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Thursday, January 19, 2006

Giving brings mom peace

Two years after her son's death, Dona Reynolds keeps his memory alive by donating first bikes.



DAVID WHITING
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Dona Reynolds gently lays the 14-inch Valentine wreath of red carnations below the tombstone of her only son's grave and ponders what is and what might have been.

A woman of modest means in a town of modest people, Reynolds went to a professional florist to make sure the wreath was just right. The red heart with the gold arrow through it is a way to hug her son, Mark Reynolds, dead two years now after being mauled by a mountain lion while repairing his bicycle chain in Whiting Ranch Regional Park.

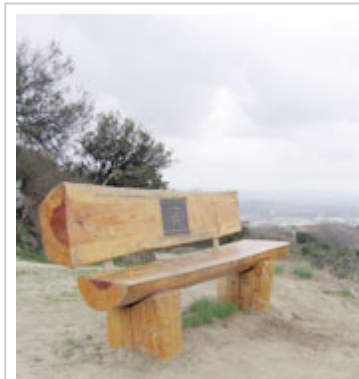
It's Tuesday morning in St. Joseph, Mo., just nine days after the Jan. 8 anniversary of Mark's death, and the frozen earth crunches under her shoes as she approaches her boy's gravestone. Small, plastic fir trees line both sides of the grave to make it feel like the mountains where her son so loved to ride.

A photo of Mark riding his bike is etched into the 48-inch tall chunk of black granite, carved to resemble a mountain. Even though it was not her first choice, the mother buried her boy the way she felt he would have wanted, in the Lycra cycling clothes he loved to race in, holding his favorite helmet.

It was a mother's gesture toward the man who was more than a son. He was her best friend.

The only thing she changed on the gravestone photo was the cactus. She asked that they be changed to flowers.

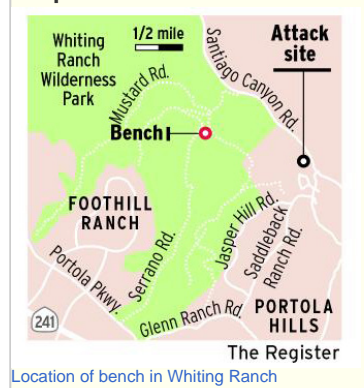
As a parent, as an outdoor person, I've thought about reaching out to Dona for two years. Now as I talk to her on the telephone, listening to her describe Mark's grave, I realize I also wanted to be assured it's possible to go on living after the death of a child, a fear I can barely contemplate.



A bench constructed in memory of Mark Reynolds overlooks his favorite trails in Whiting Ranch.

DAVID WHITING, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Graphic



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The police officer arrived at the house at 4 a.m., Dona says. She immediately knew one of her children was dead. Her first words: "Which one?"

"When you lose a child, it's not like your mother, your brother, your sister," Dona says, mentioning she buried her father a few months ago and is mourning a cousin killed in a car crash just days ago.

"A mountain lion has got to be your worst nightmare as a parent," Dona says. "The thing that bothered me the most was did Mark die instantly or was Mark left in a condition where he could have been." She stops for a moment. "You always wonder, did Mark suffer?"

Dona recounts losing 50 pounds and getting almost no sleep in the first four months after Mark was killed. Then she talks about the nightmares that still come.

"I would see Mark riding his bike. I would see the mountain lion coming. I would wake up screaming for Mark to get out of the way," she says.

We happen to be talking just hours after another mountain lion has been shot and killed, just a few miles from Whiting Ranch. I tell her what's going on.

"I'm not for killing the lions. I'm not out to ever close a park," she says. But she's not content with the way things are, either. "I think they need a little bit of control. California doesn't have a clue how many lions they have," she says. She leaves the solution to the experts, such as Fish and Game officials. She is sure of one thing, however.

"What happened to Mark will happen again," she says. "Our greatest prayer is it's not to a child."

Her comment reminds me of her Web site, www.markreynoldsfund.org, a site that is all about children.

"When he died," Dona recalls, "I knew immediately what he wanted me to do. Mark never forgot his first bike. He loved giving bikes to underprivileged children. He would say, 'Mom, that's the greatest feeling I can have is giving a child his first bike.'"

Since launching the fund, Dona estimates the nonprofit charity has given away more than \$30,000 worth of bikes to children in Orange County, Missouri, Illinois and elsewhere.

"I'm a mother on a mission," she says. "I see the smiles on their faces and it takes me back 30 years and I see Mark on his first bike."

Dona even managed to raise money Jan. 7 during a trip to Anaheim for a motocross show. Still, she's not ready to visit Whiting Ranch, and declined to join her husband for a trip to the bench Mark's friends put up.

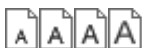
"I'm extremely grateful to those people for their memory of Mark," Dona explains, "but it's not something his mother can go visit. It's not something I can do."

CONTACT US: David Whiting's column on places and people appears Thursdays. He isn't related to the family that donated the land for Whiting Ranch Regional Park. He can be reached at (714) 796-6869 or dwhiting@ocregister.com

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