

SUNDAY

March 10, 2013

8 a.m. Noon 6 p.m.

49 56 58

Cloudy today, with periods of rain through tonight. DETAILS, PAGE C10



# JOURNAL & COURIER

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“IT STILL FEELS LIKE WE’RE TALKING TO HIM”

## HOW FACEBOOK IS CHANGING THE WAY WE MOURN



...It saddens me very much to see you go so soon...

I feel for your family and friends.

You were my inspiration and a real brother to me.

My heart aches so bad, I miss you so much!

By Jessica Contrera | jcontrera@jconline.com

**A**fter 26 years together, Jennifer Gibson-Sargent never expected her closest connection to her brother to be strictly digital.

But every day since his murder, Facebook is where she has spoken to him.

“If tears and heartache was enough to bring you back, Jeremy, you would be here with me right now.”

“I know you will never read this, but I have to tell you how proud I was of you being such a great dad!”

“Your big sis loves you and that will never change.”

Next to her own messages are hundreds of others, pouring out support for Gibson-Sargent and her family. They started the day her brother, Jeremy Gibson, was reported

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What happens to a person’s Facebook when they die? **A4**

How to use Facebook to grieve and respond to grieving, **A5**

J&C ILLUSTRATION/ DAVID LEONARD

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## Boy Scouts policy puts United Way on the clock

Let’s start by making one thing clear: Purdue University has not — repeat, not — told the United Way of Greater Lafayette to change a thing.

But know that the United Way has been pressed into a tight spot all the same.

For the past four months, the community fundraiser has been quietly navigating between an implied demand from a chunk of potential donors on campus and a long-standing partnership with the Sagamore Council of the Boy Scouts of America — which just happens to be waiting for its national organization to decide whether to stick with or ditch its no-gays policy.

But this is not — repeat, not — really about the Boy Scouts. Except that it is, as individual protests registered on United Way pledge cards escalate into a more coordinated effort within the



**DAVE BANGERT**  
COLUMNIST

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The Sagamore Council of the Boy Scouts of America covers 16 counties, including those in the Lafayette area. The council includes about 5,000 Scouts. J&C FILE PHOTO



### DST REMINDER

Clocks went ahead one hour to daylight saving time at 2 a.m.

### Note to subscribers

Due to daylight saving time, the delivery of this morning’s paper may have been an hour later than normal.

### INSIDE

The debate: Daylight saving time remains a contentious issue in Indiana. **A6**

### A BIG DAY

Purdue women return to Big 10 title game; Byrd, men celebrate Senior Day with win. **Sports, B1**



BUSINESS B9,10 LOTTERIES A2  
CROSSWORD D9 LOCAL C1  
FASHION D4 OBITUARIES C2,3



\$2.00 RETAIL

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## MOURN

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missing. He was found dead in July 2011.

For Gibson-Sargent and anyone else who has lost a loved one in the digital age, it's easy to see: Facebook is changing the way we mourn.

Whether a death is criminal, accidental or natural, Facebook has become a go-to resource for sharing information, showing support and memorializing the deceased.

"I see it more and more all the time," said Cyndy Shafer, director of the Grief Center at Hippensteel Funeral Service in Lafayette. "It can be incredibly healing for everyone involved, if used in the right way."

"If used in the right way" seems to be the catch. No established social norms or expectations yet exist in the Facebook grief process.

What to say — and when to say it — is left up to individual judgment. That's always been the case, of course. But Gibson-Sargent and many others in Greater Lafayette are learning the hard way: When it comes to death, Facebook is a blessing and a curse.

### Comfort, conflict

After the posts on personal profiles came the public pages. Kaylin Glazebrook, Jeremy's niece, began a "Justice For Jeremy" page to post photos and share information about the trials for Jeremy's killers. Before long, it had more than 500 likes.

Gibson-Sargent started her own Facebook group in memory of Jeremy.

"It still feels like it's him," she said. "It still feels like we're talking to him."

Some of the most comforting posts she saw were those that showed how much others were missing her brother, too.

Nancy Eberhard, bereavement coordinator for Franciscan St. Elizabeth hospice, said posts of affirmation are frequently the most helpful.

"One of the main needs of a grieving person is to have his or her feelings validated and confirmed," Eberhard said. "They want to know that other people share that pain."

But immediate comments can be just as hurtful as helpful.

Facebook's ability to rapidly spread information can lead to family members finding out about a loved one's death online before ever being properly notified.

Kyle Rhodes died in a forklift accident at Fairfield Manufacturing in May 2011. Messages and statuses identifying him and the cause of death were posted before his wife, Jill, was called.

