



MATT MILLER/THE WORLD-HERALD

*“On my honor I will do my best
To do my duty to God and my country
and to obey the Scout Law; To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.”*

BOY SCOUT OATH



Sam Thomsen was his family's 'miracle' baby

By STEVE JORDON
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

The baby boy began life without many advantages.

Born more than three months prematurely to a mother and father who couldn't raise him, he spent a month in an incubator after his birth 13 years ago.

Nebraska Christian Services, an adoption agency affiliated with Omaha's Southwest Church of Christ, had a difficult time placing a baby who might have problems with vision, hearing or other functions.

Sharon and Larry Thomsen, longtime members of the church, were grieving. She had suffered two miscarriages, and the couple had nearly given up having a third child, after daughters Lindsay and Sara.

Sharon Thomsen believes God brought the baby into their lives. "He was a miracle," she said Thursday. They decided to adopt, and part of the miracle was that his early birth caused no lasting problems.

His mother said she believes Sam had a purpose in life that would continue.

"I'm so proud of him," Sharon Thomsen said. "He really had a heart for God."

Scouting, his mother said, was important to him in part because of several older boys who were role models, "excellent young men" whom he admired. His goal was to be an Eagle Scout, and he loved camping.

"Sam is ready for a week in the great outdoors," he wrote on his page in Facebook, an online networking site, just before leaving for his first time at the Little Sioux camp.

Sam's Facebook page lists his interests as Jesus, football, the Huskers, Xbox video games and the Roadrunners, a basketball team for home-schooled children.

"Sam was probably one of the nicest kids you could ever be around," said Sandy Glenn, his basketball coach. "He was just enthusiastic, eager to learn, real coachable."

Glenn said teammates liked Sam, who tried hard and improved tremendously when he moved up from the Roadrunners' 12-and-under team.

"He's just a great kid," said Dr. Jim White, the family's pastor. "He was a typical teenager, always has a smile on his face."

Larry Thomsen is a longtime Douglas County employee, supervising residential appraisers for the Assessor's Office and formerly with the Register of Deeds Office. Sharon Thomsen, a homemaker, also works for the Hyatt Reservations Center.

"The office is mourning and praying for the family," Assessor Roger Morrissey said.

The Thomsens and Sam's birth mother were not given information about each other, but the Thomsens are willing to talk if the woman wants. If she's still in the area, Sharon Thomsen said, she might figure out the connection.

The family had planned a special occasion for Monday. It's Sam's birthday, the same day as one of his sisters. Sam wanted tickets to the College World Series, Sharon Thomsen said, and that's what he was going to get.

Larry Thomsen said Sam's death leaves "a big hole to fill," and he and his wife are focusing on their daughters.

"Our family is broken, but the whole world is really broken," Sharon Thomsen said, and she believes God is the way for people to make the world whole.



Ben Petrzilka was 'a natural leader'

By VIRGIL LARSON
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Ben Petrzilka, who just finished seventh grade at Mary Our Queen Catholic School, was praised Thursday as kind and caring and a natural leader.

"I can tell you so many wonderful things about this kid," Principal Kayleen Wallace said. "He always gave it his best effort. It is a very devastating loss to the school."

The 14-year-old's parents are Bryan and Arnell Petrzilka. They have another son, Jackson, a preschooler.

The family belongs to Mary Our Queen parish near 120th Street and West Center Road. The men's club at the church sponsors Troop 448. Ben had been a troop member for three years.

Bryan Petrzilka was a Cub Scout leader when Ben was a Cub, said Mike Kirk, a church member and family friend.

Steve Olson, the scoutmaster, had known Ben for years. Olson was a cubmaster when Ben became a Cub Scout in second grade.

"Great kid. . . a joy to have around. . . very well-liked," Olson said of Ben. "He was one of those who stood out. . . as a natural leader."

Olson said Ben loved the outdoors. The teen spent a lot of time hunting and fishing with his father.

Ben had reached Star rank, two steps below Eagle, the top rank, and was assistant leader of the Ninja Patrol of Troop 448.

"He lived the Scout Law," Kirk said, referring to the 12-point list of attributes that begin with "A Scout is. . ."

Olson said two other members of the 42-member troop, Christian Jones, son of Connie Jones, and Zachary Schlegel, son of Gene and Deb Schlegel, were at the Little Sioux, Iowa, camp Wednesday night when a tornado ripped through the area, killing Josh and three other teens.

He said that Christian had some minor injuries and that Zachary was unhurt.

Olson said a Ben Petrzilka Fund has been set up at Omaha State Bank. The family plans to donate the proceeds to build storm shelters at the Little Sioux camp.

