

COPS helps those left behind

Program supports families of police officers killed while on duty

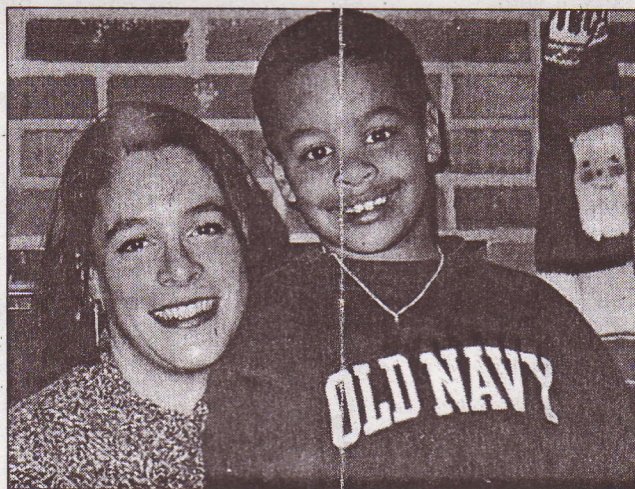


Photo provided by Ann Guinta. Ann Guinta poses in December 2001 with her son Nico in one of the last photos of them together. Guinta was killed while responding to a call on July 20, 2002, in DeKalb, Ga., where she worked as a police officer.

By KIM PREDHAM
Staff Reporter

HOMER — Eight-year-old Nicola Amie would often stop this summer and ask his grandfather: What did Mom like? How did she act?

"I think he's afraid he'll forget his mother," Nico's grandfather, Homer resident Dave McNamara said Monday. "He's testing to see if he remembers her."

Nico lost his mother, Ann Guinta, in a July 2002 car crash. A DeKalb, Ga., police officer, Guinta was driving to the scene of a reported crime when she swerved to avoid a vehicle and crashed into a ravine, overturned and struck a tree.

The 1986 Homer graduate was 33 when she died.

Two years later, her family is still coping with its grief and loss.

Guinta's mother, Conny McNamara, looks away often and wrings her hands when talking about her daughter. Nicola, who lives with his father in Georgia, is still angry, she says.