"I didn't see them. Thank God, I didn't see them," Rhodes said. "But I wish that people would know just to wait until you can be sure the family and friends have been notified."

Later Rhodes, of West Lafayette, discovered Facebook comments posted on a news story about Kyle's death.

"Someone wrote: 'Who is stupid enough to step in front of a forklift?'" she said.

"It's so easy just to write something that you would never

say out loud. Don't people realize there is a person on the other side of the screen?"

When one of Jeremy Gibson's attackers, Antonio Williams, died of medical complications before he could be brought to trial, for a time the "Justice for Jeremy" page turned in a direction that disturbed Gibson's family.

"People wrote things like, 'Isn't it great? He deserved to die,'" said Gibson-Sargent, who is raising her brother's two sons. "I just don't believe in ever celebrating someone's death. That just wasn't what the page was supposed to be about."

Deciding what to say about death has been an eternal struggle.

When a friend's daughter committed suicide, Sandy Oswald, 67, who uses Facebook frequently, decided not to post about death — then or ever.

"It's hard to express what your feelings are in that form," Oswald said. "It just seems too impersonal."

But for younger generations, an after-death Facebook post is as important as a personal response.

Jacob Adams, 27, a Purdue University graduate student, said there is always pressure to post something. When a friend died in a drunken driving crash, Adams changed his status and posted on the friend's wall.

"You know everyone else is going to be looking at your post, so you want to say something good," he said.

"You don't want to pour your heart out and write a two-page message, but you don't want to be the guy who just says 'Miss ya.'"

On Facebook, as in life, questions arise about the "right" way to grieve.

» If you call the family, should you write on the deceased's wall, too?

» How well do you have to know a person to write something about them when they die?

» If you change your profile picture to include a lost loved one, when is it OK to change it again?

Uncharted territory. Mihaela Vorvoreanu, a Purdue technology professor, has spent her career studying technology's sociocultural effects. Social norms haven't fully adapted to the wired world, she suggested.

Years ago, "You would not be such a close witness to other people's tragedies. So now, we don't know what appropriate behaviors are.

"It's awkward."

### Profile management

In the weeks after her brother's death, the focus for Gibson-Sargent switched from what others were posting to what she would post.

While cleaning out his apartment, Gibson-Sargent and her mother found a list of Jeremy's passwords.

They decided to take over his Facebook profile.

"We wanted to keep his page going and keep people in touch," his sister said. "We can accept new friends and post pictures of his sons as they grow."

Without the password, she and her mother wouldn't have been allowed to access the page.

Facebook's policy for deceased



Jennifer Gibson-Sargent, background, reads a book with Dakota Gibson, 4, one of the sons of her late brother, Jeremy Gibson, Wednesday at Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Lafayette. A "Justice For Jeremy" Facebook page is displayed on Gibson-Sargent's laptop. Gibson-Sargent is raising Dakota, and his brother, Riley, 3, along with her own children. JOHN TERHUNE/JOURNAL & COURIER

users is to either delete the page or "memorialize it." Both actions can be requested only by immediate family members who show proof of the death via an obituary.

If Facebook accepts a request to memorialize a page, no one can log into it and no new friends can be accepted. The page remains online, and only the late user's friends can post to the wall.

If no requests are made, the profile exists as if the person still were living.

For those whose deceased loved ones didn't have a Facebook profile, a newly created page, such as Justice For Jeremy, is the next best option.

Former Lafayette resident Ann Travnicsek created a page for her mother, Christine Craig, who was killed in November 2009. At first, Help Catch Christine Craig's Killer was all about finding Steven Farrell, who shot Travnicsek's mother.

After he was found and brought to trial, Travnicsek said the page was a way for her and her siblings to give their mother a voice.

"During the trial there were people on Farrell's side saying my mom was a bad person," Travnicsek said. "The Facebook page was a way we could remind people of who she really was and how much she loved her family."

The page also allowed Travnicsek's family to post about

*"We wanted to keep his page going and keep people in touch. We can accept new friends and post pictures of his sons as they grow."*

**JENNIFER GIBSON-SARGENT,**  
sister of Jeremy Gibson

every day, and every few weeks, new posts appear from Jeremy's friends and her family's supporters.

» "Miss you so much :)"

» "Jeremy I got to see one of your beautiful baby boys, Dakota, yesterday! Gosh he looks JUST like you!"

» "A day never goes by where I don't think about you."

