

The Death of a Child is the Worst

According to his mother, Forrest's last words were: "I just want to feel good. I just want to be happy."

by Becky Johnson

The death of a child is the worst. The death of a little, precious, bright, energetic, cute-beyond-belief, five-year-old boy is as unfathomable as it is horrifying. How could anyone recover from such a great loss? I know I couldn't. This should not be. This cannot be.

Saturday, as I fretted over my many pressing, "important" worries, the phone rang. Moments later, my daughter called out, "Mom, it's John Hernandez on the phone." John and his partner Leslie Scales had participated in the City Hall Sleepers Protest in Santa Cruz last year. Vehicularly housed with their pre-school son, Forrest, John and Leslie were involved in an amazing number of issues putting their bodies on the line.

In addition to vigiling against the Santa Cruz Sleeping Ban, this homeless family organized a successful (and controversial) dogging of then-Mayor Mike Rotkin at a Feng Shui event with signs, chants, and homeless protesters. John has been a regular on Free Radio Santa Cruz (96.3 FM), a medical marijuana activist, and a video journalist on the front lines of the Headwaters actions to save the old-growth forest.

The death of a child is an outrage.

I answered the phone, "Hi John, what can I do for you?" I expected to hear any of a number of interesting things, from reports on police abuse, to Headwaters court actions, Food Not Bombs news, or video stuff for Community TV. But not this...

John and Leslie had a baby boy a few months ago. They hadn't planned on having a second child. John has children from a previous relationship.

And the family was living in a van. Hardly ideal circumstances for bringing a child into the world. But the baby came anyway, despite their resolve. And it was a good thing as it turned out. As mommies and daddies everywhere will, John and Leslie loved the new baby. And Forrest was thrilled to have a new baby brother.

And with the love of their committed relationship, the children they had between them, the pared-down lifestyle choice they'd made, and the continuing level of activism they

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were able to maintain, life was good. They went north to Willits, California, where they rented a small cabin. One of their favorite things to do was go down to a special place they knew in Muir Mill Creek, where Forrest loved to play in the water.

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John's voice shattered my day: "Forrest is dead." He was crying so hard, it was difficult to hear him.

"What!" I almost shouted at him. How dare he shock me with such an obscene statement out of the blue like that. "Forrest is dead. My son. My son Forrest is dead. He died in my arms. I gave him mouth to mouth resuscitation but he was dead."

As I was able to find my voice again, shock and disbelief swimming

around me like a putrefying witches' brew, the details came out.

John and Leslie had been going to Willits, where John had court dates. He had been arrested in the Headwaters Forest while he was videotaping the protest of the logging of the old-growth forest.

They were on a family outing to their favorite spot in the creek. It had rained the night before, and the water was a little frothy. Forrest drank some of the creek water. John and Leslie saw him do it. They shouted at him to stop, that the water there was polluted. There was raw sewage leaking into the creek, but no warning signs had been posted. He was only five years old. He laughed at them, and played in the water. He was such a playful child.

On August 21, Forrest became very ill. They thought it was the flu. According to Leslie, his last words were: "I just want to feel good. I just want to be happy." Leslie said he turned green. It was early morning. They rushed him to the hospital in Willits. He died 10 or 15 minutes later as John held him. He was such a sweet, precious little guy, a joy to his parents, and a playmate to his friends.

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The Investigation Into Forrest's Death

On the coffee table in the waiting room of the hospital where Forrest had just been declared dead, John saw a copy of a newspaper with a picture of some dead fish. The article caught

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