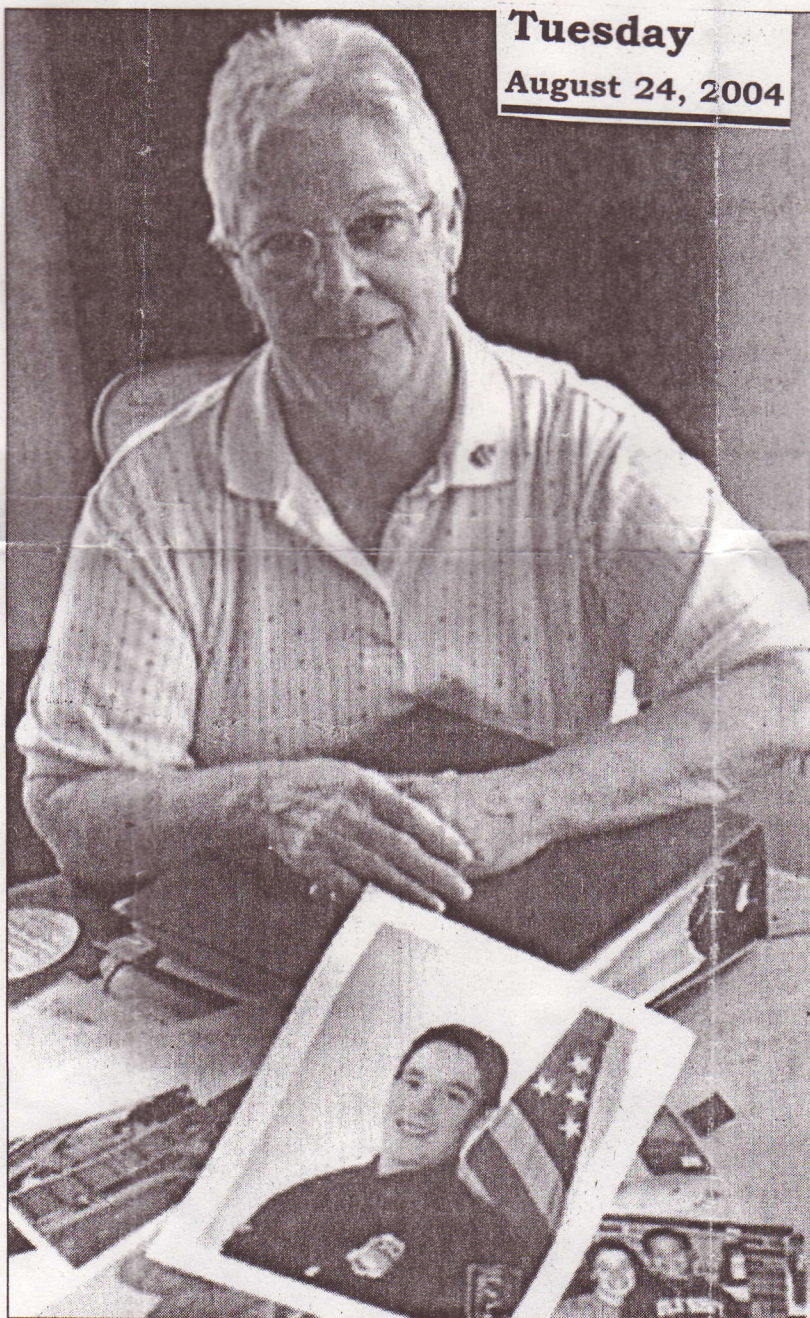
"I think that's his way of being sad," said Dave McNamara, Guinta's stepfather.

This summer, Nico had a chance to be a kid again and forget about some of his sorrow. He hung out with other children who have been through the same thing.

Earlier this month Conny McNamara and Nico attended the Concerns of Police Survivors' (COPS) annual summer camp, a place where children ages six through 14 and their adult relatives and guardians get to fish, make arts and crafts and engage in other summer camp activities while learning grief and coping skills.

It is also a chance to meet others who understand their loss.

Conny and Dave McNamara be-



Bob Ellis/staff photographer

Homer resident Conny McNamara keeps several scrapbooks filled with photos and memories of her daughter Ann Guinta, a DeKalb, Ga., police officer who died in 2002 while responding to a call. McNamara and Guinta's son, Nicola Amie, 8, attended a summer camp this month that helps grieving families of police officers who have died in the line of duty. Guinta was a 1986 Homer High School graduate.

ed to losing parents.

Camp leaders even let him use the kitchen to cook by the end of the week, an honor not bestowed on any other child, Conny McNamara said. Nico is an excellent cook, she said, something picked up from his mother. The two often cooked together.

"He's told everybody and his brother about the camp," according to Dave McNamara.

COPS is a nonprofit organization that was formed 20 years ago by 10 young police widows who gathered in Washington, D.C., for a peace officers' memorial service.

The group offers peer support, counseling, scholarships and information on state death benefits.

COPS volunteers accompany survivors to court and write letters when a convicted murderer of a police officer faces parole. The organization, which receives funding from the federal government and donations, also trains law enforcement agencies to deal with deaths on the force.

The camp began in 1995 after a counselor overheard a child at a COPS conference remark that families did their grieving separately, in an effort to appear strong for one another.

"They end up doing things for themselves," COPS Development Director Terrie Merritt said Monday. "They have to remember, I'm still a family unit."

"Moms especially look forward to it (the camp)," Merritt said. "It gives them a safe environment to go camping."

Six hundred and one people have attended the camp, held this year in Troy, Wis. Attendance is free of charge; participants are only responsible for getting themselves to and from the camp.

"COPS has been a real godsend."