Gibson-Sargent even looks to old posts written by her brother, especially to share with his sons, who were 1 and 2 years old at the time of his death.

"I know they won't remember him like I remember him — and that kills me," she said. "But I can go back and see what he wrote about them on their birthdays, and then say 'Look, this is what your daddy said about you. This is how much he loved you.'"

Down the road, she might post less often about Jeremy. Bereavement specialists say that's what usually happens.

Yet it's comforting to know there is a place she can find support.

"It's not perfect. But at least it's something."

accepted. Existing friends can write on the deceased person's timeline, and the profile's photos and past posts will remain visible. Memorialized timelines don't appear in People You May Know and other suggestions. Anyone can notify Facebook of a user's death, but they must show proof of the death via an obituary.

All these options are assuming that family members or friends do not know

the deceased person's password. It is against Facebook policy to take over a person's account, but it often happens after a death. No matter what the circumstances of death, Facebook will provide access to an account to anyone but its owner. This has resulted in a number of legal battles for the company.

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## How to use Facebook to grieve and respond to those grieving

One of the main challenges with the use of Facebook for mourning is the lack of social norms established on the "appropriate" ways to grieve and respond to grieving. But experts agree that if used correctly, Facebook can be an extremely beneficial tool for

overcoming the loss of a loved one.

Lafayette grief expert Sally Downham Miller, author of "Mourning and Dancing: A Memoir of Grief and Recovery," has

spent more than 30 years studying ways to overcome personal crises. She spoke with the Journal & Courier on the best ways to handle Facebook mourning.

### If your Facebook friend has lost someone he loves

The first step is to think before you write. Hastily posted or unthoughtful comments can greatly exasperate a grieving person's anger or sadness.

Miller said it's best to wait a few days to post anything to ensure that all family members and close friends have been notified of the death.

"Start with a note of support. Say 'thinking of you' or 'praying for you' — something simple that still ensures the person is getting contact," Miller said.

If you knew the person who has died, Miller recommends sharing stories about them. Start with "one of my favorite memories of this person was when ..."

For those who have a relationship with the griever outside of Facebook, focus on

what you can do for the person. Miller suggests asking "What helps?" She said to never say, "I know how you feel."

Most importantly, understand that mourning is a long-term process. It's common to see posts about lost loved ones months or years after their deaths.

"Grief takes place over time, but it doesn't take place all the time," Miller said. "You never know when someone is going to need your support."

### If you have lost someone you love

Know that grief is a process that all people go through, Miller said.

"We're all human beings. In grief, anger is anger and longing is longing. We all feel that. That's why it is so helpful to communicate with other people."

Miller believes Facebook is an incredible tool for communicating because it allows people to express reactions through writing. After writing privately, such as in a typed document or a notebook, publicly sharing some of those words can be deeply healing. You can post on your own profile or create a page to memorialize your lost loved one.

"Be open to talking about the reaction you are having to your loved one's loss," Miller said.

Be mindful that Facebook is not a replacement for formal therapy, Miller said. She believes that group therapy is one of the most effective methods of counseling.

"There's strength in a group that exceeds any one person. Expressing your grief or hearing others express theirs — it's just so helpful."

— Jessica Contrera/  
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## What happens to a person's Facebook account when they die?

Without specific instructions from the deceased on what should be done with his or her social media accounts, the future of the Facebook account is left up to the family members or executors of the person's will. Here are the options to pursue:

### Do nothing

Without any requests to Facebook, the deceased's timeline will remain active,

meaning friends still can post on the person's timeline or tag him or her in statuses.

"With a community of more than 1 billion people, we rely mainly on reports of deceased users from family and friends of the individual," said Facebook spokesperson Andrew Noyes.

Because the account exists as if the person still is living, the deceased person's name and photo can appear in People You May Know and

other suggestions.

### Delete it

At the request of an immediate family member or will executor, Facebook will remove the deceased person's account from the site. To make this request, you must prove the relationship, such as with birth or death certificates or proof of authority under local law that you are the lawful representative of

the deceased or his/her estate. Requests will not be processed if Facebook is unable to verify your relationship to the deceased.

### Memorialize it

If someone notifies Facebook that one of its users has died, Facebook will lock the account into a "memorialized" state. No one can log into a memorialized account and no new friends can be

accepted. Existing friends can write on the deceased person's timeline, and the profile's photos and past posts will remain visible. Memorialized timelines don't appear in People You May Know and other suggestions. Anyone can notify Facebook of a user's death, but they must show proof of the death via an obituary.

All these options are assuming that family members or friends do not know