

## All Youth Are Valuable

By: Bob Lenz

All youth are valuable. Period. No matter what! No matter what they look like, what they have done, what misfortune, pain, struggle, or neglect they've gone through, no matter what the situation, youth are valuable.

I couldn't begin to tell you of the youth God has touched through my severely handicapped brother Tim's life. A while back I shared part of Tim's story before a group in Canada. After the session, a woman by the name of Heather Hockbaum shared a story with me. I would like to share this true story of Tracy Lyn Latimer as written by Heather.

### Tracy Lyn Latimer (1980-1993)

*Born November 23, 1980, mentally handicapped with cerebral palsy and epilepsy.*

At the time of her death Tracy had the physical capacity of a 3-6 month old infant. She could roll over and had some voluntary motion in one hand. She had difficulty eating because she had no swallowing reflex.

Her hip had become dislocated because of the spasticity of her muscles. She faced a serious operation to either break the leg bone to maintain the ball-joint in her socket or totally remove her hip joint to relieve her constant pain. Tracy could not walk, nor would she ever walk.

Although she was thought to be severely retarded, she recognized people, enjoyed animals and **she loved chocolate.**

When Tracy was about two years old, her parents went on a six-week trip, leaving Tracy in respite care. Then they returned, Tracy would not let her mother feed her. **She had feelings.**

Tracy attended the developmental center at the local school. She rode the school bus in a special carrier system that locked onto the wheels of her wheelchair. She was the favorite of the school kids, especially those that rode the bus with her. **She had friends.**

Tracy's mother, Laura, was a very strong advocate for handicapped person's rights. She wanted her daughter to be placed into the regular Grade 5 room so that not only would she get more stimulation from the kids, but this would "*show them she was a person*" (her mother's words). Tracy's mother never hid her and included her in as many community activities as possible. Everyone in our small farming community of about 1,500 people knew Tracy.

Laura had visions for Tracy. She wanted her to stay at home until she was 18, and then move to a group home close to home...perhaps even "go" to college.

Things began to change when Laura became pregnant with their fourth child. The pregnancy was not without complications. Tracy of course had grown, and with Laura pregnant she could no longer lift Tracy. A children's home in N. Bateford agreed to take her on respite full-time for as long as needed. Tracy returned home in October after the baby was born having spent three months in respite.

One Sunday, Laura and the three children, Brian (10), Lindsey (8), and the newborn went to church. Bob Latimer, Laura's husband, and Tracy stayed home that morning. Upon their return, Laura went to wake Tracy up and found her dead in her bed. The police were called in as a technicality. By law, death outside of a hospital required an autopsy.

Tracy's funeral was a happy event. We all knew that she had been released from her pain and deformities and was now home with Jesus. This child had touched so many people. Tracy Lyn was as close to sinlessness as a human mortal can get. The church was packed. The staff at the Developmental Center and at the children's group home came, as did most of the children from her school.

Two weeks later, Bob Latimer was arrested for first degree murder of his severely retarded child. Everyone was shocked. We thought there had to be a mistake. My best friend phoned Laura that night and found out that Bob had willingly confessed to the murder. He even showed police how he had taken her to their garage, placed her in his half ton truck, had rigged up an apparatus, that would bring the carbon monoxide fumes into the cab, and sat to watch her die. He then picked her up and placed her back into her bed so Laura could find her in bed.

He had refused a lawyer. His half brother had to pressure him to obtain counsel. At his preliminary hearing he pleaded NOT GUILTY! His wife pleaded to have him released and sent home.

He gave an interview to CBC where he freely admits to "euthanizing" his daughter. He stated that he couldn't stand to see her in so much pain. (The Friday before he killed her she traveled over ten miles on gravel roads to school).

A year later he was found guilty of 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder and sentenced to the mandatory life in prison with a chance of parole after ten years. (First degree murder is 25 years without parole).

