

# DEALING WITH DEATH

It is inevitable for all of us. It's not something we like to talk about, but it happens in schools all over the yearbook world, every year. So you need to know how to handle it in your yearbook if it happens at your school. Do you?

Spring is usually when we get requests on how to handle the death of a student, teacher, staff member or administrator in a yearbook. New and experienced advisers alike will have it happen in their school and not know what to do. To be very honest, neither did we. We didn't have anything definitive, at least, to tell those advisers when they asked us, "How do we deal with the death of one of our school family in the yearbook?" We were asked this question again last week, sadly, so we decided to put together the information we have accumulated from advisers and yearbooks of all kinds about dealing with this subject.

Our overall findings by going through some very good yearbooks included:

- Many covered that student with a sidebar in the class they were part of. If the deceased was a junior, they ran a sidebar in the junior mug section, faculty member in the faculty section, etc. The rest put the memorial at the end of the yearbook. This was especially true if the death happened late in the year after the mug shot sections had been submitted.
- Most of these sidebars did not dwell on the cause of death, although one did read, "On February 3rd, John Doe found it necessary to take his own life." Another mentioned, "After a long battle with cancer, John Doe passed away on February 3rd, 2013."
- All of the sidebars that I really liked included quotes from friends about how that student had lived, and the best included a specific memory about that person. The big point here is to dwell on how the person lived as opposed to how he or she died.
- No yearbook covered the death of graduates. Your yearbook covers this year, not the death of someone who is not known by most of the students in your school. This includes board members, district faculty or other community leaders unless they are well known in your school. ❀

After looking at yearbooks, we sent out some e-mails asking other advisers who we knew had faced this dilemma. We got back some very thoughtful responses. These were the two we liked best.

**The first response came from an adviser who I truly admire for sharing this:**

*"I am hesitant about writing this, but I'm going to anyway from the perspective of a parent who has experienced the death of a child. Our son Jeff had just finished his freshman year at a local high in 1984 when he died in a drowning accident at the lake. Until recently, I have also been the group leader for the local Chapter of The Compassionate Friends for approximately 15 years. So, I believe I qualify to put in my two-cents worth.*



**Please advise students not to list the cause of death, especially if the cause is suicide.** Mentioning that the child died on a certain day, how much he/she will be missed, and adding comments from other students should be sufficient. BUT, first ask the parents what they would be comfortable with. Remember, this book is forever and what is written could be a very painful experience and reminder of an extremely dark time in a student's life. This could also be true in the case of a student who was killed because he/she was driving and drinking. So, the best thing, in my opinion, is to just not mention the cause of death unless it is from cancer or some other physical illness that meant the student had put up a fight to live.

**For a dedication page, the parents are a great source of information.** Interview them, also. A nice gesture would be to give the parents a copy of the yearbook—most likely, they will treasure it forever. The yearbook is only one little piece of their child's life, but even one little piece is worth more than anyone can imagine to a grieving parent.

**So, there, I've said it. I hope it helps in some small way."**

**"You may want to remind advisors to check their school board policy.** Ours prohibits memorials of any kind in student publications (or in our building). I didn't understand this policy at first, but there are several valid reasons. Especially if it is a suicide, other students who are already on the edge may see this and see it as a way to get attention for themselves. It is also easy to memorialize well-known or well-liked students but not as easy with someone who wasn't. Some schools will memorialize students in the year they would have graduated; however, especially in larger schools, that could be hard to keep track of and, unfortunately, there is no guarantee that student would have graduated that year - he or she could have moved or dropped out. Just my two cents."

