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Keillor will help family say goodbye

By **GERI PARLIN**
Of the Tribune staff

How do you say goodbye to a child who dies too soon?

Janet and Kent Koppelman are still saying goodbye to their son Jason, who died in a car accident in September 1989 at the age of 19. But it has become a more public farewell than either had counted on. Garrison Keillor, poet laureate of the radio airwaves, is coming to La Crosse to share in the Koppelmans' long goodbye.

In the first days of grief, the Koppelmans turned to Jason's prose and poetry for solace.

Much to his English teacher father's dismay, Jason was not a reader; but he was a writer. He was always scribbling, crafting literary gems his parents now treasure. In an effort to cope with their pain, the Koppelmans decided to share Jason's writings with some of his heroes — famous people who had somehow shaped what was to have been Jason's future.

Among those heroes was Garrison Keillor.

"My highest hope was to get a letter," says Janet. She did get letters from Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, and each sent signed posters. But Keillor called.

The Koppelmans' daughter, Tess, answered the phone and told her mom, "Some guy's on the phone."

Janet still remembers Keillor's introduction.

"This is Garrison Keillor from New York."

"At which time I almost fainted dead away," says Janet. "He sounds on the phone just exactly as he does on the radio."

In that phone conversation, Keillor suggested that he do a benefit for Jason's scholarship fund.

"He asked for a picture of Jason," says Janet. "He's just like a real human being; not like a celebrity at all."

After some phone calls and letters, the Koppelmans and Keillor agreed on a date — March 25 — and the one-man show was set. All proceeds will go to the scholarship that will be awarded to students from Central High School — Jason's alma mater — who want to major in film or broadcast journalism.

"It was a dream that Jason had that he's not going to be able to do," says Janet.

Jason's dreams were on celluloid. His world revolved around film and he often looked at life as a movie. His parents cautioned him that it wasn't that easy to become the next Spielberg, so he was aiming for a degree in broadcast journalism as a practical future. He was working as a teleprompter at WXOW at the time of his death.

But for Jason, the movies were his reality. He saw "Star Wars" more than 100 times and just before taking a trip to England in 1987, he wrote a will that ended with, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away ... there was Jason."

When he went away to college, he wanted to immerse himself in film, but took the usual course load of general requirement studies first. He had to write a paper on "King Lear," but even that academic endeavor was flavored by Jason's love of the movies. His father remembers the opening paragraphs of Jason's

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paper: "What a concept — 'King Lear, the Movie,' directed by Spielberg, starring De Niro."

Kent laughs as he remembers, and then talks about Jason's frustration at being an actor when the class enacted "King Lear."

"He was so annoyed because they wouldn't let him be the director."

Even his enthusiasm for Keillor was filtered through the lens of a movie camera. His favorite Keillor piece was an essay, "Laying on Our Backs Looking Up at the Stars," which came from Keillor's book "We Are Still Married." Jason so loved the essay that he read it to friends and family over the phone. "We both kind of suspect that somehow or other he was visualizing a movie," says Kent. "I know Jason well enough to know if he

liked Keillor, there had to be a movie in it."

"I know exactly the kind of movie he was thinking of," adds Janet, referring to the movie "A Christmas Story," where the movie's action is moved along by a narrator. The voice-over for this movie, of course, would have been done by Keillor himself.

Though the Koppelmans are excited about Keillor's visit, they realize the concert will be a difficult event to get through. Kent's parents still have not been able to read Jason's poetry and Janet has not been able to finish Keillor's book, she says, because she knows how much it meant to Jason. "I burst into tears every time I pick it up."

"It's a slow process," says Kent, of this long farewell. "For us, the accident took place yesterday."