

# A Birthday to Celebrate and Remember

By Janet Benz

It seemed like our family was just beginning to recover from some of the traumatic events around the catastrophic death of our son in January 2007. Each of us were settling into the grief journey and what that meant for us individually and collectively, when Christopher's 18th birthday arrived. As a parent I struggled with what to do and how to handle what I expected to be a very emotional and difficult day for our family. I couldn't begin to know how my other two sons would deal with their youngest brother's birthday and the reminder that he was no longer with us. I only knew that he was and always will be my son, and I still am and always will be his mother, and nothing will ever change that.

I felt that just as birthdays had always been in our home, that Christopher's birthday needed to continue to be a very special day. There was in me a driving need to recognize the day in celebration of Christopher's life, to honor him for who he was, what he brought to our lives and those around him, and to continue to keep him present in our lives in a meaningful way. So we planned and had a birthday dinner for him which ended up being such a positive and meaningful experience for our entire family that we have decided to do this every year. It was a nurturing and healing day for me as I prepared Christopher's favorite foods and the entire family planned their busy schedules of that day in time to be home for dinner. The dinner table included a cake with the bold inscription "Happy Birthday Christopher;" however there were no candles on the cake.

At the end of the meal, each person was given a birthday candle and asked to talk about what they thought Christopher would have done with his life, and this year we told our favorite Christopher stories. Each person lit their candle as they shared their memories of his life and then placed the candle on the cake. Once all the candles were on the cake our family shared a prayer, made a wish, paused and then blew out the candles.

I know we will continue to celebrate this very special day in our family as Christopher's birthday arrives each year, for our family feels it is good and it is right for us to do. I also found this to be a perfect time to bring out photos of family and friends, baseball trophies, high school year books and other items that help strengthen the memories but may not always be on display every day in our home. Reminiscing and sharing memories is a wonderful way to keep our loved ones alive in a very real way as we continue to give meaning to their lives; and as we connect with each other in mutual support on this path we all walk as survivors.

Editors Note: We all grieve differently. There is no right or wrong way to handle celebrations, anniversaries or special occasions. This is one family's way to celebrate a birthday in hopes it will help others find ways to live, grieve and go on.