Troop 448 boys will be asked to be in uniform when they attend Ben's funeral, Olson said. The funeral will be at Mary Our Queen Church. The day has not been set.



Aaron Eilerts loved to help others

By LEIA BAEZ
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Aaron Eilerts, 14, had endless talents and a good sense of humor, and he would go above and beyond whatever was asked of him.

"He was the kindest kid you could ever meet," said Dawn Sievertsen, principal of Robert Blue Middle School in Eagle Grove, Iowa, where Aaron recently finished eighth grade.

He was a member of Boy Scout Troop 108 in Humboldt, Iowa. Aaron was attending the Little Sioux Scout Ranch to be a youth leader for the Boy Scouts Junior Leaders Training program.

"He was very outgoing and a very friendly kid," said Gerald Davis, scoutmaster of Troop 108. "He would do anything for anybody."

Rob Logsdon, a 15-year-old Boy Scout from Lawton, Iowa, said Aaron was buried beneath a chimney. The two boys had become friends "pretty fast" at the camp, Logsdon said.

"Aaron and I were in charge of a group of seven other Scouts," Logsdon said. "He was a real good guy."

Aaron recently was runner-up for a character award out of about 40 nominees in Iowa.

"He embodied everything Scouting stands for," Sievertsen said. "He would start these projects to earn badges, but took them very seriously and would continue them long after he earned the badge."

Whether it was creating brightly colored pillowcases for patients at local hospitals, making fleece blankets for dogs at the Humane Society or making table centerpieces for the senior citizen dining center in Eagle Grove, Aaron was always doing for others.

"There will be a lot of holes left in the community with his death," Sievertsen said.

Colby Gochanour, 14, will have one of those holes in his heart.

"We were best friends," he said. "He was always there."

The two enjoyed singing show tunes from "Wicked."

"We would be having a serious conversation, but if there was a line from a song, we would break into it," he said. "He was a great singer, and he adored music."

Especially Elvis.

"He was an Elvis fanatic," Gochanour said. "He had tons of Elvis CDs, and I think he had a few Elvis posters in his room."

Aaron even wore a black-and-red Elvis jacket and had visited Graceland a few times.

Aaron, who was an aspiring chef and planned to move to France, performed "The Star-Spangled Banner" at local sporting events when he wasn't on the field. He played football, ran cross-country and was in the school band and choir.

He also was involved in community and school theaters.

Gochanour said, "He was a great friend."

A prayer service was held Wednesday afternoon at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Humboldt.

Funeral services were pending at Stokely Funeral Home in West Point, Neb.



Josh Fennen enjoyed exploring

By DANE STICKNEY
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Josh Fennen was a confident, inquisitive 13-year-old with natural leadership abilities.

"He was a good student, a hard worker, and he was always trying to be creative," said Jeff Alfrey, principal at Andersen Middle School, where Josh recently finished eighth grade.

Alfrey wasn't surprised that Josh was at the Boy Scout camp near Little Sioux, Iowa, when the tornado that killed him and three other boys swept through.

The camp focused on leadership training, and Josh was adventurous and had a knack for exploring.

"I could see him thriving in the wilderness," Alfrey said. "I could see him being a great leader."

Josh didn't stand out physically. The dark-haired, brown-eyed boy was of average height and build for an eighth-grader, Alfrey said. But his inquisitive nature separated him from other students. The principal talked to Josh just before school got out about refining his inventive skills.

"His mind was always working," Alfrey said. "He was always finding something new to do, something to experiment with."

Josh was scheduled to attend Millard South High School this fall. His sister, Erika, attends Millard West High School. His parents are Charles and Dorothy Fennen. The family moved from Denver to Omaha in 1997, when Charles was relocated through his job with Union Pacific Railroad.

The family — which lives in northern Sarpy County near the path of Sunday's destructive tornado — couldn't be reached Thursday. Co-workers of Dorothy, who teaches English as a second language at Bryan Middle School in the Omaha school district, said officials from the Boy Scouts of America picked up family members Thursday morning to take them to the Little Sioux area.

A family member in Texas had no comment. "We're just grieving right now," he said.

Chuck Cormaci's son, Jack, was Josh's best friend. The two boys enjoyed hiking and other outdoor activities together.

"Josh was the smartest kid I ever knew," Chuck Cormaci said. "We're going to miss him. He was a special, special boy."

Millard Public Schools counselors were at Millard South, 14905 Q St., on Thursday to assist staff, students and families in dealing with Josh's death. They will be there again today from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

It's hard to cope with the situation, Alfrey said.

"We have 800 students at the school, but something like this really hits home and shows you that every student is special," Alfrey said. "Our hearts go out to the family."