

# An Unlooked for Dream



Suzie Ryan

**A** parent is not supposed to outlive their child. But sometimes, impossibly, it happens.

*"As an only child, J. Kyle Braid was raised in a loving household with parents who taught him good values and high standards. Kyle, as he was known to everyone, was dedicated to putting a smile on people's faces and laughter in their hearts.*

*In 1994 Kyle was a high school Sophomore—one of the few starters on the varsity football team. During practice, a well-meaning coach told the 16 year-old to get bigger, stronger, and faster 'no matter what it takes.' After several months of secretly using anabolic steroids—which can cause uncharacteristic aggressiveness, depression, and manic mood swings—Kyle, impulsively, took his own life." (quoted text from the J. Kyle Braid Leadership Foundation: [www.jkbranch.org](http://www.jkbranch.org))*

Thus began the "long slow climb out of the soil" for Kyle's parents, Colleen and Ken. Through mutual friends in the nearby town of Villa Grove, Colorado we were introduced to the Braids in 1995. Soon after Kyle's death they moved to Colorado from their home in Florida and began to build what would be called the J. Kyle Braid Leadership Ranch, dedicated in the memory of their son.

What follows in these next pages is the story of how Colleen and Ken made a deliberate and courageous decision to move from a place of grief into an infinitely larger place of light that would alter their lives and offer hope for other parents and teens. That first year they began to build something far larger than just buildings in the San Juan Mountain range of the Rockies.

It is a place that holds and hosts an ever-expanding community of the teens and teachers who come to experience what the Ranch has to teach and offer. This article tells some of this extraordinary story. The photos give you a glimpse of the stunningly beautiful setting for this Leadership Ranch, and convey some of the spirit that lives there every summer. Over the last fourteen years, hundreds of high school sophomores have come for a week at a time and had their lives changed. It is an astounding real-life story that has grown and continues to grow out of the all-too-painful real-life experience of the death of young Kyle Braid.

*"The JKB Ranch is the leadership training facility for the J. Kyle Braid Leadership Foundation, a national non-profit Public Charity. With its mission of 'Helping Teens Take the Lead,' the Foundation awards 160 scholarships each year to top sophomore leaders, boys and girls. These young adults have been*

**"The ending of Kyle's life does not fit the story. We decided that if a tragedy like this could happen to us, many families were at risk."**

*nominated and selected by peers, faculty and administration within their respective high schools. This program integrates a peer helping curriculum, a ROPES challenge course and productive leisure activities in order to provide the skills necessary to help their friends and themselves more effectively...."*

The move into new life after the inevitable embracing of death is all a part of the mystery of Christ's birth, death and Resurrection—the Paschal Mystery. Christ's long "climb out of the dark soil" moved him from the cradle to the cross to the tomb into the Resurrection—in that order.

We witness this mysterious process and maybe even take it for granted in our own ordinary lives: day gives way to night; seeds die in the soil before becoming edible life; spring is born out of the dark winter. But perhaps it is at that deeper strata of life where we come face-to-face with this mystery in hard, cold reality, more up close and personal than we would ever have wanted to dream. Some life experiences come flying at us out of nowhere: unbidden, unexpected, and, seemingly, unnecessary. That is when we question everything, when nothing makes sense and the anger and pain of it all can send us spiraling down to places we shouldn't go. Countless victims during hurricane Katrina died because of inept government programs. A grandchild dies of SIDS. We are blind-sided by a terminal illness or an incurable debilitating disease in ourselves or someone we love. Our lives are turned inside out. And no one asked our permission.

The crossroad we may reach leaves us with a terrifying choice: to turn inward, darkly inward and let the pain grow and remain hidden; or we can turn outward for help and, step by painful step, move forward toward the light.

It was at just this kind of crossroad that Colleen and Ken Braid must have found themselves in that dark February in 1994. Somehow, by grace, with support from friends and a lot of hard work of the heart—their long climb back into life began.

*"The ending of Kyle's life does not fit the story. We decided that if a tragedy like this could happen to us, many families were at risk."*

The seed of a tragic death began to germinate and grow slowly into new life.

