



Orphaned But Not Alone

LEFT WITHOUT PARENTS
AFTER THEIR MOM'S DEATH,
TEENS TYLER AND CHEYENNE OSBURN LEARNED THAT
THEIR NEIGHBORS WOULDN'T LET THEM FALL

By **ANNE LANG & NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN**

Photographs by **MARC ASNIN**



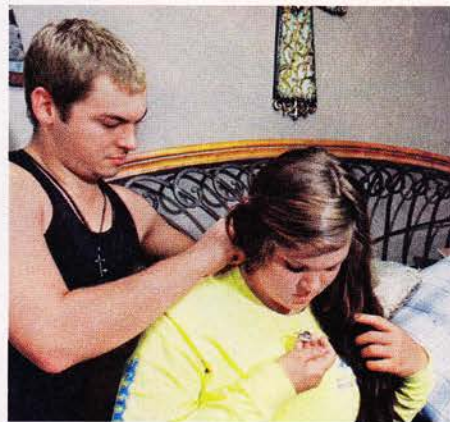
GROUP HUG
"I dearly love these kids," says Pam Taylor (with Cheyenne and Tyler). They call her Nana.

By the time Tyler and Cheyenne Osburn had reached their teen years, they were old souls. Their father, Billy, a guitar player in a local rock band, had died when they were babies. Their mother, Liz, a hairdresser, suffered from seizures and, after being badly burned in a backyard accident in '07, was never the same. The family scraped by on her disability income, and the kids traded off chores. Still, Liz found ways to share joy with her kids—with homemade lasagna and extravagant Christmases and quiet chats in her bedroom. "She had the heart of a lion," Tyler, 19, recalls. "She could do more with nothing than a lot of people can do with something. She tried to give Cheyenne and me the entire world."

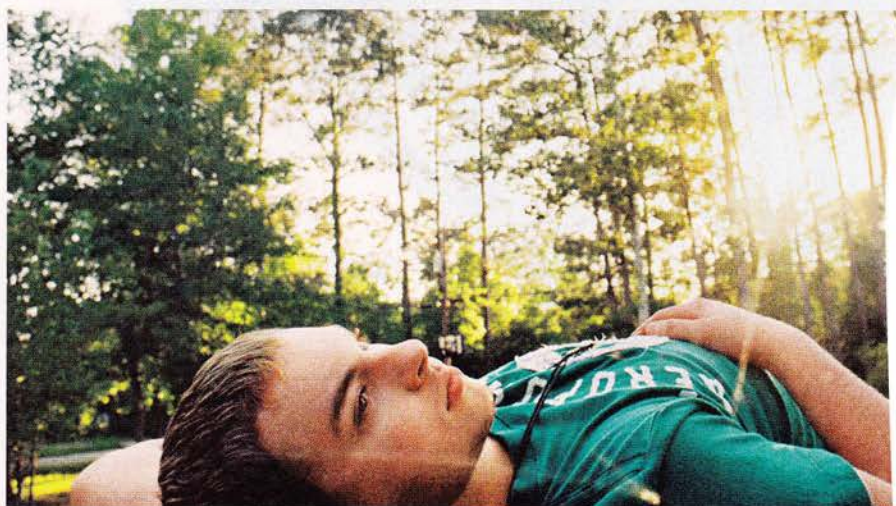
That world changed forever when Liz didn't wake up one morning two weeks before Christmas 2011. "I was so scared," says Cheyenne, 17, "of not having a mom, having no one to come home to, having to deal with grown-up things like bills. I felt so alone." Not for long. The people of Lacombe, La., wrapped their arms around the orphaned siblings, and they haven't let go. Years earlier Liz's friends Gwen Babin and Karen Labatut had agreed to be Tyler and Cheyenne's legal guardians. "We never in a million years thought this would happen," says Labatut, 51, a hairdresser who had worked with Liz. They started a rotation with family friend Pam Taylor, taking turns cooking dinner and staying overnight at the teens'

house. Soon Jackie Dantin, head of a local nonprofit group, set up a fund (ccno.org) and got the story out to the local media; help poured in. A men's Bible study group maintained their lawn; a pizza-making enthusiast baked their favorite pies; Lakeshore High School, where they were students, paid for prom tuxes and gowns.

