepared as we should be."

Mann hopes to see many things changed in the near future. He said pipeline testing should be required and frequent, and pipelines should be equipped with an automatic shutoff valve that activates on pressure loss. He said he also feels pipeline companies should inform the community when they work on a pipeline.

Informing a community about pipeline repairs doesn't mean the community will be prepared for an accident. However, it may grant the opportunity to ask questions and think about possible problems.

According to a report by Pates titled "Out of sight, out of mind: What every local government should know about pipeline safety," roughly 1.8 million miles of gas and liquid pipelines carry hazardous materials to urban areas and through environmentally sensitive regions across the country. The nation's natural gas pipeline is about eight times longer than its liquid one, extending to almost every street in most cities.

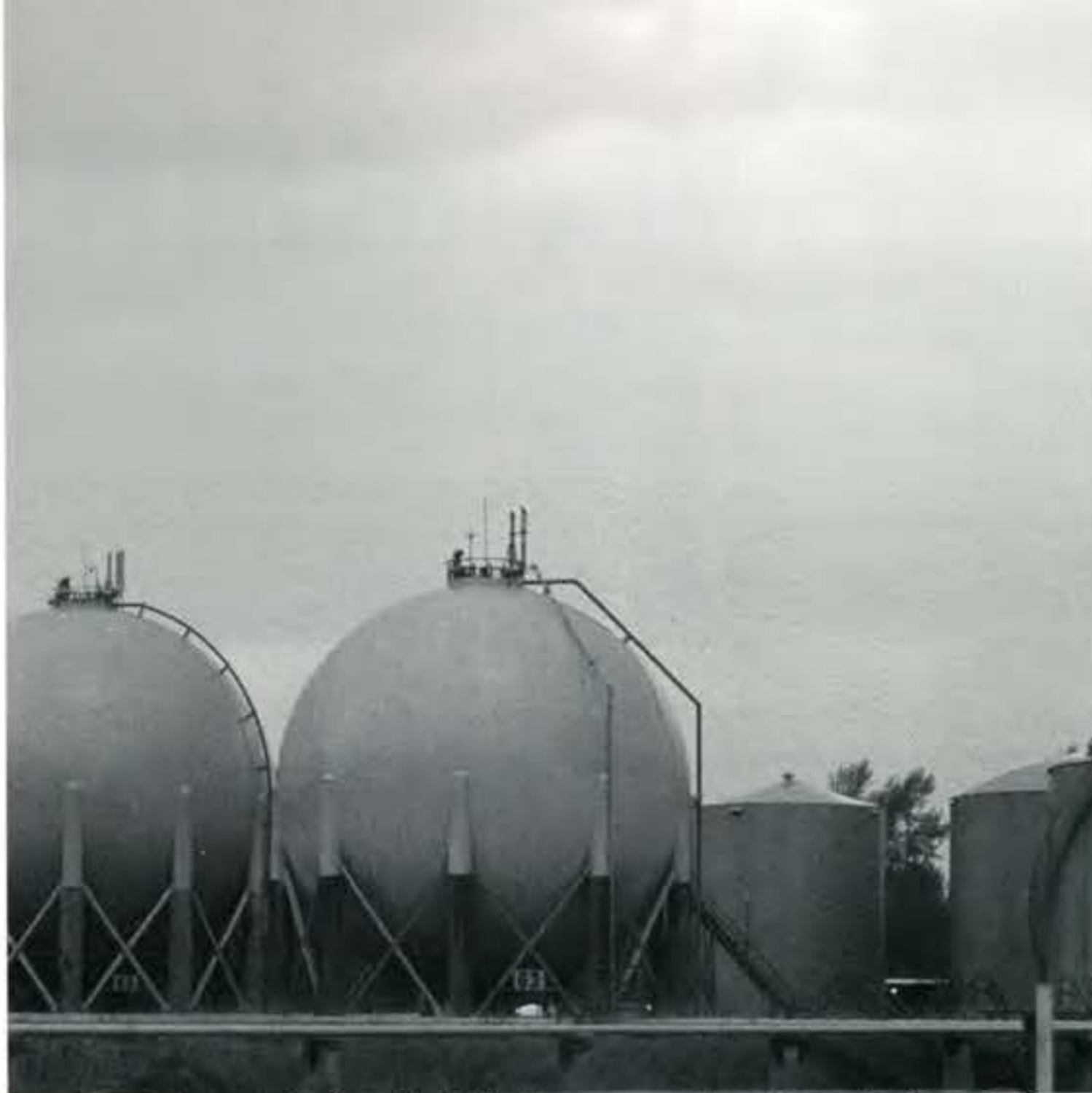
"Every street in most cities" makes this a national problem. Thousands of accidents and hundreds of deaths create a strong argument for change. More training, more testing and more disclosure need to come forth from this industry, as ignorance and accidents apparently go hand in hand. It is only with education that eradication becomes a possibility.