The flood of well-wishers and donations arrived. Over \$80,000 was given to help with court costs and the man was hailed as a wonderful father who just did the compassionate thing.

During the court proceedings, a court reporter that had covered many murder trials, commented she had never seen so many court officials be so lenient in giving special privileges. The prosecution had no qualms about letting him out on bail after the preliminary hearing. "He is no danger to society." This man killed his daughter but he's no threat to society?

They appealed the case and again the guilty plea held. Unbelievably the judge thought the sentence was too steep. (He murders a child – his own child – and ten years is too steep!)

The Canadian Supreme Court is listening to arguments not for euthanasia but that his rights were violated. He's saying the police held him for questioning for too long before they made an arrest.

He will be getting a new trial because the prosecuting attorney got the police to ask questions about religion, morality, abortion, euthanasia, etc, to the potential jury members during jury selection. This violated his right to a fair trial. (All expenses will be paid by the taxpayers of Saskatchewan).

We live in a very small town in Saskatchewan. There is very little crime. There had not been a murder here in 75 years. My family doesn't even lock the doors when we go out. I have never seen the police go down our road.

This convicted murderer lives two miles away from my home. After his conviction and while waiting to hear the decision of the appeals court he was allowed to come home under house arrest. Wearing a monitoring bracelet, he was restricted to a five mile radius from his home. Most convicted murderers have to stay in jail while awaiting their appeal.

He shows no remorse. He firmly believes he will be released unconditionally. He doesn't understand why the police and other groups (Saskatchewan pro-life voice, etc.) feel that he is a murderer. He has stated that as this child's father, he felt he was doing the best for his little girl. He believes this is a family matter and no one else's business.

In this small town in rural Sask a father murdered his own child and people are saying he's a good man. This child was not the family pet to be put out of her misery. She was a human being – a soul. This child taught about compassion and caring. She made me realize that children can teach us. She taught me not to judge the worth of a person by their appearance or popularity.

She showed my family that God has a purpose for everyone, even a child with multiple handicaps.

If Tracy had been endowed with normal intelligence, we would compare what her father did with Susan Smith – the woman who drowned her two young, innocent children. But because Tracy was handicapped, society and her parents believed she was garbage to be thrown away when they felt like it.

What do I tell my child when she asks, "If Bob killed Tracy because she was sick and hurting, will he do that to Lindsey and Brian if they get sick?" I don't know what to tell her.

Euthanasia is not just coming – it's here – alive and well in a supposedly Christian country. The media gives such a biased representation. Only once did they present that this child went to school. For the most part they played on how handicapped she was and what wonderful and caring parents she had. They consistently implied that murder is merciful. If you look at the news reports, it portrays Bob Latimer as the victim instead of his daughter Tracy.

Shortly after Tracy's murder, several other cases involving handicapped persons being euthanized came into the media. This is not a family matter. This is a societal matter. Who gets to draw the line about whom is useful in our society - Lawyers, judges, governments? It scares me that others may look to Bob Latimer as a role model.

*-Heather Hockbaum*

I don't know what reading this story did to you, but my emotions and thoughts race from tears, to questions, to outrage.

On the way home from this trip, I picked up the USA Today newspaper in the airport to find Dr. Jack Kevorkian, in the news again. He has assisted in over thirty suicides in America. He is hailed by many as a “compassionate” hero. St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church in Livonia, Michigan was packed as he delivered the sermon. He said the bottom line was the “right not to suffer”.

Two Circuit Court of Appeals must agree because they ruled patients do have a right to die – even a right to ask someone to help them. Assisted suicide is now the law of the land in twelve states. I’m not going political on you, but I think this sends a horrific message to our youth.

These are my thoughts on the message we’re sending concerning assisted suicide...

