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Seeing death as part of life

*Children's Museum opens the dialogue about a forbidden subject*By Elizabeth New, Weld
Globe Staff

In a quiet, airy room overlooking Fort Point Channel, children are learning about death. "Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss," at the Children's Museum, through June 1985, has been called "courageous" and "excellent" by visitors.

Janet Kamien of the museum staff developed the exhibit, the first of its kind, because she thinks children encounter death in their daily lives and need to learn about it. Dr. Martin Norman, codirector of the Belmont Counseling Center and adviser on the project, agrees. "There will be public opinion that says we must be protective of our children and not make them confront or face unpleasant or frightening feelings," Norman says. "But in my work, I help children cope with sadness, loss and separation, feelings that stem from divorce to people just moving away, from losing a friend, grandparents or a pet."

Located in an enclosed corner on the museum's third floor, the exhibit opens by putting death in perspective: "Every day, some people are born and some people die. On a given day, all over the world, about 380,000 people are born and about 145,000 die. Do you remember the death or birth of anyone in your family?" a sign asks. Throughout the exhibit, children and parents fill out forms called "Talkback" with their responses.

Talkback: "I remember the death of Jack Cole who died when I was about 5 years old. He would always give us doughnuts. I remember the birth of Becky H. who was born when I was 3. She is now 5. She is very funny."

Once inside, children can touch a tombstone, watch a speeded-up videotape of a dead mouse's body being eaten by insects, look into a coffin or lift up a phone to hear funeral music from around the world.

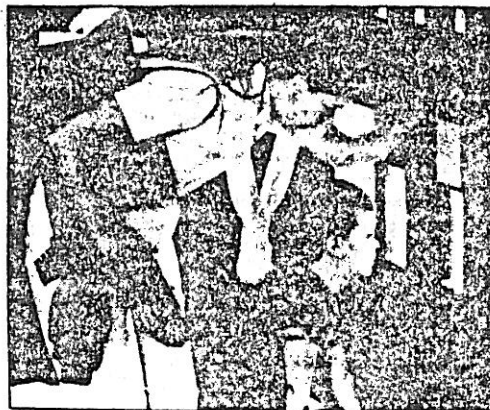
Most children turn immediately toward the dead frog displayed in front of a live one in an aquarium. Ponytailed Sarah Murray, 3, of Philadelphia sticks her finger onto the dead frog's back. "Mom! Commer! It's real - it's pretend," she says. Sarah is unsure about the difference.

The exhibit takes pains to help children think about what is alive and what is dead, what is pretend and what is real. One section displays objects and animals and asks, "Which is alive? Which is dead? Which was never alive?"

Next to the dead frog, a man on a video reels backward into a wall. Blood spurts onto his shirt and



Nicholas Ambler shows no fear at the tombstone exhibit.



Pat Fontana and her son, Jerry Lyons, look at displays together.

smears the wall behind him while he falls to the ground. "Eeeyooo, gross!" says a blond 9-year-old boy.

"OK, cut, that's a take," says a man's voice on the video, and the actor stands up and shakes the director's hand. "Here's how it's done," continues the overvoice, explaining on the video how bloodshed is simulated on television and in the movies.

The boy runs to get his younger sister, and they return to the curtained cubicle to watch scenes of fighting in Lebanon taken from television news spots. "Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between what's real and what isn't," says the narrator. "It's confusing."

Sarah's mother, Pat Murray, thinks it's good for children to learn about death. "She's young, but she knows - she saw the 'Sesame Street' show about the death