Pipeline Fatalities by State (1984-1999)

Source: Office of Pipeline Safety





photos by Angela Smith

Acting Out

by Katrina M. Tyrrell

Student protesters, wearing bandanas over rain-soaked faces, stand united in pouring East Coast rain. Yellow and blue signs boldly read “Mobilization for Global Justice,” as more than 20,000 protesters form a blockade surrounding the International Monetary Fund and World Bank buildings in Washington D.C., in April.

In Neah Bay, Wash., animal rights activist Erin Abbott is run over on her jet ski by the United States Coast Guard while protesting a Makah tribe whale hunt.

Julia “Butterfly” Hill protests the harvest of old-growth redwoods by living for more than two years in 180-ft “Luna,” an ancient Redwood in Stafford, Calif.

In 1998 the cargo ship Thorseggen, carrying 8,000 tons of newsprint made from British Columbia’s ancient coastal rainforest, dodges four Greenpeace swimmers determined to block the ship from docking in the harbor. For 56 hours, others chain themselves to the ship’s unloading cranes, their signs proclaiming boldly, “Stop Destroying Ancient Forests!”

And in Bellingham, pipeline activist Carl Weimer meets with a small group at the Old Town Café to plan the next course of action.

Activists across the globe fight for reform, equality and basic human rights. Educating, uniting and striving for change are their goals, and recently, the issue of oil pipeline safety has stirred their anger. A new fight begins.

The devastating nature of Bellingham’s pipeline explosion, coupled with the outrageous behavior of regulators who are supposed to oversee pipelines, handed this community an opportunity to send a strong message.

“It would have been a very sad waste of three lives not to take this opportunity to try and change things for the better,” Weimer said.



“It would have been a very sad waste of three lives not to take this opportunity to try and change things for the better.” -Carl Weimer

"This community was handed this terrible opportunity, and has done a wonderful job of trying to turn it into a positive lesson for the entire nation."

On April 15, a sunny, Saturday afternoon outside of the Environmental Studies Center at Western, Weimer gathered with a handful of students to talk about pipeline safety.

"(OPS) is still trying to categorize this as a Washington state and Bellingham problem," he said as he squinted into the mid-day sun. "This is a national problem. In 10 months it went from a Bellingham incident to a national one."

Weimer and others involved in this fight stress this kind of event is not unique to Bellingham. According to Office of Pipeline Safety data, 313 million gallons of crude oil and petroleum products spilled in the United States in the last 30 years. **In the past 15 years, pipeline accidents killed 342 people in 41 states.**

Shortly after the pipeline explosion last June, Weimer and other local citizens formed SAFE Bellingham, a coalition of civic, business, neighborhood and environmental organizations. It is one of many activist groups in the nation pushing for increased pipeline safety. Their mission is simply to ensure that the pipeline disaster that occurred in Bellingham will not repeat itself here or elsewhere.

Weimer, executive director of RE Sources, a local environmental business, and SAFE Bellingham, is a leader in this fight.

At a hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation in March, Weimer emphasized that pipeline companies around the nation have not put safety first.

"If safety had been the highest concern, then employees of Olympic Pipe Line Co. would not have to be taking the Fifth Amendment," Weimer said. "If safety had been the highest concern, then three families would not have to grieve the loss of their children. And if safety had been the highest concern, then members of our community, along with employees of Olympic Pipe Line Co., could sleep through the night without recurring nightmares."

Safety. That should be the bottom line.

Activist groups have been successful, but the task is not without challenges and problems. Weimer, like most activists, volunteers his time, has a family, and works a full-time job that alone drains him of energy.

"We have been far more effective than any of us ever dreamed," Weimer said. "There have certainly been problems. How does a small group with little or no money take on the multi-billion dollar oil industry? How do we get elected officials from around the country to take notice of a problem that has been pretty much out of sight, out of mind?"

The focus has to be taken off of Bellingham and be turned into a national issue, and that is the real challenge, said Greg Winter, member of SAFE Bellingham's steering committee.

"For the last six months or so that's what we've been trying to figure out how to do," Winter said. "I think it has been really successful."

In his office above Tony's Coffee House in Old Fairhaven, Winter, a community development planner, speaks of his dedication to SAFE Bellingham and his choice to become active in



(below) Mayor Mark Asmundson, Marlene Robinson and Frank James. (right) Carl Weimer



the issue.

