

WE REMEMBER

David Isaac de Bree
Born October 25, 1976
In Victoria
Died May 15, 2002
In Duncan, at age 25

By Ro de Bree, Isaac's
mother and SNAP
Resource Parent

When Isaac died, a magazine that had already published three of his articles was asking to see more of his work. People who had heard him speak at workshops said they couldn't believe how much they had learned. The rows of very young women present at his funeral told me about seeing him on television. "He was so cute!" They said. My son was not an actor, not a polished writer, not an exceptional public speaker, but he was a skillful communicator and an expert on his own subject, which was Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). He was born with FAS and in the end it killed him.. Isaac, one of our adopted children, came to us as a temporary foster child when he was nearly two. He was small for his age and had not yet attempted to walk or talk. With two other boys in his age group our family was considered a good fit. Physically, Isaac caught up quickly; emotionally he was often ahead of the pack. But as he grew older, we knew that there were going to be challenges. "He can't keep track of his own belongings and he wears the first jacket he comes to, but he will always get by on his charm." Said his kindergarten teacher. In grade One the teacher said: "Isaac is happiest on days

when our regular routine is closely followed. He doesn't handle change very well." In grade two: "Isaac is still in the slow arithmetic group, but everybody wants to be his partner. He is friendly, outgoing, and very popular. In grade Three: "Isaac tries hard. He is eager and enthusiastic, although his enthusiasm is not always well directed." Nobody knew that Isaac had permanent and irreversible brain damage, that he was already struggling with the severe deficits of FAS. His learning skills and memory were intermittent. He was sometimes unable to differentiate between reality and fantasy and he couldn't make the connections between cause and effect. His impulse control was poor and his reasoning skills were non-existent. Unfortunately because he looked good, dressed well, and had excellent verbal skills, he appeared to be far more capable than he really was. By the time he entered middle school, his teachers were saying: "He must be more responsible," and "He must try harder." They didn't understand that Isaac was unable, not unwilling. The year he turned fourteen, other health issues surfaced. Our family doctor organized a referral to SunnyHill Hospital in Vancouver, and Isaac tested positive for FAS. However, the diagnosis turned out to be a hollow victory, because there were no services for people with FAS, and no one apart from his family, was particularly interested. Isaac's invisible disability, although it affected every part of his life, remained generally acknowledged. Meanwhile a local support group had been started for adoptive parents with children

who have special needs. This soon became what we now know of as SNAP. An evolution of this organization was the FAS Action Team whose purpose was to educate and make our town FAS friendly. With a Community Mobilization grant from Youth Crime Prevention, we opened the first FAS storefront office in Western Canada. Pretty soon our grown FAS children had become just as involved as we were. With good leadership, they were able to form a Mentorship Team and became skilled at sharing their issues in public. Soon they were in demand as speakers all over southern Vancouver Island. By this time, Isaac, enjoying an independent but chaotic lifestyle, joined the Mentorship Team. Later, he also became secretary for the Action Team. Typical of many with FAS, Isaac was self absorbed. And, although devoted to mom, he had a real desire to be cared for. Being admitted to the hospital filled his needs beautifully. Seeking admission became his top priority. He discovered the suicide "attempts" were a good way to get the attention he craved. Seven years ago, our doctor said, "Isaac has no impulse control. He doesn't understand cause and effect and he mixes up imagination and the real thing. You better prepare yourself, because one of the "attempts" might accidentally succeed. He is playing a dangerous game.'" Last May the coroner told us: "Isaac did not intend to end his life. This was the closest thing to an accident that a suicide could ever be." Isaac didn't die because he was suicidal or depressed. He died because he had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.