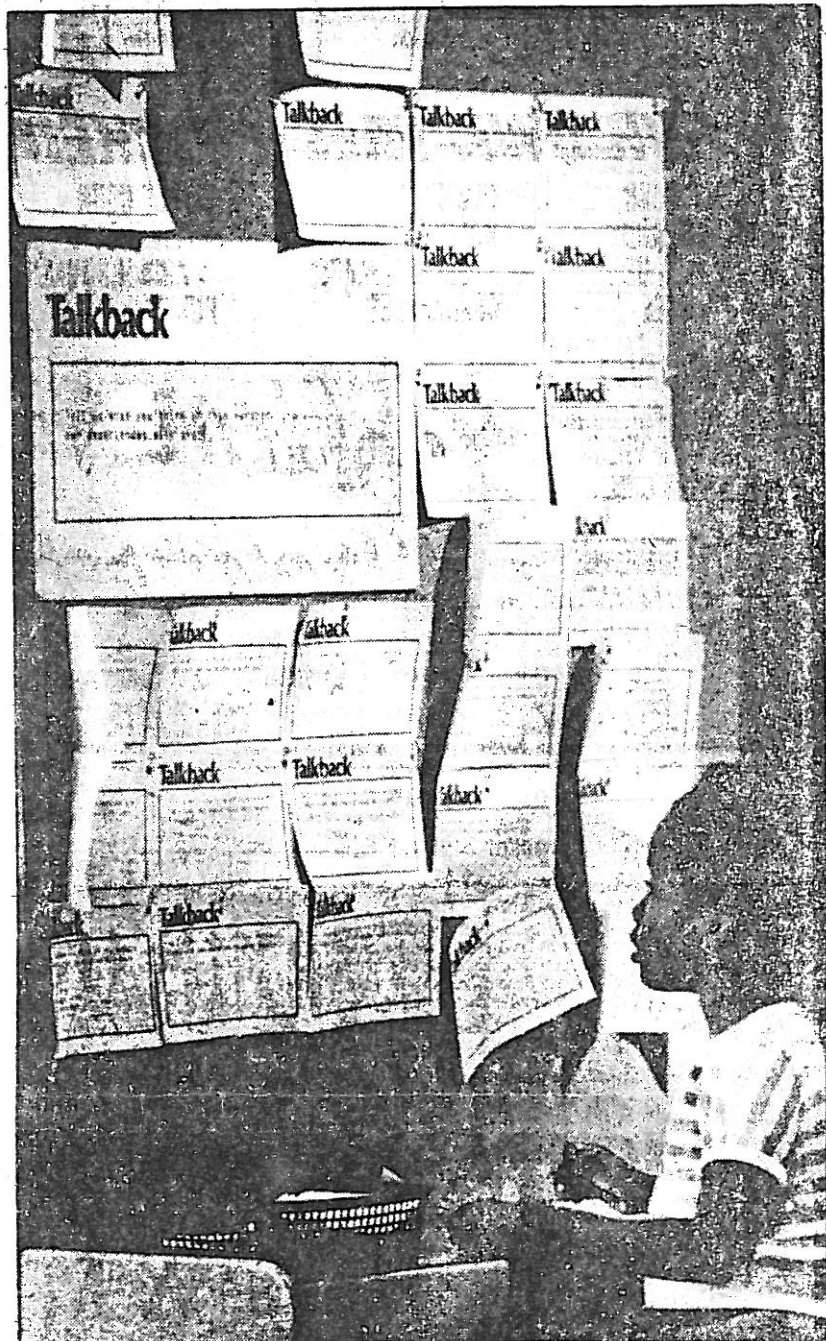
of Mr. Hooper. Just wait until she gets home and sees what happened to the worms she left in the garage."

Kamien says the exhibit offers something for every age. "A child of 6 would spend time in the 'Which is alive, which is dead?' part," she says. "Older children will spend more time with the videos and the rituals."

"When my cat died, I knew she was OK because she was suffering a lot. This exhibit helped me think of that."

"If you are going to take a small child to the exhibit, explain what they're going to see," says Rabbi Earl Grollman of Belmont, a project adviser who has written extensively on children and death. "A parent should stay close to the child. A child needs to feel the parent's warmth and affection while they're going through it."

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Teaching kids about death

■ DEATH

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Kamien tells the story of the mother and her 10-year-old son who wandered into the exhibit "When Grandpa Died," a story mounted on boards.

"The boy is just too old to hold her hand, and his shoulders are stiff," Kamien says. "She lets him wander alone while he reads, but she checks out how he's doing. He begins to stand closer and closer until he is leaning on the panels with his hands. She drifts over and puts her arm around him and they finish reading the story together.

"So the mother says, 'Does this remind you of someone you know?' And he nods: 'Yes. Grandpa.' They stand awhile with an arm around each other, talking, crying a little. Then they wipe their eyes and walk around the corner.

"This exhibit provided them with a contact point and things they have shared that you just can't talk about at the dinner table," Kamien says. "My one hope for this exhibit is that parents and kids would talk to each other about the things being seen. The exhibit provides the subject and the permission to talk about death."

"I felt good about this. I learned dying can hurt everyone. Crying helps."

The exhibit skillfully weaves sections that elicit strong feelings with lighter and more intellectual areas. Near the case filled with objects put in ancient native American and Egyptian tombs to aid the spirit on its journey to the afterlife, a British physician living in New Hampshire grins at his two small, lively daughters. "We're deciding what I'm going to be buried with. It'll be Rudyard Kipling, I expect," he says.

"This exhibit is exceptionally good," the doctor adds. "It gives a sense of perspective. The average American has an outlandish sense of self-preservation and preservation of life — like pacemakers for dogs and cats. I personally believe it's too much."

One sign asks: Were you named for someone who died?

"I was named for Queen Maeve of Ireland who died."

"I was named Joseph for my grandfather who was a very good welder."