"On June 10, when this happened, and when I learned that this was an oil pipeline and then I heard that one of my friend's children was killed, somebody that lives in my neighborhood, there wasn't even a question that I would get involved," he said. "It was just how I would get involved and how I could be helpful."

Winter was part of a citizens group in Alaska as a researcher on Exxon oil spills until 1994. After hearing that ARCO, which was involved in the Alaska spill, was involved again in the Bellingham explosion, he became more intrigued. He decided to do background research about pipelines and pipeline safety, and wrote a report for SAFE Bellingham as part of his role on the steering committee.

SAFE Bellingham's steering committee is a diverse group, each person bringing different strengths, weaknesses and availability of time, he said.

"Everybody has a role to play," he added. "We continue to sort out those roles over time. It's a very organic organization."

SAFE Bellingham spreads its message by speaking to elected officials and other activists. Its efforts have resulted in the formation of a network of people to compare notes, share stories and strengthen the coalition of activists, Winter said.

Activists from around the nation gathered last April in Washington, D.C., to share their experiences.

"Hopefully that created a spark that will be self-sustaining," Winter said with a smile. "I think it will be. There's never been an event like this that has pulled everyone together."

Activists met with Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) in D.C. to enlist his support in changing pipeline regulations, Winter added.

"Strategically that's probably the most important thing that has happened in the last couple of months," Winter said. "McCain has jumped on board."

"We're guardedly optimistic that we'll be able to get some good laws and good regulations passed," he said. "We may even be able to do it this year. But if not, we'll just dig our heels in and keep fighting until we get something that we're happy with."

SAFE Bellingham is definitely not alone in its battle to urge local, state and federal government leaders calling for stricter pipeline safety rules. Another activist group in Seattle, Cascade Columbia Alliance, is right by its side.

CCA formed in 1996 in response to a proposal to build a 230-mile pipeline just north of Seattle, through the Cascade Mountain Range, across the Columbia River to Pasco, Wash. CCA includes environmental groups, neighborhood associations, businesses and concerned individuals.

At the D.C. conference in April, executive director for CCA, Susan Harper, spoke about CCA's main goal.

"Our organization's primary goal is to promote a regional fuels policy that protects our environment, safety and quality of life by improving the safety of pipeline, tanker, barge, truck and rail fuel delivery systems, encouraging fuel conservation, and promoting alternatives to hazardous, non-renewable, fossil fuels," Harper said.

Pipeline safety is its focus, she added. Both CCA and SAFE Bellingham hope to educate the public about the need for a federal fuel policy.

"We decided as a group, as SAFE Bellingham along with the Cascade Columbia Alliance, that what we really need is a regional fuels policy that looks comprehensively, not only at how we transport fuel and how to do it safely, but how we use fuel," Winter said. "With all the problems associated with using fossil fuels ... we should be working towards reducing our consumption."

And communities in other states are making the effort. In May 1999, Annette Smith, who practices sustainable living on her small farm in Danby, VT, established Vermonters for a Clean Environment. This nonprofit coalition of citizens in Bennington and Rutland counties in Southwestern Vermont acknowledges that Vermont's future lies in conserving its clean, rural, small-town environment. The coalition is working to halt a billion-dollar natural gas power plant and pipeline proposal.

"We have been educating the public about this massive problem," executive director Smith said. "(Our) first job was to raise awareness. Most people didn't have a clue it was going on."

The organization has held public forums and sent out mailings, resulting in successful opposition to the proposal by the town government and the community.

"I have personal feelings about pipelines in Vermont," she added. "The pipeline industry is proposing expanding ... into and through Vermont. **My feeling is they should not be allowed to build one inch of new pipeline until the existing pipelines are made safe.**"

Harper, in her speech at the pipeline conference, announced her response to a proposed pipeline north of Seattle.

"No new pipeline!" Harper said with enthusiasm.

The more voices, the stronger the message. The conference keynote speaker Bob Rackleff, president of the National Pipeline Reform Coalition, stressed the importance of national coalitions.

"We will raise public awareness and build support for meaningful pipeline safety reforms; for an end to shameful, needless tragedies; for an end to the equally shameful neglect of safety by both industry and regulators," he said.

