

Advertisement



PRINT THIS

Powered by Clickability

Mourners pay respects to websites of the dead

Posted 5/10/2006 9:07 PM ET

By Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY

Sometimes, when Indigo Rael goes to her little brother's MySpace page, it feels "almost "like he's still there," Rael says. "Like I could message him and tell him I'm going to visit him at his job."

Anthony Rael of Denton, Texas, killed himself Nov. 9, just two months shy of his 19th birthday.

But on MySpace he will always like punk, rock, pop and "emo." He'll always stare out from the page with that baby-faced grin, always be a freshman at the University of North Texas, always play *Plug in Baby* by Muse, always work at 7-Eleven and always talk about "just livin' life one day at a time."

The page remains just as Anthony Rael left it — with a few notable exceptions: Now his friends and family use it to read his words, look at his pictures, and share their thoughts with one another — and, they say, with him.

"I feel sort of responsible for looking out for it, as if he were going to come back and have it be his again," his sister, 20, says.

This is the new way of mourning on the Internet. When a person dies — especially a young person — friends and family instinctively gather at his or her personal site, much like mourners might head to a family's home. Instead of casseroles, they bring words, raw and immediate.

The result is a memorial site that commingles the words and thoughts of the person who died with the wishes and regrets of friends, family, even strangers.

People have been using the Internet to memorialize the dead almost since the Web began. Many create sites on their own. And many commercial sites, such as Virtual Memorials, will help people create memorials for a fee. But the spontaneous memorials springing up on young people's sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, and blogs including Xanga and LiveJournal, have an immediacy that others can lack.

The words and visits to Anthony Rael's personal MySpace page have continued ever since his death. His page has served as a gathering place, where people return again and again to reread Rael's words, listen to his music and speak directly to him just like they used to do when he was alive.

Advertisement



**Sure, you
can do it all.**
(But you shouldn't have to.)

[LEARN MORE >>](#)

"What's up homie," his friend Matt Sandoval wrote in January. "Miss ya. Save me a spot in heaven." Sandoval, 19, a student and singer from Denton, wrote a song for Rael, *Farewell Nevada*. He says visiting the page gives him solace.

"I tend to visit whenever I need some support in my life," Sandoval says. "I realize how many people cared for him. When he was alive he didn't really realize (that). It gives me hope that, even if something's not going right, I know there's people there for me."

For some people, these online memorials are another place to gather to mourn someone close to them. For others, the online memorials are the only place where they feel comfortable talking about the deceased to others.

Mike Kauth, 25, a comedian from Germantown, Wis., says he wasn't that close with a friend who drowned after having an epileptic seizure in the bathtub.

"I was just off in the periphery of her life," Kauth says. "I knew her only casually. I wouldn't have felt comfortable going to the funeral."

But he knew her well enough to want to reach out. "I've been thinking about that, why I did it. It's kind of like that's how I communicated with her the most so it just kind of seemed appropriate. It was also closure for myself. You feel bad, and you want to do something."

Wanting to communicate with the dead is fairly natural, says Thomas Franz, an associate professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University at Buffalo.

"Posting messages online would be a perfect way to do that, to keep communicating every day," he says. "It is sort of as if the person is still there, even though they sort of know they're not."

And, he adds, teens especially need an outlet. "Teenagers have a harder time grieving than any other age group, in part because they are now experiencing adult feelings that are very strong and very painful. And they are experiencing them as adults for the first time."

After her daughter Kristina was killed in a car crash in July 2004, Blanca Martinez of Riverbank, Calif., erected a MySpace to memorialize her.

When Martinez goes there, a few times a week, it provides "just a sense of comfort. You're so used to seeing them every single day. When I log into her page, it's just her beautiful face. It's 'Hi baby. Help me get through the day.' "

Sandoval says maybe the dead are listening. When he thinks about Anthony Rael, he can't help but imagine that he sees the words.

"I think if he were to check his MySpace in heaven, he would be really happy to see the comments left for him," Sandoval says. "And it gives us a little bit of closure on the whole issue — just the feeling like we could still talk to him and like he's listening to us."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-05-10-myspace-memorials_x.htm

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