*"There are many programs for at-risk and the underprivileged. There are very few for those young adults who already display leadership qualities—those leaders who are already sought out by their peers for advice and help in making critical decisions. When the Braids came across the fact that 85% of teenagers, when having problems, go to other teenagers, their target group needed to be the leaders that would yield the most positive impact...the leaders. They view their program as one that is proactively preventative. The safety, growth and happiness and future of our youth are still in the hands of 'responsible adults.' However, since tragedies such as Columbine it strengthens our resolve that this adult responsibility needs additional help from our own teen-agers—our target group."*

*We have been successfully working with teens on leadership, responsibility and teaching them how to cope with their peers in crisis—when to intervene and how to interact and communicate with adults about teens with problems. Peer pressure is more powerful than adult pressure. Teen peers will know about teens in crisis long before adults. We strongly believe that by taking the leaders and enhancing the skills that already exist, the ripple effect is exponentially greater. The accomplishments of our alumni attest to it."*

The Ranch is located on 160 acres adjacent to the Rio Grande National Forest, its buildings nestled in the foothills of the San Juan's at close to 9,000' altitude. Driving onto the property you are greeted by barking dogs, the earthy scent of pine trees and the rustling of aspen leaves. The western-style ranch buildings are substantial, built from massive logs with porch and interior furniture of the buildings constructed in

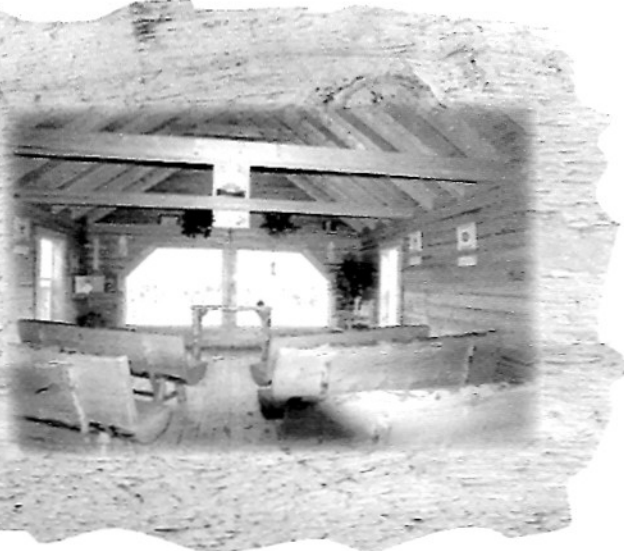


*...I never met Kyle, I really felt a connection to him my week at the Ranch... thank you for empowering me with the skills to help others & get my ideas across. You have given me not only the skills but the confidence to make a difference & reach out to those in need...*

*Margaret Swanson  
junior at LTHS in Chicago area*

...It allowed me to be a woman of character at a time when temptation to popularity & following the crowd is great. It empowered me to maintain my standards & allowed me to make abstaining from drugs & alcohol the cool thing to do...

*Beth Burwell-Sisters of Life*



the same style. It feels built for tough homesteaders and high-energy, athletic teenagers. It is a rugged and relaxed setting and one feels immediately welcomed.

*"It is the Mission of the J. Kyle Braid leadership Foundation to identify and select young adults who exhibit the leadership potential, have a strong sense of moral values, and possess the compassion necessary to improve the world.*

*With guidance from positive role models and trained professionals, these teens will develop leadership skills that promote responsible decision making, increase self-esteem, resist negative peer pressure, and encourage conflict resolution."*

One of the buildings is a small inter-denominational chapel set on a hill overlooking the Ranch. Floor-to-ceiling windows behind the altar provide a breathtaking view of the Sangre de Cristo Range of the Rockies on the eastern side of this wide, beautiful San Luis Valley. It is a simple and handsome space with hand-hewn logs for pews and plaques on the walls painted with symbols for all the different religious traditions. In the front left corner is a wooden tabernacle-like box that contains Kyle's ashes. Next to it is a smaller box holding the ashes of Sandy, the dog Kyle grew up with.

On as many summer Sundays as possible some of us Nandan's make the forty-minute drive to the Ranch to celebrate 5 P.M. Mass. Everyone is invited and many attend, even the resident Golden Retriever, Cinci. Some of the teens have never been to a Mass, others only in large city parishes. They come as they are, hot and sweaty after riding the horses or having begun the ROPES challenge course; most heads or necks wrapped in blue or red bandanas. For that short space of time they are respectfully still. All heads bow in unison whenever "Let us pray" is said by the priest. Volunteers do the Mass readings, standing in front of the Chapel, their large sneakered feet shuffling as they do their best to read clearly—if at a

somewhat break-neck speed. I am charmed by their courage to read the word of God in front of their peers. It is clear that these are no ordinary kids. Normal, yes. But "marked" in a way I can only intuit. Some later thank Eric for the Mass and occasionally, even shyly, thank Connie and me for singing.

