

Lessons from my niece, Liz

"Dear Sarah and Andrea,
If you want to come over to my house before school you can. We start school Aug. 26. You can come over before school starts. If you want me to come over, that's fine.

Your cousin,
Elizabeth
P.S. I'll have my own room by then."

It was this note, written by my niece, Elizabeth Lias, to my two daughters when she was probably in the second or third grade (she didn't date this piece of correspondence) that helped my family find hope two weeks ago when we were surrounded by despair.

Elizabeth died in a traffic accident just east of Vermillion late Thursday night, Sept. 17, as she began her drive home after a full day of classes and other activities at USD. The news came to us at 2 a.m. Friday, and darkness seemed to fill every corner of our house as my wife and daughters and I struggled to face reality.

It was, Andrea would say later, like walking in a thick fog. Suddenly all of the landmarks we usually relied on were lost; our world had permanently changed and we stumbled about, trying to get our bearings in this new, mysterious landscape.

It was Elizabeth, (Liz for short), who provided the first bit of hope for us. Andrea, struggling to grasp something to gain some sense of closeness to her cousin, found a small stack of childhood letters from her. The physical appearance of her notes represented her life; the earliest correspondence is in an out-of-control scrawl of a young child still mastering the art of printing; they were followed by words put to paper using perfect penmanship. The most recent letters came to Andrea type-written on a computer, printed in wild fonts and colors that fit Liz's personality perfectly.

In November, 1997, with Thanksgiving out of the way and a landmark birthday (10 years old) quickly approaching in January, she demonstrated a unique respect for authority while also showing she wasn't afraid to question it.



David Lias

Between The Lines

"Dear Andrea,
My mom wouldn't let me type a letter to you on the computer, so I have to write a letter!"

Andrea shared the letter with each of us, and soon the fog was lifting; it was slowly receding thanks to the unique gift of laughter that Liz was always sure to bring. This letter continues with a report of her favorite activities at her elementary school. "Fridays at my school are the funnest," she wrote. "What's happening at your school, anything exciting?"

Perhaps she felt this letter wasn't entertaining enough to keep Andrea's attention. She ended this message with a statement that serves both as an excuse and a revelation of her frank honesty — a predominant feature of her life. "I'm only writing this letter because you wanted me to be your pen pal." She ends that sentence with double explanation points that feature a smily face drawn underneath.

In March, 1999, Liz sent Andrea a St. Patrick's Day greeting, allowing us to experience another nugget of her unique humor that bathes our souls in warm sunlight. "If you didn't wear green you're in for a pinching next time I see you! Well, long time no letter me, sorry! To (sic) busy with homework!"

She was getting great pleasure out of her studies of the Iditarod at the time.

"Math we started fractions (yippy yi yo)! ... Swimming is going good. We have a meet here this year, you will have to come to some of it. Well, I don't have anything else to say!"

Your Favorite Cousin, Elizabeth
Weathers Lias"



The Lias girls, June 1989. Daughters Sarah, 4, and Andrea, 3, and Goddaughter Liz, 18 months. Taken at the farm near Humboldt.

I desperately hoped for the good feelings her letters brought to carry us all through her memorial service and her funeral. Naturally, it is during those times when the feeling of loss is the greatest. You stand at the casket and drink in as much as you can bear; you etch the features of her face deep in your memory, for soon you will never see them again.

Sitting in her church, I tried to recall her words full of childlike wonder, her zany laugh, and her endless spirit in a failed attempt to fight the sadness which relentlessly came rolling in again. The only solace I could find was in numbers; I alone wasn't lost — hundreds of friends and relatives struggled to make sense of the situation in which we found ourselves. Of all people, why did this happen to Liz?

Life is supposed to be about learning fractions (yippy yi yo) and swimming lessons, reading your favorite stories in school, and getting letters from your favorite

cousin. Liz taught that to all of us so well.

Everyone who had any sort of association with her was the recipient of one final gift — a lesson that is so important.

We had spent days struggling, asking ourselves, "Why Liz?" Perhaps, more accurately, we were asking, "Why me? Why did this terrible loss happen to me?"

All of us who gathered in the church to celebrate her life didn't leave empty-handed. I'd like to think that Liz wanted to make sure of that. I listened, and I learned — we all learned — how suffering and death are very much a part of the mortal condition. God had given us Liz, such a beautiful gift.

