



# NEWS



NEWS SPORTS BUSINESS OBITS OPINION LIFESTYLE NIGHT & DAY TRAVEL MYTOWN CLASSIFIEDS AUTOS JOBS REAL ESTATE FIND A BUSINESS

WEATHER 72° F TRAFFIC **HOT TOPICS:** CHELSEA/AMBER | NCAA BRACKETS | SAFE PLACES MAP

Free Communication Event, March 18-21

David & April  
MATCHED BY eHARMONY

Experience the eHarmony difference for FREE this Thursday to Sunday!

[Learn More >](#)

## Metro

LOCAL NEWS NEWS BY REGION NEWS BY TOPIC

[EMAIL](#) [PRINT](#) [SAVE](#)



### Center helps families deal with issues of death

BY **LYNDSAY LEONELLI**, CONTRIBUTING WRITER  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2010 AT 12:02 A.M.

**KEARNY MESA** — Devrea Smith was visiting her husband on a Virginia military base when the unimaginable happened back in San Diego. A television came crashing on top of their 21-month-old daughter, killing her.

While the family was paralyzed with grief, the Bereavement Center at the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office helped them remember there is life after death.

About 11,000 equally heart-rending stories are reported to the medical examiner every year. The Bereavement Center, an annex of the agency's new complex in Kearny Mesa, is designed to assist those coping with tragedy.

"I don't know where we would be today if it wasn't for the Bereavement Center," said Smith, who lives on base at Camp Pendleton. "I couldn't even begin to explain how thankful we are."

The center offers counseling, cremation assistance, access to chaplains from various religious backgrounds and a grief resource booklet that helps navigate the often-complicated process of death. Most of the services are free.

"To date, we have spent almost \$50,000 helping families," said chaplain Joe Davis, who helped create the center. "When people get our call, they stop and say ... 'Wait, and you're from the county?'"

This service is especially helpful for families who are overwhelmed by the cost of death.

"No one wants to have that type of expense at a time like that. However, we are helping families who truly need and appreciate the assistance," Davis said.

Since the center's inception, 4,300 grief resource booklets have been distributed,



JOHN GASTALDO

Devrea Smith stood next to a pair of sandals that belonged to her daughter, Bronte, who was killed in a household accident in 2008. The Bereavement Center assisted her family in various ways, including finding a children's counselor for her son, who witnessed the accident.

### THINGS TO DO

[+ADD AN EVENT](#)

EVENTS MOVIES RESTAURANTS

16 Tue	17 Wed	18 Thu	19 Fri	20 Sat	All events
-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	-----------	---------------

- 4 pm tomorrow [ShamROCK 2010](#)
- 7 pm tomorrow [Boeing - Boeing](#)
- 8 pm Friday ['Romeo and Juliet'](#)

WHAT  WHEN

[ALL EVENTS](#) | [HOT TICKETS](#) | [+ADD AN EVENT](#)



MOST POPULAR MOST COMMENTS

- [Missing teen found in El Cajon](#)
- [Derailed train cleared, track repairs under way](#)
- [Westbound state Route 52 reopened](#)
- [Man stabbed during gang fight in Chula Vista](#)
- [NCAA Men's and Women's brackets](#)

more than 200 families have received free licensed counseling, and 100 cremations have been provided to families who might not have been able to afford them.

On March 2, 2008, Brenda Schaefer of Imperial Beach lost her husband of 29 years to suicide.

"I was lost, I was shocked ... I didn't know where money would be coming from. I didn't know if I would lose my home. I was overwhelmed," she said.

Soon after, Schaefer got a call from Davis at the Bereavement Center. He said that he and the team at the Medical Examiner's Office were ready to do whatever they could to make this process easier for her.

The center arranged for her husband to be cremated and have the ashes sent to his mother, whom they also notified of the death. It arranged to have some ashes saved for Schaefer and, in order to simplify the process, shipped the paperwork to a chaplain in her neighborhood.

"How often do you look up places to be cremated? I never," Schaefer said. "Some things you don't think about until after. All these steps that needed to be taken that I didn't even have to worry about. It made the transition of losing someone a lot easier."

It's been nearly two years since her husband died, and Davis still checks in on her.

"To this day, he calls me. Out of the blue. I mean, the 'Are you OKs?' the 'Do you need someone to talk to?' Just those little steps that you need to keep going," Schaefer said. "And he didn't know me from Adam."

After witnessing countless family members struggle with a lack of information or specialized assistance, Davis and the Medical Examiner's Office worked together to create the Bereavement Center in 2006. The San Diego center is one of only five like it in the nation and recently won the National Association of Counties 2009 Achievement Award.

"We didn't have the luxury of following up on cases — uniformly at least," said Glenn Wagner, the county's chief medical examiner. "But that didn't lessen the need of the people who came knocking on our doors."