*"Everyone associated with the Foundation is dedicated to helping young adults develop a balance between their family, friends, school, athletics and their God—no matter what it takes."*

Then a great Thanksgiving-like feast takes place in the massive high-ceiling main lodge. One of the students offers grace. We eat and visit with the Braids and many of their volunteer staff while the students (alternating weeks have girls, then boys) dig in. They do the dishes and they sweep the floor. Fundamental life-skills are taught and encouraged here, even ones that extend into the kitchen! We always leave shortly after dinner, and they begin a full week of activities and training classes as well as challenging courses that will stretch their minds, their capacities, their skills, their patience and their bodies.

*"For one week the participants' days start at 6:30 AM and many times the learning does not end until 10 PM. The personal growth never ends...[these teens] return home from a life-changing experience with skills that will help them promote positive peer pressure throughout their schools and communities for their remaining two years of high school and on into their futures."*

The gamut of where life-roads have led some of these JKB Ranch alumni is impressive and a testimony to the seeds of growth planted during their time at JKB Ranch. There are

three in the National Football League, two in the National Baseball League (one of those has started his own foundation working with kids in Florida), an ESPN announcer, and one studying with the Icelandic Symphony. Many are studying for advanced degrees—master's, MBA's, and doctorates in the medical field. Two of the alumni, young men, are presently serving in Iraq. Some have become lawyers, pharmacists, and financial officers. Many have gone on to become teachers; some of those are JKB Sponsors in participating schools working with new JKB alumni. Many former leadership ranchers volunteer for a week or more each summer. And one of the young women became a nun!

The passover from wounding into healing, from darkness into light is never an easy ride. It hasn't been for our friends. But theirs is, really, a story of resurrection. It will not bring back their child. But they did not give up on their dream and instead, miraculously (and with a lot of grace, grit, and hard work) allowed another kind of life entirely to be born out of that impossibly painful place of loss. Now hundreds and hundreds of other young teenagers have entered their lives and taken up residence in their hearts.

The JKB Ranch website gives you a larger view of what makes up the Foundation. Many of the photos (some offered



here), testimonies and articles found on their site tell more of the story from the inside-out of people's experiences during their time at the JKB Ranch. We Nadan's feel changed by our time there and exposure to a place so full of heart, beauty, and high energy. It has been a privilege for us to come to the ranch on those Sunday afternoons in the middle of high summer in the Rockies.

We look forward to this coming summer, driving up the long, dusty dirt road to the Ranch, turning the corner at the entrance and hearing Cinci bark, welcoming us back to her home, her tail wagging wildly as she runs toward us in greet-

ing. Then there will be the wind in the aspens, the wide-open expanse of the Valley behind us, and the high-energy conversations coming from inside the main lodge of some very unique and very normal teenagers, whose lives are about to be enhanced and irrevocably changed by their experiences during the up coming week.

Their brief stay under these Colorado skies will come to an end. They will have worked very hard individually and as a team. They will leave equipped with more finely honed life-skills and insights that will provide tools for them to help other teens like themselves deal with the challenges in a future world they will someday be leading. They will return to their own homes, schools and communities and begin paying it forward.

Suzie Ryan lives at Nada Hermitage in Crestone, Colorado.



## The World in Translation

It was a long climb out of the soil.  
She counted off whole continents  
As she lifted each foot,  
imagined her dark years falling away like  
husks.

Soon she could feel objects come to life  
In her hand, the peel of banana,  
a lightly waxed pepper,  
she accepted these into her home,  
placed them in bowls where they could  
be watched.

There was nothing obscure about  
melons,  
nothing involved about yams.  
If she were to have anything to do with  
this world,

These would be her translators,  
through these she would learn secrets of  
dying,

How to do it gracefully as a peach,  
Softening in silence,

Or the mango, finely tuned to its own  
skin.

Naomi Shihab Nye