

The New Normal: Facing Life after a Child's Death

by Marti Pieper

“Dad, I know you’re scared. I believe the Lord will deliver me through this. But if he doesn’t, I’m going home to be with him, and that’s okay with me.”—BJ

Higgins, August 5, 2005

Brent and Deanna Higgins clung to these valiant words throughout their son’s six-week hospitalization. BJ became ill with a mysterious infection after he returned from his second mission trip to Peru. His death on September 26, 2005, days before his sixteenth birthday, ushered their family (Brent, Deanna, and two college-aged daughters) into what they called the *new normal*: life without their beloved son and brother. The new normal also meant life without one who served as a role model for many, including his own family members. BJ’s story and message of passionate obedience to Christ are chronicled in his parents’ best-selling book, *I Would Die for You: One Student’s Story of Passion, Service, and Faith* (Revell, 2008).

How do Brent and Deanna survive the new normal? The Higgins point to their relationship with God as the key. “The level of intimacy one truly has in a relationship with Christ is often reflected through the time of pain, suffering, and loss,” says Brent, now vice president for international operations for their son’s sending agency, Awe Star Ministries. He and Deanna recommend that others who face the loss of a child draw near to God. “When you do, He promises to draw near to you,” Brent explains.

Drawing near to other people is important, too, Deanna says. “It helped to talk to other people about him, to remember who he was. Initially, just holding onto the people around us helped a lot.”

Today, the Higgins lead teams of young missionaries like their son to take the Gospel of Christ to people around the world. More recently, God has opened the doors for ministry to others who have lost a child. “No two losses are exactly alike regardless of similar circumstances,” says Brent. “I encourage parents to seek the Lord because He always listens.”

“Everyone goes through it differently,” says Deanna. “We each grieve in our own way, but God can handle our anger. He can handle anything.” She urges other hurting parents to recognize the hope beyond their pain. “If you look, you’ll find ways He’s showing you He cares. He’s showing you He’s with you through it.”

God’s presence doesn’t eliminate loneliness, however. The Higgins both admit that their work with students often brings back bittersweet memories of their son. “Certain students remind me of BJ in their passion for Christ, their hunger to know more,” Brent says. At times, both Brent and Deanna find comfort in their son’s journals (excerpted in the book) as well as videos and pictures of him. Music, an integral part of their family life, also serves as a source of strength.

Connecting with God and with others, especially young people like their son, helps them cope. Deanna says the loss of her son has left her more open to see the potential of these young men and women. Brent adds, “Before BJ

passed, the things I taught were less experiential and more intellectual. The things the Lord has allowed me to walk through since that time have increased my own intensity and passion for seeing students truly understand what God calls them to do.”

As part of a passionate declaration in one of his journals, BJ wrote, “It’s time to raise a revolution. God will give me the strength.” For his parents, the new normal means a commitment to extend his legacy—even when it hurts.