In order to fund the Bereavement Center's offerings, a nonprofit organization called Dunamai was created in 2003. To date, it has brought together more than 20 agencies and organizations including churches, mortuaries, counseling programs and grief centers that provide services at no charge or at discounted prices. Dunamai raises about \$15,000 a year, primarily from private contributions, none of which goes to salaries.

"I remember when this first started, there seemed to be an awful lot of barriers. But as the 'me' got smaller, the 'we' got bigger. Soon, a really positive multiagency community effort was born," Wagner said.



- FAMILY PHOTO

Bronte Smith



Most of the services at the Bereavement Center are free. The center is at the Medical Examiner's Office complex in Kearny Mesa.

Advertisement

**Eat For Less In San Diego**  
Just enter your email address and get access to the best deals in San Diego... [Learn more](#)

**Don't Buy Wrinkle Creams!**  
Until you read our reviews. Top wrinkle creams of 2010 rated for results and value. Try them now. [Learn more](#)

[Add Your Link Here!](#)

#### FOLLOW US



#### Sponsored Listing

##### Refinance Rates 3.41% APR

\$160,000 mortgage for only \$712/mo. FREE. No obligation. Get 4 Quotes!  
[www.LendGo.com](http://www.LendGo.com)

##### Penny Stock Jumping 2000%

Sign up to the #1 voted penny stock newsletter for free today!  
[www.AwesomePennyStocks.com](http://www.AwesomePennyStocks.com)

##### Great Trading Education

Free Trading Seminars and Workshops!  
[JustClickLocal.com](http://JustClickLocal.com)

[Buy a link here](#)

#### SIGNON TOOLS

<a href="#">Weather</a>	<a href="#">Forums</a>
<a href="#">Traffic</a>	<a href="#">Webcams</a>
<a href="#">Surf</a>	<a href="#">Crossword</a>
<a href="#">Gas Prices</a>	<a href="#">Sudoku</a>
<a href="#">Lottery</a>	<a href="#">Horoscope</a>
<a href="#">Email Alerts</a>	<a href="#">Contests</a>
<a href="#">Text Alerts</a>	<a href="#">SignOn Guides</a>
<a href="#">Make this your homepage</a>	

#### UNION-TRIBUNE TOOLS

<a href="#">Your Subscription</a>	<a href="#">E-Edition</a>
<a href="#">Subscribe</a>	<a href="#">Archives</a>
<a href="#">Newspaper Ads</a>	<a href="#">Buy U-T Photos</a>
<a href="#">Vacation Stop</a>	<a href="#">Special Sections</a>
<a href="#">Subscription Help</a>	<a href="#">Newspaper in Education</a>

The Bereavement Center has been able to overcome the realities of tighter budgets during a bad economy by partnering with privately owned businesses and other nonprofits, Wagner said.

"Just like our new building, there is nothing about this institution that is ordinary," he said. "These are people trying to make a difference."

Devrea Smith's 3-year-old son, Dylan, was sitting next to his sister, Bronte, at their grandmother's house when the TV fell on Sept. 2, 2008. Smith searched everywhere for a counselor who specialized in children's grief therapy but couldn't find one.

After a call to the Bereavement Center, she had one.

The team also connected the family with the detective who worked the case, the emergency room doctor who operated on Bronte, the autopsy report and the 911 call that was made. The center donated a \$900 casket and arranged to have the toddler's body embalmed so her parents could say their goodbyes in person.

"It takes a lot of ease off you," Smith said, "to know there is someone you can go to and know that you'll get a result."



PHOTO BY PEGGY PEATTIE

Joe Davis, a chaplain at the Medical Examiner's Office, was instrumental in helping to create the Bereavement Center. The award-winning center is one of five such facilities in the nation.

#### Aid for the grieving

The Bereavement Center at the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office.

**What:** Provides free or discounted services to families who experience the sudden loss of loved ones. It is funded by Dunamai Ministries, a nonprofit organization.

To learn more or donate: go to [dunamai.net](http://dunamai.net)

EMAIL PRINT SAVE



#### Sponsored Listing

#### Acai Berry EXPOSED (News 7 Reports)

We Investigate Acai Berry. Is Acai a Miracle Diet or Internet Scam? News7Daily.tv

[Buy a link here](#)

#### Commenting Terms of Use

Add New Comment



Required: Please login below to comment.



Type your comment here.

Name Website (optional)

Email  Subscribe to all comments by email

Login and Post

You must be logged in to post a comment.

Showing 25 of 25 comments

Sort by Newest first   Subscribe by email  Subscribe by RSS

SDGuy 02/23/2010 05:28 PM

This is going to upset Sarah Palin and her fans very much... she calls these "Death Panels".

[Flag](#)