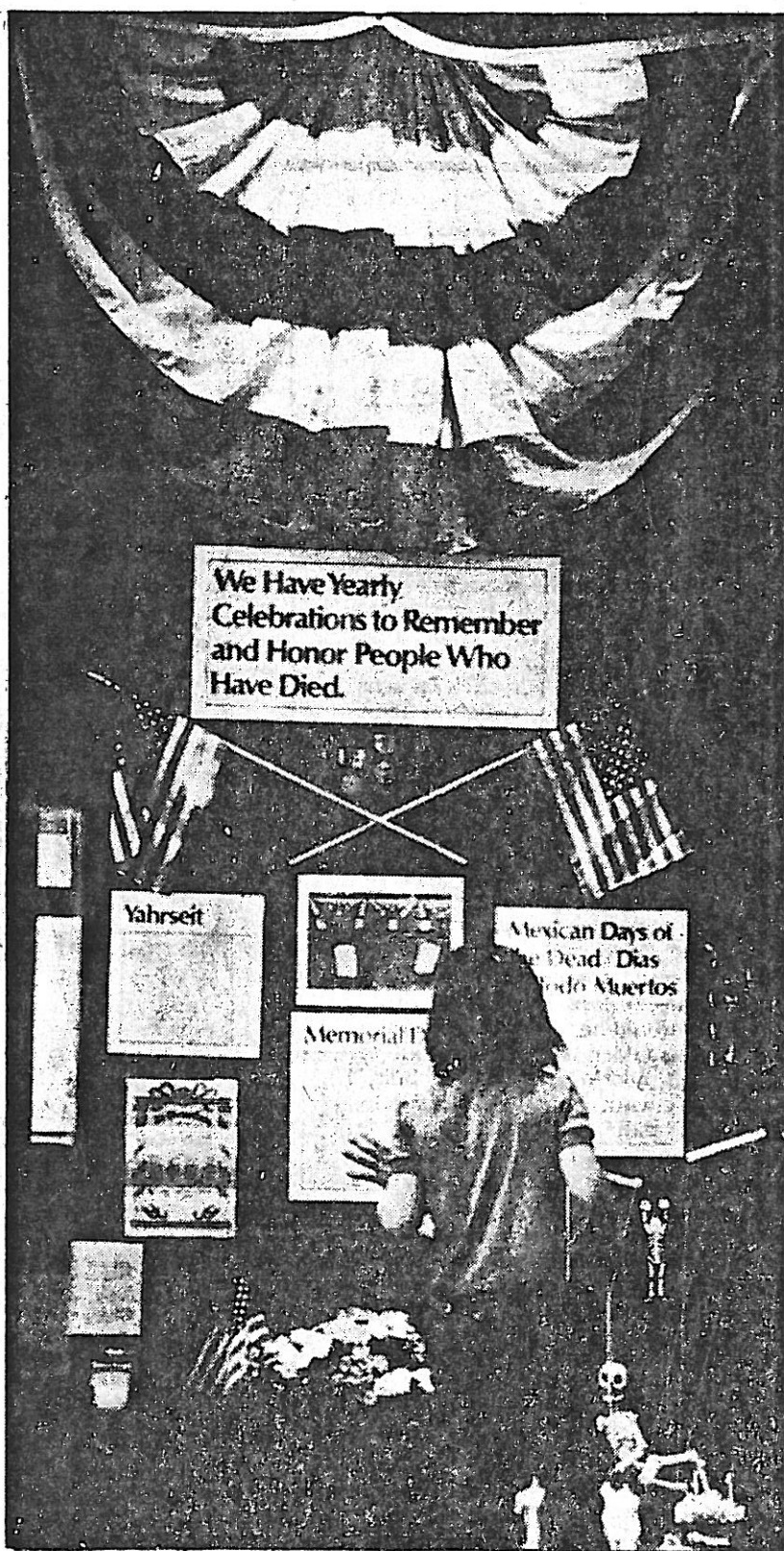
"I was named for Bobby Kennedy."

The room is sometimes very quiet as people study the exhibits. "I think it's sad," says a boy of 10, standing close to his father beside the mock gravestone.

"I don't like death. It makes me feel bad."

"What can I do about feeling sad?" asks Audrey, the voice of a puppet in a video written and performed by Susan Linn, puppet therapist at Children's Hospital. Audrey's puppet friend Alison has been killed by a car.

"One of the things you can do is talk about it," says Linn's voice. "Doing something can help the hurt."



A child observes part of the exhibition on death at Children's Museum. GLOBE PHOTO BY JANET KNOTT

"I'm writing a poem and painting a picture," says Audrey. "Maybe when I finish my picture, I'll feel like playing tag again." Linn's videotape is viewed by families sitting on huge brown pillows on a carpeted platform near a resource center where museum staff often sit to answer questions and talk.

Half the exhibit concentrates on rituals surrounding death and comfort for survivors, from prayers and music written for the dead to ceremonies and memorials. The section includes a coffin, chemicals used to embalm bodies, burial clothes and a discussion of afterlife. "Being the survivor is a much tougher task than being the victim," Kamien says. "And when we're in circumstances where it can't be discussed, then it's all the harder. We wanted to offer the options."

"It's great because it makes me think about death without telling me what to think. This makes me happy."

Resources for parents are of-

fered — reading lists, newspaper stories and, in the gift shop, a bookshelf labeled "Death" containing 30 books, ranging from guides for parents such as "Talking about Death" by Rabbi Grollman and "On Children and Death" by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross to Newbery Award-winning fiction such as "Bridge at Terabithia" by Katherine Paterson and "The Cat Who Went to Heaven" by Elizabeth Coatsworth.

"The soul goes to heaven. The body stays."

"It's not a question of showing them an exhibit," Rabbi Grollman says. "It's entering into a dialog between parents and child."

"I'm not listening because I am afraid."

"Death is a very sad thing and it happens to the best of us."

"I believe, after people die, they evaporate after a long time in their graves, but a little piece of that person is always in everybody's heart that loved him/her."