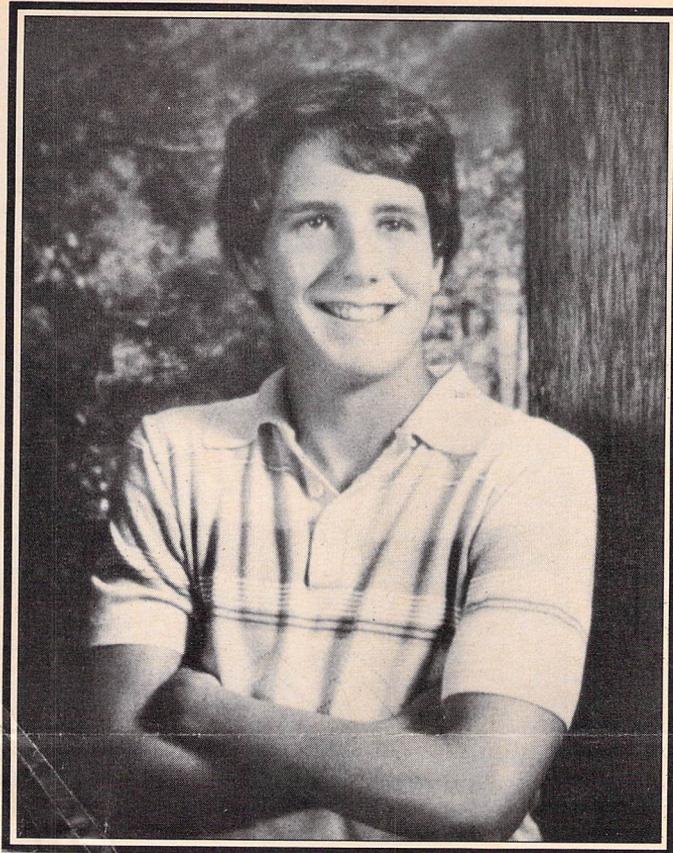


IN A SUPREME ACT OF FORGIVENESS A KENTUCKY COUPLE 'ADOPTS' THE MAN WHO KILLED THEIR SON

Most Sundays after church, Frank and Elizabeth Morris take Tommy out to eat. Sometimes Tommy mows the lawn, or the three of them sit around the living room discussing the Bible. On Thursdays Tommy joins Frank and Elizabeth in an evening of roller skating, and on weekends they bowl. Earlier this month he helped them mount an elaborate Hawaiian luau in the backyard of their Pee Dee, Ky. home. As a matter of course, Tommy telephones the Morrises every day, usually between 4 and 5 p.m. "I would miss it if he didn't call," says Elizabeth, 40, who is forever kidding with Tommy, 26, tugging at his tie, picking the lint off his jacket—just like a mother.

Only once in a while do Tommy and the Morrises feel there's something odd about their relationship. That's when Tommy is introduced to an out-of-towner and the stranger asks, quite naturally, "Is this your son?" For Frank and Elizabeth there is no easy way to answer. What can they say? That Tommy is their surrogate son? That he is the beneficiary of their Christian beliefs, of Elizabeth's extraordinary maternal needs? For Tommy the question is equally unsettling. It's a sharp reminder that, no, he's not really the Morrises' son. He is, rather, the killer of their son, their only child.

Two nights before Christmas 1982, Tommy Pigage drove from a party where he had made a fool of himself and showed friends that his drinking problem had gotten out of control. After pausing briefly at a Minit Mart to get his bearings, he plunged the Buick back onto the road. The last thing he



Ted Morris, 18, was killed by drunk driver Tommy Pigage.

remembers is approaching the Canton Street Bridge in Hopkinsville. "Then I blacked out," he says. Tommy never saw 18-year-old Ted Morris coming the other way in his '76 AMC Hornet.

The first time the Morrises heard Tommy Pigage's name was the day before Christmas. They drove to the Hopkinsville police station to get an official report on the collision and saw his name on it. Several days later they found a Hopkinsville High School yearbook and located Tommy's senior photograph. "We wanted to grasp every detail, to know what happened," says Frank. "I remember thinking he looked a little like a punk. He had long hair. Of course," Frank adds, "he wasn't going to look good to me anyway." Tommy was certainly a far cry from the boy he'd killed. Where Ted was gregarious, articulate, deeply religious, Tommy was shy and without direction. Where Ted was an old-fashioned kid who "yes sirred" and "ma'ammed" his parents, a scholarship student at David Lipscomb College, Tommy was a budding alco-

holic from a broken home.

It wasn't until Jan. 7, 1983 that Elizabeth saw Tommy in the flesh. It was at a hearing involving his murder charge. "I was trembling all over," she remembers. "My nose was running, my legs were rubbery. It was a sickening feeling to see that boy." She admits now that she wanted him dead. On February 3, the grand jury reduced the charge to manslaughter. "We were furious," says Elizabeth. "This is when I became very resentful. Tommy was walking, talking, breathing, while my son, the innocent victim, was in a fresh grave." Finally, on October

26, Tommy was given a 10-year sentence. Five of those years were suspended and the remaining five were probated, which meant he was at large. His probation called for him to attend alcohol counseling and to spend every other weekend in Christian County Jail for two years, undergoing a blood test for alcohol content each time he entered. Among other stipulations, he was required to participate in Mothers Against Drunk Driving programs at area high schools for a period of five years.

