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## COLUMN ONE

## Grief, comfort meet on MySpace

Online profiles linger as memorials when their owners die. Friends leave comments on the pages as a way to continue their relationship with the departed.

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RIANNA Woolsey, a 16-year-old cheerleader, last logged onto MySpace.com on Dec. 6, 2005. She died the next day when her car smashed into a tree near her home in southern Orange County.

Her online profile is a snapshot of a young life cut short — her smiling face greets visitors as the singer Imogen Heap's "Hide and Seek" plays in the background. There is a photo of her boyfriend, she calls James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces" the "best book ever written," and the Trabuco Canyon resident wrote that she planned to have children "someday."

The one part of her page that has changed since her death is the section where MySpace denizens post comments. Since the accident more than a year ago, friends have written nearly 700 messages to the Tesoro High School junior.

*i dont understand, i dont like it, i am completely and utterly selfish. i want you here, i want to laugh with you and see your shining face, i want to dance with you, i want to carpool with you, i want to talk about boys with you, .. i want to hug you. but i cant. cause for an entire year youve been happy and healthy and dancing up in Heaven, and theres nothing i can do down here.*

MySpace.com was created in 2004 as an online community to meet friends or lovers, network, post pictures, listen to music and keep diaries, known as blogs. But it has also become a place for a generation to chronicle its grief — a high-tech extension of visiting graves, writing letters to the departed and journaling about sorrow. Woolsey's MySpace page is one of countless that have turned into virtual memorials.

Dead users' profiles largely feature teens and people in their 20s, who are most likely to use MySpace. Some killed themselves or accidentally overdosed on drugs. A few had heart defects that had gone undetected. Others were slain, some soldiers were killed in Iraq, and a young man was gunned down in a drive-by shooting in Watts. Many died in car accidents.

Family and friends use other sites on the Internet to remember the dead in many ways, such as creating formal legacy pages memorializing their lives, or setting up guest books for people to log condolences and memories.

BUT the grieving on MySpace is unplanned — the dead person's page is a frozen moment, showing when they last logged on, their favorite books and movies, whether they were in a relationship, and photos of their best friends. After their death, their friends post messages to the departed that are akin to text messages between high school pals, stream-of-consciousness blurbs filled with slang, misspellings and abbreviations. The messages are sorrowful and sweet, angry and funny, routine and heartbreaking. They include reminiscences, pleas to watch over them, and updates on events the dead friend has missed.

*This weekend was homecoming, and it was so weird to not have you there. I remember last year when you wore your cute polka-dot dress, and looked so pretty.*

Linda Goldman, a certified grief therapist, said that writing on a dead friend's MySpace page is similar to visiting the cemetery, writing them a letter or praying to them. All are attempts to maintain a relationship with someone who has died.

"It's a diary to their friend that died," said Goldman, author of "Life and Loss: A Guide to Help Grieving Children." "One common aspect of grief is [survivors] want to have an ongoing interpersonal relationship with the person who died. There's a strong need to keep communicating."

Goldman said MySpace was a valuable outlet for the dizzying emotions of teenagers, who may be dealing with the death of a friend for the first time. Seeing others communicating with the departed shows them they are not alone in their grief, even months after the death. Additionally, knowing they can click on the profile months or years from now allows them to keep a connection to their friend as memories fade, she said.

*i feel like it has been forever and i am starting to forget the little things like the way you laughed and the crayon smell of your car even tho mine has the same smell i just miss you so much riri. life moves so fast and i feel like i never just have the time to stop and think about you and about life. life is so hectic right now and i find myself thinking and missing you most at night esp. cuz this is when i would normally call you up and we would swap stories from the night.*

Nealani Lopez, a 17-year-old Temecula resident who had known Rianna Woolsey since seventh grade, said the site helped her maintain a link with her friend.

"I'll never forget about her, but sometimes I start to forget what she looks like, so I just go on her page to look at her," she said. "Even though I pray, it's

kind of weird talking to a friend I've known forever [who is] in heaven. I can't really explain it, I just like to talk to her on MySpace. It feels like she's still here."

It's unknown how many of MySpace's 145 million users have died, leaving their online profiles alive in cyberspace. MySpace deletes them only at the family's request.

"We often hear from families that a user's profile is a way for friends to celebrate the person's life, giving friends a positive outlet to connect with one another and find comfort during the grieving process," according to the company.

Profiles of dead young people also have a macabre appeal to some Internet users. Mydeathspace.com, a website created by 25-year-old Michael Patterson more than a year ago, has links to more than 1,200 profiles of people who have died. It receives 200,000 hits a day.

"It's like rubber-necking on the freeway," said Patterson, a San Francisco resident. "People are going to slow down and take notice of that wrecked car on the side of the freeway. They don't necessarily want to see the body bag, but they're interested to see what happens."

ON MySpace, outsiders can view but cannot post messages to a specific profile; the only ones who can are users with their own profile who have been granted access.

*saw ur mom the other day she helps me know that what happened was meant to be, she is such a strong lady and it helps me to know ur in a better place just talking with her. your sister is looking so much like you its weird it was hard to see her cuz its like looking at a lil you. as time goes on i forget the lil memories but by talking to ur mom i get to hear stories that i never heard about when u were little and the things that made you who you were.*

Tania Woolsey, Rianna's mother, said the postings on her daughter's site were "a great way for her friends to express their feelings. We will leave it up as long as they are still writing."

Barbara Stogner, whose 24-year-old daughter China died in October of complications from an 11-month battle with cervical cancer, said being able to write on her daughter's MySpace page was especially beneficial for her male friends, who were hesitant to discuss their emotions. Although postings on MySpace are mostly public — unless the user chooses otherwise — the act of writing to the dead friend feels like one-on-one communication, she said.

"Guys can't always let their emotions out, and I think it was a place they could say what they needed to say in private and express themselves," said the Redwood City resident.

Jessica Folmer, whose brother Ryan died of an overdose of the pain-relief drug Oxycontin in September, checks his MySpace page every day. His comments, the music and the pictures on his page help her stay connected with his memory.

"I say things I would want to say to him if he was still here," said Folmer, the 21-year-old community college student who lives in Redlands. "It's like he can see it."

Stogner and Tania Woolsey said they checked their daughters' pages every two weeks.

"It is hard for me to look. Obviously, it brings everything back," Tania Woolsey said. But "what goes through my head is how much she impacted so many people. It's wonderful to see that she's still continuing to impact people and so many people still love her and think about her."

Rianna's friends are grateful that her site remains online.

"I would be so upset if her MySpace was gone. If they took that down, I would feel less connected to her," Karla Benefiel of Rancho Santa Margarita, a 17-year-old Tesoro senior who met Rianna on the song team nearly four years ago. "Even just looking at her pictures ... seeing she put those up there, knowing how she obsessed over certain pictures, knowing it was actually her doing that, it helps me a lot."

Benefiel said she enjoyed sharing inside jokes and memories on the page. The friends shared a passion for Coach handbags, so whenever Benefiel buys one or sees one that she likes, she tells Rianna about it on MySpace.

"Every time I go in [the Coach store] I think about her," Benefiel said. "It's so much easier to write something out than just try and talk about it."

Hillarie Ralston of Mission Viejo, a 17-year-old senior at Tesoro who met Rianna two years ago, recalls that the pair would talk on the phone every night, and posting on her MySpace page reminds her of that. "I feel like I still get to have that conversation," she said. But "it's hard when I don't get a reply."

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