He also, to this day, offers a means of healing and redemption and an integration of our suffering. Liz made sure we understand that.

This is deep stuff, coming from a young woman, who as an 11-year-old shouts with glee in her detailed

account of a student camping trip to Newton Hills. In a letter to Andrea in which nearly every sentence ends with a bold exclamation point, she writes about studying ecosystems and taking a hike. "That took us to dinner time! For dinner we had spaghetti, garlic bread and disgusting juice!"

After a night around the campfire, she and her friends finally fall asleep in their tents around midnight.

"Some of the kids stayed up all night, and they did not look very pretty in the morning! We had breakfast about 8 a.m. ... then we took our tents down (I must say taking it down was harder than putting it up) ... After that, we packed most of the stuff up. Finally, we were off to our morning hike in Ticky Ticky Land (Grasslands)."

Oh Liz. Last week, I couldn't stop crying when I thought of you. Now I can't stop laughing.
What a gift!



Bob Karolevitz

Writer At Large

Don't worry if you've never heard of Gordon Mjork

Gordon Mjork was a totally fictional character — but he almost got elected student body president at South Dakota State College (now University) by a gang of ne'er-do-wells who didn't believe much in the democratic process at the time.

We made him up! We were trying to make a point by nominating him to the office as our candidate when he wasn't real.

We got a picture of the back of somebody's head, and used it to identify him as a living, lovable character who deserved the student body's vote.

We even had a campaign song to promote him. We used the student body newspaper to unveil him to the electorate — though he didn't even exist.

It was our way of showing that anybody could be elected even if the voters didn't know what he stood for.

Gordon Mjork was famous on the campus, and when the election took place he came in a strong second.

After the election he just disappeared, and we never did show his face (it was Ralph Walz, a printing student who was selected by the shape of his head and his crew cut).

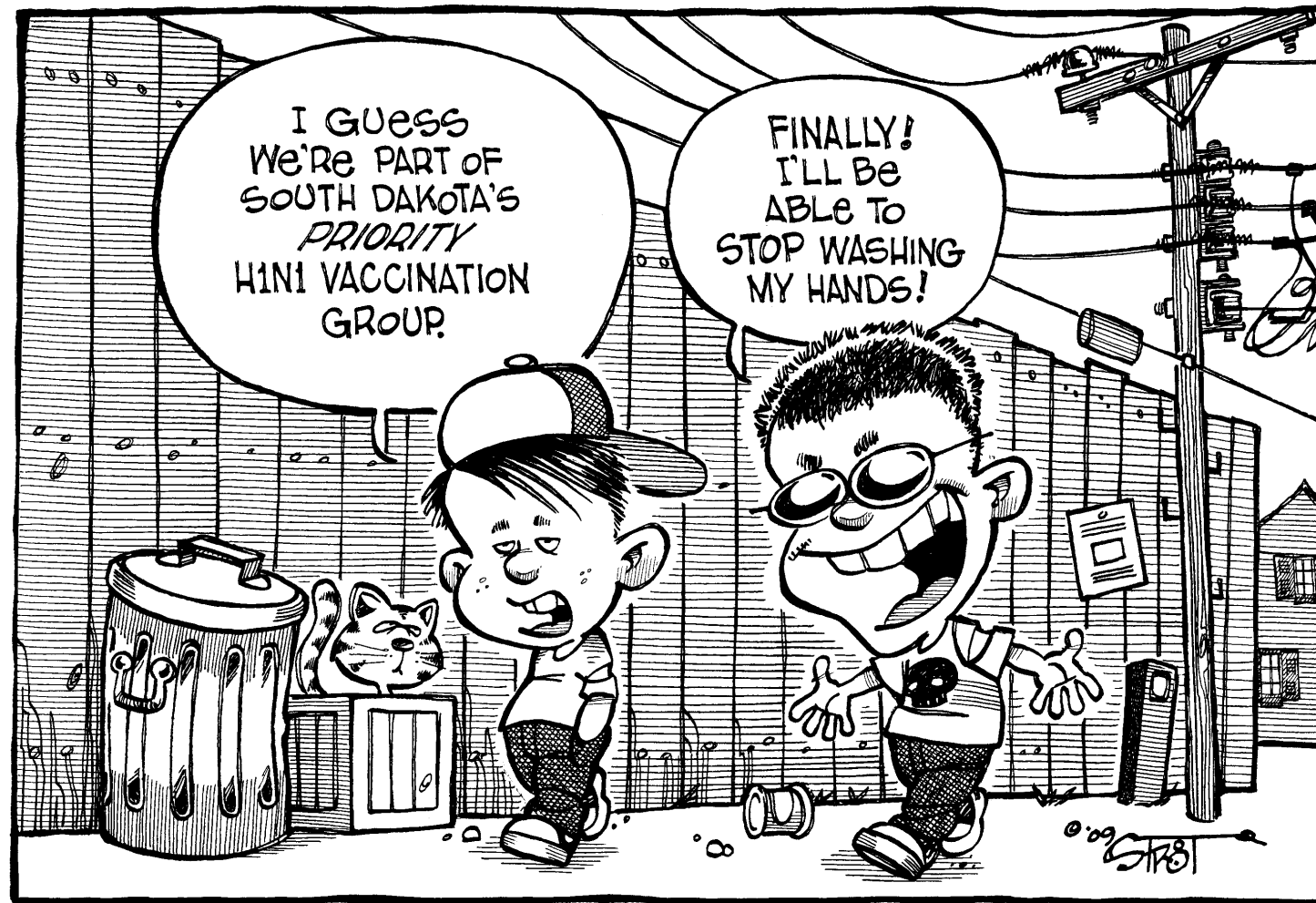
We had proved our point. And Gordon Mjork became part of the school's history, which was not recorded in the annals of the college.