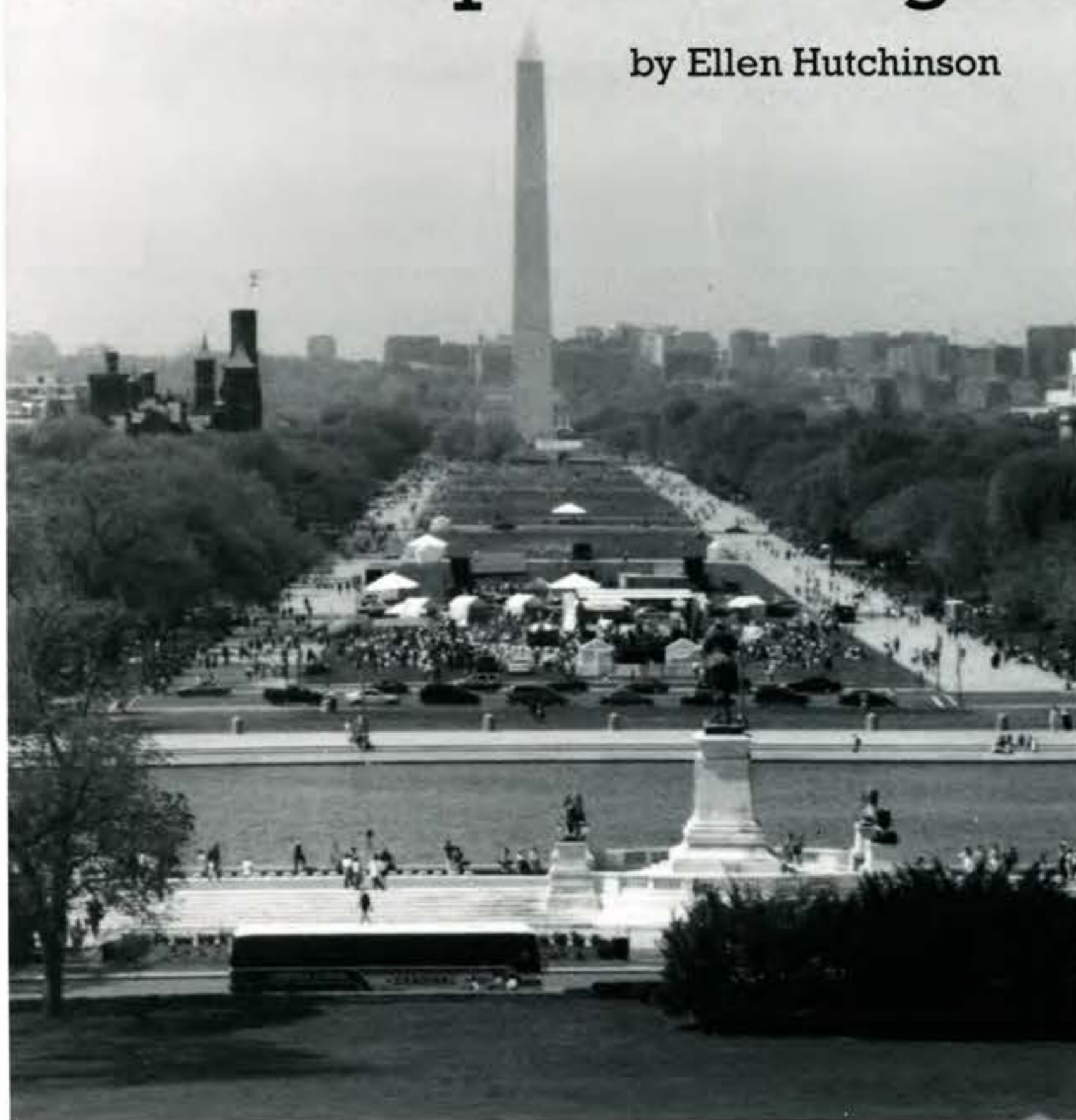
Rackleff emphasizes that the coalition should get together and stay together.

And, of course, he is right. It would be a sad waste of three lives not to take the opportunity to create change. Activists clearly prove they are striving for that change and the nation's eyes are open to their lessons. From angry students in Washington, D.C., to determined citizens in Washington state, activists across the country refuse to let their messages go unheard. ☺



The End of the Line: Politics and Pipeline Regulation

by Ellen Hutchinson



photos courtesy of Carl Weimer

A pipeline bursts and the focus is on the point of rupture. Questions hover like the looming plume created by the explosion, but answers are not found only at the site. Although pipeline accidents occur in local communities, they are not isolated. It is not the pipe that fails; it is the system that operates the pipe. National pipeline regulations are inadequate. To find the answers, one must follow the pipe to the source of national regulations — the end of the line: Washington, D.C.

