

September 23, 2004

 MOVING ON
 By JEFF ZASLOW


Using Technology To Mourn the Deceased

When an E-Mail Inbox Outlives Its Owner


September 23, 2004; Page D1

In the weeks after 14-year-old Zachary Edelson died in a drowning accident, e-mails continued to arrive in his in-box. The messages came from classmates, camp friends, basketball teammates -- most written directly to Zach. The kids reminisced about their adventures with him, and promised to always remember him.

"They never would have sent these letters by regular mail," says Zach's father, Alan. "But by e-mail, it felt like they were trying to communicate with him. It was a dilemma for us: How long would we keep his e-mail account open?"

This sort of issue didn't exist a decade ago. But technology is presenting new challenges for grieving families. Zach's parents and two brothers

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are among those still feeling their way, trying to decide which facets of popular devices such as cellphones and e-mail are helpful in the mourning process -- and which ones exacerbate their losses.



Zachary Edelson, far right, with his brothers and father before his 2002 death in a boating accident.

Zach died in 2002, and his parents still can't bring themselves to remove him from their online buddy lists. Whenever they log on, Zach's screen name pops up: "Snoopy1372." Likewise, Zach's phone number remains in Mr. Edelson's cellular phonebook.

"Seeing Zach's name every day is both a comfort and a painful reminder of my loss,"

says Mr. Edelson, who owns a furniture company in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "But if I deleted him, it would be another loss."

Many families today routinely create Web memorials following the death of a loved one. Though some of the 50 Internet firms that market online remembrance sites seem gimmicky -- Lastwishes.com sends your final e-mails to relatives after you die -- others are starting to change the way people mourn and recover.

Some older widows and widowers who at first were intimidated by today's technology now embrace it. In St. Joseph, Mich., Bonnie Neumann often logs on to LifeFiles.com, and visits pages in memory of her husband, John, who died in 2002 at age 69. Perusing Mr. Neumann's online photo gallery and reading comments posted by his friends "brings John back alive for me," Mrs.

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Neumann says. The site costs \$200 for two years.

In Chappaqua, N.Y., Beverly Dubs says her late parents, both immigrants, were never tech-savvy. Ms. Dubs's mother used to ask: "What are those Dutch-coms I always hear about?" And yet, since losing both parents in recent years, Ms. Dubs has found consolation via the Internet. Visiting a Web site about her dad's hometown in Poland, she found a photo of him as a young man, and details about his life that he never shared with loved ones.

America Online customers sometimes ask if they can assume the accounts and screen names of deceased relatives, and the company allows that, says an AOL spokesman.

In the case of Zach Edelson, he was with friends in a motorboat on Michigan's Walnut Lake when a gust of wind lifted a large inner tube out of the boat. The tube's line wrapped around Zach's leg, pulling him into the water and banging his head against the boat. Investigators believe he lost consciousness. Without a life vest, he sank quickly.

For three days, divers couldn't find his body, which wound up 70 feet below the lake's surface. After friends and relatives blitzed the community with e-mails, 400 people gathered on the shore to show their support.

Mr. Edelson stood on the shoreline, too. He used his cellphone to call Zach's grandparents -- "I have the worst news," he told them. It occurred to him, as he spoke, that a cellphone was a valuable but impersonal gadget to have at such a desperate time. He used the phone again to ask a local TV news station to send away the helicopter that was hovering over his head. (The TV station declined to move the chopper.)

Mr. Edelson saw many others on the beach using their cellphones, too. He knew they came because they meant well, but it was surreal watching them conduct their lives while he waited for his son's body to be found.

The night before Zach's funeral, his older brother, Jeff, wrote his eulogy in Zach's room, on Zach's computer. "I wanted to be surrounded by things that were special to him," says Jeff, 21.

For months after that, Jeff's AOL Instant Messenger "away message" to friends, which he continually updated, was often a note about how he missed Zach. It was painful for him to speak out loud about his loss, says his mother, Wendy Talan. "This was his way of talking about it."

The e-mails friends sent to Zach after he died described him as smart, sensitive, creative, funny. One boy revealed that, when they were 13, he and Zach took his parents' car for a secret joy ride. Many called Zach their best friend.

Later, when Mr. Edelson turned to his computer for solace, he was disappointed. He typed "drowning of a child" into Internet search engines, and found many entries. "You think the stories will make you feel better, finding people who suffered like you suffered, but it wasn't helpful," he says. "It was just sad."

Zach's mom now uses his computer, and she struggles with memories of him at the keyboard, happily tapping instant messages to his friends. But she's moving forward "with baby steps," she says, and using Zach's computer is part of that process.

Meanwhile, Mr. Edelson recently switched cellphone plans, and loaded his saved numbers -- including Zach's -- into his new phone. "I can't imagine hitting the delete button to erase his name," he says.

He feels the same way about Zach's screen name on his computer. "My buddy list shows that he's off line," Mr. Edelson says. "But in my heart, he's always on line."

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