It was just one of the things which happened when a group of guys and gals got together to have a little fun.

But Ralph's head remained a portion of a graduate's memories.

(This column was dictated to daughter Jill who remembered the election as part of the school's past which was worth writing about).

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Finding my way to Saint Eusebius

MapQuest takes me along I-80 from Indiana, east past Youngstown, Ohio, and then onto Pennsylvania Highway 38. I turn right on Emlenton Clintonville Road, left on Main Street and onto Main Hill Road, which becomes Queenstown Road. I veer left onto PA 68, which becomes Clarion Street and left again on East 2nd Street.

I am trying to find Saint Eusebius Cemetery in East Brady, PA, where my parents are buried.

On my way through the Allegheny Mountains, I experience recurring bouts of grief. This is the closest physically I will be to my parents since their ashes were transported here from California a little more than a year ago. This is my first visit.

East Brady is an unassuming little town in Western Pennsylvania, hidden away down several winding roads. It possess all the amenities of not-so-remote places. Quick shops, pizza

MyStory YourStory



Paula Damon

Columnist

places, bars and beauty salons busily line Main Street, which skirts a mountain ridge along the broad and meandering Allegheny River.

Not far from here, my dad and mom were born: Dad in Rimersburg, PA, Mom in Punxsutawney. It is in this area they went to school, married, started our family, and this is where they wanted to be buried.

As I look for signs for the cemetery, I imagine every adult child at one time or another doing this: searching for that final resting place of their parents.

After getting lost, backtracking, stopping for directions and calling my uncle for

the exact location, I finally arrive at Saint Eusebius Cemetery, a medium-sized stretch perched on a hillside with pastoral views below.

Once inside the iron gates, and finally locating their plot, I slowly read their names, dates of birth, dates of death and cannot imagine how 85 years of life passed through them so quickly.

I kneel as close as I can get to their headstones, stroking their names, running my fingers along the rough edges of the granite marker. It is now clear that this is where they had been journeying to all along and I am overwhelmed.

I have traveled to this

place more than 1,000 miles from my home in South Dakota. I want them to see me, a dutiful middle child of six, paying homage to all their work in bringing me life.

I want them to see me here, missing them while honoring their wishes to be placed side-by-side near where they started life. I am here.

A resident of Southeast South Dakota, Paula Damon is a national award-winning columnist. Her columns have won first-place in National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women Communications Contests. In the 2009 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contest, Paula's columns took three first-place awards. To contact Paula, email pauladamon@iw.net, follow her blog at www.my-story-your-story.blogspot.com and find her on Facebook.

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