Shortly after the Bellingham explosion, a group of concerned citizens formed SAFE Bellingham to prevent Olympic Pipe Line Co. from replacing its pipe before anyone knew what had caused the explosion at Whatcom Creek.

“We found that it really wasn’t a Bellingham incident,” Carl Weimer, executive director of SAFE Bellingham explained. “When you looked around, these things were going on on a regular basis all over the country.”

David Bricklin, an attorney hired by the City of Bellingham, discovered that a franchise agreement between the City of Bellingham and Olympic Pipe Line had lapsed a few years before. This franchise agreement would have enabled Olympic to

replace the pipeline within a matter of days. Without this agreement, Weimer said, “the city had some leverage to say to Olympic, ‘You have to do all of these safety things before you fire up this pipeline again.’”

Through the realization that pipeline accidents occur not only in Bellingham, SAFE Bellingham joined together with two other groups, Cascade Columbia Alliance and The National Pipeline Reform Coalition, to put together The National Pipeline Safety Reform Conference in Washington, D.C.

The April 2000 conference brought together citizen groups and government officials from 15 states to discuss pipeline issues and reform. The purpose of the conference was to draw congressional attention to pipelines and build a national network of reform activists.

Washington, D.C., can seem removed from the nation it represents, with administrative buildings crowding the boulevards suggesting an impenetrable bureaucracy. The formidable structure, however, did little to intimidate activists.

Lois Epstein, a senior engineer at Environmental Defense, formerly Environmental Defense Fund, who has been involved

**“Pipelines are a
phenomenally
profitable business,”
- Bob Ruckleff, National
Pipeline Reform Coalition**



in pipeline reform for a number of years described the conference as a “promised land” for pipeline reformers.

At the conference, pipeline reform activists and elected officials filled the round tables.

The three pipeline officials present remained as inconspicuous as possible.

On a yellow, oversized conference handout, beneath the Bellingham plume read in block letters “DON’T FORGET!” Terry Boss, a representative from the National Gas Association, shuffled those words “DON’T FORGET!” underneath a pile of papers.

The ice water and linen tablecloths made some people forget, as Epstein pointed out, that this conference was to put “industry on notice that business-as-usual is not acceptable.”

As a division of the Department of Transportation, the Office of Pipeline Safety (OPS) sets the standards for petroleum and natural gas pipelines. OPS is responsible for 160,000 miles of hazardous materials pipelines (petroleum and oil) and 1 million miles of natural gas pipelines, Epstein explained.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent agency that investigates incidents such as plane crashes and pipeline explosions to find causes and make recommendations for action. NTSB makes recommendations to OPS, industry, trade associations, and standard-setting bodies.

Pipeline regulations are extremely vague according to Don Deaver, a former Exxon employee of 33 years. He describes how the pipeline industry convinced the federal government in the ‘70s that the best way to regulate would be to allow them “room to be innovative.” The industry said, Deaver continued, that all it needed was “general performance criteria” and it would “take care of the details.” In effect, the pipeline industry is allowed to regulate itself.

Epstein said these nebulous regulations have enabled the pipeline industry to revel in obscurity while raking in the profits.

President of the National Pipeline Reform Coalition Bob Rackleff said that in the last two decades, all interstate oil pipeline companies enjoyed an average annual rate of net earnings, after taxes, of 31 percent.

“Pipelines are a phenomenally profitable business,” Rackleff said.

“The sole regulator of the nation’s pipeline system, OPS has a maximum staffing level of 105 people. It only has 45 field inspectors to police some 1.7 million miles of oil and natural gas pipelines nationwide, or about one field inspector for every 35,000

miles of pipeline,” Rackleff explained. This can be compared to the Coast Guard, which has over 42,000 uniformed and civilian personnel to help enforce regulations on the oil tanker ship and barge industry, he said.

According to Rackleff, oil pipeline regulations fail to specify any periodic inspections except for the “visual surveillance of the right-of-way.”

Harold Underwood, Jr., manager of external affairs at ARCO, said that history tends to guide forward movement.

“Look at the cause of the incidents in the past,” he said, “and determine what you might do to cause those things not to happen anymore.”

This mentality, however, has not been demonstrated by the OPS.

“OPS has no map of the pipeline system it’s supposed to regulate,” Rackleff said. “It has no comprehensive data on the age and condition of these pipelines, types of pipe used, the use of protective measures like coatings, or what pipeline companies have better or worse safety records. In short, OPS doesn’t have a clue of what the safety problems are, where they are, who’s responsible, or what to do about them.”

Rich Felder, who heads the Office of Pipeline Safety, illustrated Rackleff’s point by responding that he was “no expert” when questioned about the Bellingham situation.