### 1. *Physical vs. Emotional Pain*

Talk to people, talk to counselors, and it is clear, most people would choose physical pain over emotional pain. In light of the often tough, painful world youth are living in today, what are we saying to them? Are we saying we accept “the right not to have to suffer?” At any cost? Suicide is already claiming 18 of our nation’s young people each day, with another 1,800 attempts. Is this the message we wish to send? That death by suicide is treatment for pain? To say nothing of the street drugs, sex, violence, gangs, and other vehicles youth already use to numb pain. I say NO! Let’s teach youth there are positive, healthy, loving, meaningful ways to deal with the suffering in a fallen, painful world.

### 2. *Human Doings vs. Human Beings*

In a day where the L.A. Lakers agree to pay one man, Shaquille O’Neal, \$121 million to play basketball for seven years, and a handicapped girl is killed, **without a choice**, by her own father who is now practically a “free man”. What does this tell our youth about where value is found? If you’re talented, if you can perform, if you’re the best, you score big. If you’re deformed, physically or mentally handicapped, or in pain, we will take you off the game itself. That’s the game of life. We will call it mercy killing because what kind of life would you have? If we accept this, we reduce people to “human doings”, basing their value on what they do rather than who they are – human beings. The issue is the sanctity of all life vs. the quality of life as determined by whom – society?

Is Tracy’s dad a “caring father” or a man with a vision of a perfect society like Hitler? Call it extreme, but come with me and stand in front of 100,000 youth a year and hear the cries of low self-image. An image that can’t compete with what society says is valuable.

### 3. *The Question of Suffering*

How could a loving God allow His children to suffer and go through such torment? There is a lot of awesome writing on this, but let me say as a father of five children, my heart aches to see my kids suffer. Each of my kids has had at least one visit to the emergency ward. The doctor comes and seems to cause more pain. I hate it! But I allow it. I didn’t cause the original pain yet I allow more suffering because I know what the end result will be.

God knows the bigger picture of suffering – if supported by love and comfort – can produce in a person. I am not saying suffering is good. I believe we should make every effort to reduce it in terminally ill people. But look at the suffering God allowed His own Son, Jesus to go through.

**Hebrews 5:8** reads, “Although He was the Son, He learned obedience by the things He suffered. **Romans 5:3-5**, “We rejoice in our suffering because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance – character, and character – hope.”

Hopelessness, lack of character, and apathy are monsters eating away at our youth. Yet the vehicle to build perseverance, character, and hope – suffering – is being eliminated by society. By facing the reality of suffering, we may add what is lacking in young people’s lives.

### 4. *Burden vs. Caring*

“I’m soooo bored, there’s nothing to do.” This echoes the voices of youth throughout America. Yet there are more thrills, adventures, opportunities, and things to do than ever before.

We taught them that more, faster, bigger pleasures are good. Who said you can't have it all?! But we haven't taught them to slow down and love. You're in the way of what I want, no need to be happy. Happiness is the goal, or should I say "god" of many Americans. So get out of my way. Put the old and the handicapped in nursing homes and don't expect me to visit. I don't want to associate with pain or suffering.

Terminally ill Americans need adequate care as they approach death rather than the right to a physician assisted suicide. A congressional subcommittee was told in an April 29, 1996 hearing that two of the loneliest people in the world are youth and the elderly. Maybe they need each other. If a suffering elderly person was visited and cared for by a young person, whether it be to hold their hand, talk, or just listen – what a difference it would make in both of their lives.

I was in Moline, Illinois at a youth convention of 700 high school students. Thirty of the students went to a nursing home for a servant project. They played Bingo with the elderly and they visited with them. At the end, the students didn't want to leave. Hugs and prayers were shared. Addresses were exchanged so they could keep in touch. **It is more blessed to give than to receive.** Society has taught youth to take and take until they are bored and empty. Let's teach everyone to give, care, and love. Just watch the change.

Articles are written by Bob Lenz, Tiffany Thompson and other national youth communicators with Life Promotions Inc., a non-profit youth organization committed to instilling hope, worth and value in youth.

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