At the beginning of last December Tommy spoke on behalf of MADD for the first time, at an assembly held at Trigg County High School—which, ironically, was the school from which Ted Morris had graduated in 1982. In the back of the gymnasium stood Elizabeth. "I'm ready for this," she remembers telling herself. "I want to hear how

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"I love Tommy as this new creature," says Elizabeth (reading the Bible with him and Frank), "not as our son's murderer."



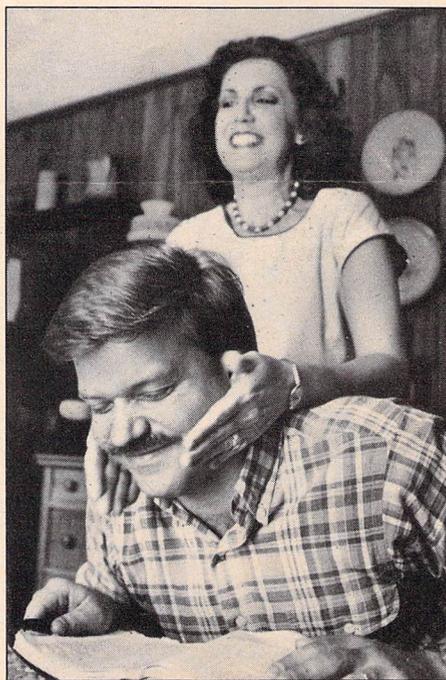
Elizabeth (kidding with Tommy) won't let anybody play with the beach ball Ted blew up before he died. It sits on his bed.

you're going to worm yourself out of this." As it turned out, Elizabeth was not ready for Tommy Pigage. She had expected him to offer up a world of excuses, but he did not. "I want to tell you about the night I killed Ted Morris," he began in a quavering voice.

Elizabeth remembers thinking, "I can't believe what I'm hearing." Tommy spoke of crying all the time, day and night, after the collision, of the anguish he had caused Ted's parents. He referred to himself as "a murderer" and even said he thought his sentence was too light, adding, "I should be in prison."

The last thing Elizabeth wanted, or expected, was to feel compassion for the killer of her son. But after the program ended, she approached Tommy Pigage, who was visibly afraid of her. "I'm not going to slap you or spit in your face," she remembers telling him. "He just stood there and looked at the floor. I told him it took a lot of courage to do what he did." Elizabeth reached out to touch Tommy on the arm. He turned toward her and started to say something and, suddenly, her feelings of pity vanished. She smelled liquor on his breath.

The next evening while passing by Tommy's apartment (by chance, she says), Elizabeth spotted him on the



front porch. She asked him to get into her car, and he did. "He thought I was taking him to jail," she says. They had a talk. Tommy admitted he'd been drinking the previous day, at which point Elizabeth said to him, "You don't need your driver's license." Then, she says, "Tommy took it out of his wallet and tried to give it to me. He was so submissive, like a little whipped puppy, almost afraid to move." Elizabeth told Tommy that she was "willing to give him another chance. But I said, 'If you

do this again, I'm going to nail your hide to the wall.'"

Apparently shaken by the encounter, Tommy drank heavily that Friday night. Come Saturday morning he entered the county jail, where his blood alcohol level was found to be excessive and he was incarcerated for three months.

During his three-month lockup Tommy's most faithful visitor was Elizabeth Morris, who was amazed to feel her initial hatred being overcome by an intense desire to mother this lost and needy soul.

On January 12, returning from a MADD lecture in Todd County, Ky., Frank Morris, a United Parcel Service driver who once was a part-time preacher, began a conversation with Tommy about the Bible. "On the way," says Frank, "I could see he was a believer. I said, 'If you're sincere in wanting to be baptized, I can stop this very night and baptize you.' About 10 that night we stopped at the Little River Church. Tommy put on a baptismal gown, and I baptized him by immersion. He thanked me and asked if I'd forgive him for what he'd done. I said, 'Yes, I'll forgive you.' Elizabeth had already forgiven him."

Ted Morris is gone, but he is hardly forgotten. "We do not tippy-toe around the subject of Ted," says Frank. "We are completely open." Indeed, in an effort to help Tommy to get to "know" Ted, Elizabeth insisted some weeks ago that he come along on a gravesite visit. It was the only time Tommy has ever seen her weep. Then, too, there is the house. In all, the Morrises' 11-room modified Cape Cod home contains some 50 photos of Ted. He is, in fact, the theme of the entire house. For a year Elizabeth would not strip the sheets from her dead son's bed because they still bore his scent. After Ted died Elizabeth took several of the silk roses given her previously by her son and mounted them in a glass box hung in the living room. "When I die I want those flowers in my hands," she says. It is Elizabeth's feeling that "because we've tried to help Tommy doesn't mean we love Ted any less. Ted has gone to a better place. If he knew about this hatred I was harboring toward Tommy, he would have said to forgive. Ted would not have wanted me hating Tommy, that hatred eating me like a cancer from inside. Now I can be happy again, I can go on living."

—Written by William Plummer, reported by Cable Neuhaus