In response to the inability of OPS to create and enforce adequate pipeline safety regulations, three bills are proposed. Both Sen. Murray and Congressman Metcalf’s bills propose an increase in state authority to regulate pipelines. The administration’s bill focuses on improving safety measures and enforcement at a federal level.

“The era of unchallenged power of the pipeline industry can be over soon – if we decide to

make that happen. We have the facts on our side. We have the spirit and determination. All we need is the strength in numbers it will take to change decades of official neglect and industry carelessness,” Rackleff said.

The conference tables abandoned and the media cameras packed away, it was apparent that what is obvious is not easily implemented. Pipeline regulation has been underground for many years and the negligence of OPS has corroded its legitimacy. As pipeline issues bubble to the surface they must be dug up and examined thoroughly. Politics and oil are slippery, but adequate and enforced regulation can contain both. ©

“The era of unchallenged power of the pipeline industry can be over soon—if we decide to make that happen. We have the facts on our side.”

- Bob Rackleff



Carl Weimer

“Rocky Ford”

A story by Liam Wood, 1980-1999

It was a cool and damp morning, typical of western Washington in the spring. The rain slogged off the windshield of Matt’s pickup as he flew down Interstate 5 in the early, pre-dawn light. His window was cracked slightly, letting in a cold draft to wash out the smoke of his lit cigarette. The sun was beginning to illuminate the eastern sky, defining the crags of the Cascades against its bluish hue. Lightning flashed intermittently over the mountains. Matt glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the reflection of a trailing car’s headlights in his eyes. The same eyes that were alive with excitement and expectations of wonderful things. He concentrated on the road, watching the white lines flash by, watching his steady procession. Matt’s truck was handling beautifully, its bed weighted down with gear and a canopy.

With a flick of his hand, Matt flipped on his right hand signal and threw his dying cigarette out the window, and then swerved and sped off down the off-ramp. At the intersection under the freeway, he turned left and sped east, towards Steven’s Pass, towards the light. Matt drove through the early morning as the sky lightened. He passed the towns of Monroe and Sultan as the road kissed the Skykomish River and then started climbing in elevation towards the peaks that loomed above, lost in the gray, boiling clouds. The engine of the pickup worked against the steep climb, making steady progress. Tall, thick Douglas Firs gave way to spindly high-elevation spruce and huge flakes of driving snow. Road condi-

tions deteriorated rapidly giving way to a four-lane ice rink.

At the Steven’s Pass ski area, Matt pulled off the road and parked on a large shoulder, in the summer, the parking lot to a trailhead, but now bordered by a fifteen-foot high snow bank. Before getting out of his truck, Matt donned his parka, boots and a wool hat. After stepping out into the weather, he grimaced in the face of that wicked snow. It stung



his face and slapped against the back of his head. Trying to light a smoke out in the open was out of the question, so he ducked back inside his truck to light up. After Matt had taken a couple of deep, cancerous lungfulls, he walked quickly over to a snow bank that was out of view of the road and made yellow snow. His stomach growled fiercely. Jogging, he made it to the ski lodge before the snow really showed its teeth. Inside, it was warm and light; smells of burgers and sweaty ski clothing abounded. Matt was stoked for some grub so he sat at a table and flagged down a waitress. Within seconds, a pretty blonde came to take his order.

“What can I getcha?” she asked

while chewing a stick of gum.

“I’ll take a cheeseburger, no mayo, fries, and a banana milkshake please,” Matt replied. “And could I get a bowl of clam chowder to start?”

“Sure, I’ll have that right up for you. Are you gonna ski today?”

Matt smiled and said, “No, I’m a flyfisherman. I’m heading to Rocky Ford.”

Speeding east, Matt smoothly crossed the pass and headed downward. Soon, the beautiful Wenatchee River paralleled the road. As the steep mountains gave way to rolling hills sparsely covered in Ponderosa Pine, the ominous gray clouds that had cloaked the western part of the state in a suffocating, wet blanket began to part. Brilliant sunshine peaked through, and the azure sky beckoned Matt. What a release! Matt rolled down his window and let out a joyous whoop. He opened the glove compartment and donned his shades.

Wenatchee, Quincy, Ephrata, and other, smaller desert towns with obscure names were left behind. Matt was cruising down a flat two-lane highway that cut a straight line through the desolate, but magnificent plains. The plains that were brown and covered in small bunches of sage and dotted with large boulders that seemed way out of place in that almost mythical environment. Matt had not seen another car or sign of people in over an hour of constant driving. His legs and butt were beginning to ache with the strain of sitting in the truck and working the pedals without a break. His turn was somewhere

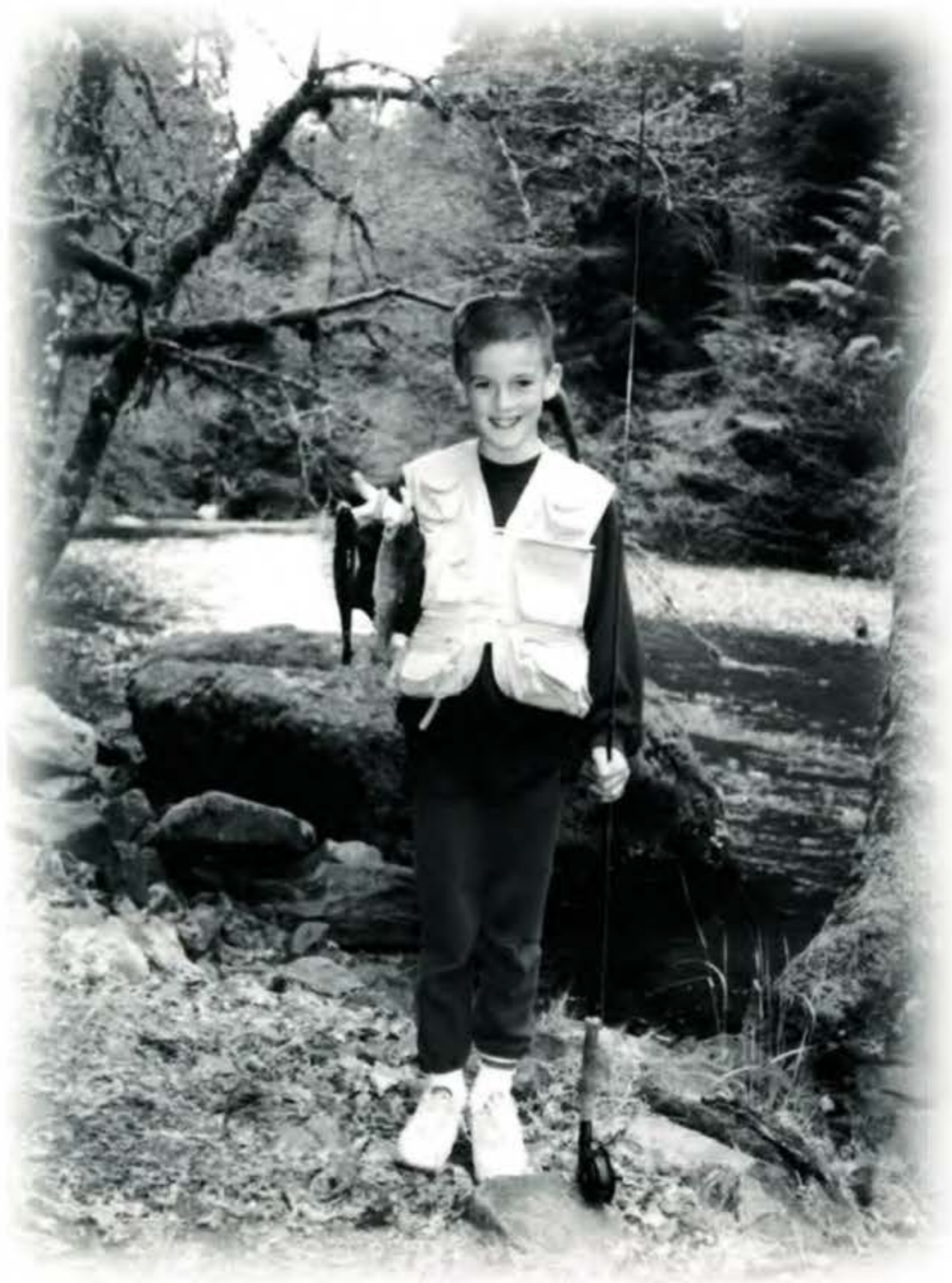
close so he began to slow, but ended up passing it anyway. In all the trips he had made to this unbelievable creek, he had never been able to make the turn without passing it first.

His truck made that weird reversing sound after he stopped and began to back up. He got to the turn-off and peeled out down the narrow, rust colored dirt and gravel road. Matt loved to drive fast down rough roads, but he slowed as he neared the creek. It was a peaceful place, and quite sacred, at least for Matt. As he rounded a bend, a small oasis was revealed before him. Cut-

ting through the desert wasteland was a narrow green swath in the middle of which, was Rocky Ford Creek. The creek flowed clear and slow, with a clean oily sort of current common to spring creeks. Bordered by green grass and tall reeds, red-winged black birds flew quickly around the reeds and a blue heron lifted off from the top of a boulder next to the creek. The creek itself was no more than twenty to twenty-five feet wide and not any deeper than four or five feet. There were a couple of sections where the current quickened through boulders, but for the most part the surface of the

creek was like glass, green weeds waving like untiring exotic dancers in its slow, hypnotizing currents. Moreover, in those rich currents were trout, and lots of them.

Matt parked his pickup off the road on the rim above the creek. He got out and stretched mightily, his bones and muscles screaming in uninhibited joy after being cramped up from the long ride. It was quite warm in the brilliant sunshine, at least for April. Making his way to the back of the truck, Matt opened the canopy and then the tailgate. He pulled out a short aluminum case containing a delicate three-weight





fly that measured seven and a half feet long. He took the rod from the case and screwed on the little black reel. After stringing the line through the rod guides, Matt put on his fishing vest over a short sleeved cotton shirt and tied on a tiny size-eighteen Humpy dry fly to a fourteen foot leader tapered to 6X. He greased his leader with floatant and then began the short walk down to the creek.

Before arriving at the creek he could see the rise forms of dozens of large trout. He put on his polarized glasses and stared into the clear waters. Big rainbows were lined up all over the place, gently sipping tiny flies from the surface film.

While making his way through the tall grass that bordered the creek, Matt scared up a large doe mule deer. She scampered off up the hill, throwing clods of grass and dust behind her hooves. Matt waded through clumps of sage and stopped about fifteen feet short of the bank of the creek. In front of him, numerous snouts poked above the surface, followed by large tails. These kind

of "head-to-tail" rises signaled that the trout were feeding on emerging nymphs just under the surface. Matt quickly clipped off the humpy that he'd planned on using and switched to a size 20 olive midge pupae. He released his leader again within an inch of the fly. This would allow the fly to sink just an inch below the surface and the floating portion of the larder would signal a strike.

This was it, the first cast. The cast that is always the most awkward, the most pleasing and the quickest one to forget. Matt stripped out a bunch of line and then kneeled down on the bank. He gently began casting his light rod, making beautiful loops that sailed out over the glassy water. He quickly pinpointed a large rising fish and shot out his line slightly up stream. The fly landed harshly sending ripples out over the quiet water. Large wakes crisscrossed the creek as large trout made a mad dash to get the hell away from Matt. He cursed softly and then got up and walked down the creek, searching for another pod of hungry rainbows. Matt didn't

have to go far. He spotted a huge fish sipping tiny midges off the surface right next to the near bank. Positioning himself well upstream of the fish, Matt let loose one perfect cast. The fly hit the water about six feet above the fish without so much as a ripple. Feeding line to the drifting fly, Matt watched as the gargantuan rainbow rose up and sucked down his fly. He wrist-snapped the hook home and held on for dear life as the trout put on its burners and headed upstream. The fish would not stop running. Finally, just before Matt's backing ran out the fish jumped and then sat on the bottom burrowing its head into the weeds. Matt quickly reeled up the fish and walked across the surface, throwing spray. The fish finally tired and Matt lifted his crimson-sided trout in his arms. He took a quick photo and then released it back into the river.

Smiling, Matt stretched and wiped the fish slime on his pants. He lit a smoke and walked down the creek to catch another trophy. ☺

Pipelines surge under the skin of our nation's soil in 2 million miles of complex, overlapping grids. They run through neighborhoods, schoolyards and city parks. As these pipes age they become unsafe.

Many believe the deaths of Liam, Stephen and Wade are instances of legislative failure, the failure of federal law to keep our community safe. They blame Olympic Pipe Line and federal legislators alike, saying lax pipeline standards and corporate profit-seeking killed three of Bellingham's sons.

Certainly, pipeline safety should be considerably better than it is, but Olympic Pipe Line is just a cog in the wheel. Blaming them is like blaming the messenger for the message.

Pipelines exist for a single purpose, to cater to consumer's economic demand for oil products. Who sets the level of oil in Olympic's pipeline? Consumers. You. Me. Anyone who drives a car and buys gas. Anyone that buys food or any other good shipped on roads or rails. In fact anyone who flies out of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport consumes what Olympic serves. And so, the Bellingham pipeline explosion is a symptom of a larger societal problem. America's materialistic lifestyle is the turn-crank standing behind the machine.

Olympic's pipeline is actually our pipeline. Wade and Stephen and Liam's deaths are actually ours to bear.

—Skye Thompson