After several fund-raisers, the efforts raised \$40,000, covering the monthly mortgage, groceries and bills through this summer—keeping Tyler and Cheyenne in their own home and on a steady course. Tyler, who graduated last year, has found sporadic work in construction; Cheyenne, who earned As and Bs, will start commuting to a local college in August. "I never would have thought all these people would have wanted to help so much," Cheyenne says. "It's been amazing."



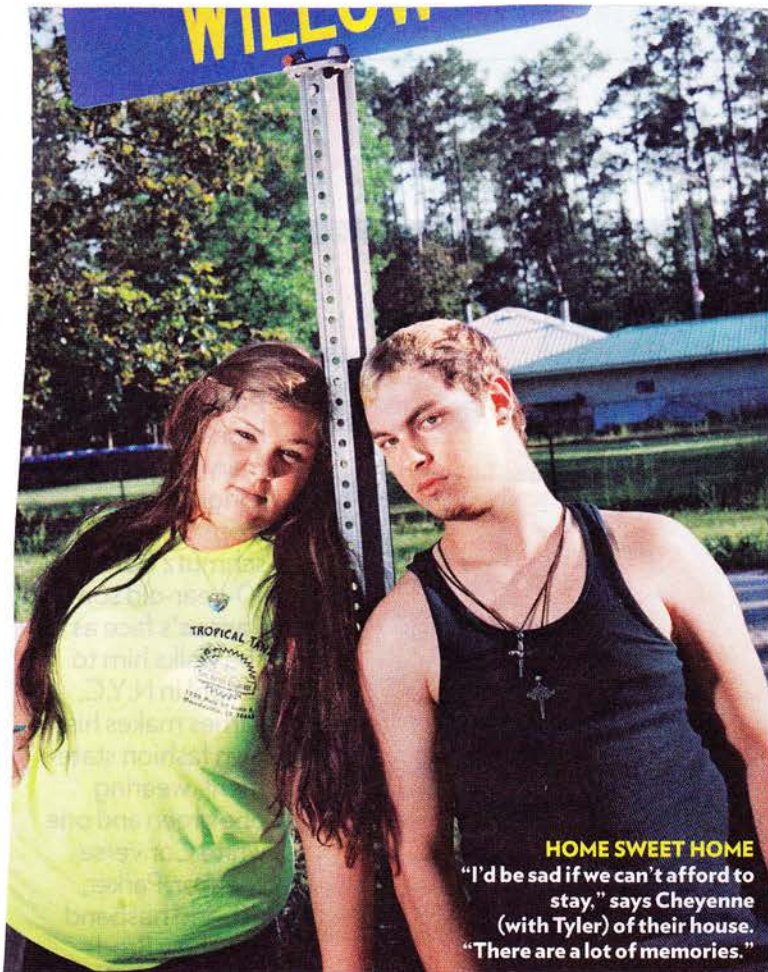
↑ MAN OF THE HOUSE
 "It's my instinct to protect her," says Tyler (braiding Cheyenne's hair). "Mom always wanted us to stop fighting; she would want us to look after each other. My sister doesn't know this, but she's the one who gives me hope. I'm going to be there for her no matter what."



TOUGH TIMES, HAPPY TIMES

Tyler and Cheyenne (left, with Liz in 1997) have no memories of their dad, Billy, but Tyler cherishes his father's three guitars. "Ever since my mom passed away," says Tyler, who wears one silver cross that belonged to his dad and another given to him by his mom, "I've been playing a lot more." Their dad's early death made them a tight threesome. Now that their mom is gone, they find themselves appreciating all she did for them, even as she struggled with health and money problems. "She taught me how to cook and bake. When I was little, she gave me a little culinary hat and apron to wear," says Cheyenne, who wears her mom's wedding ring on a chain around her neck, along with a heart Liz bought her two days before she died. "She was a cool mom." Someday Cheyenne hopes to become an ultrasound technician. What would her mom tell her if she were here now? "Stay strong. You can do this."

↑ MISSING MOM
 "I think about her every single day," says Tyler (in a quiet moment). "She could be really funny, silly. I miss her smile. If I was in a bad mood, she'd ask what was wrong until I'd tell her. And she would make me feel better. She guided me in the right direction. So after she passed away, I felt really lost."



HOME SWEET HOME
 "I'd be sad if we can't afford to stay," says Cheyenne (with Tyler) of their house. "There are a lot of memories."

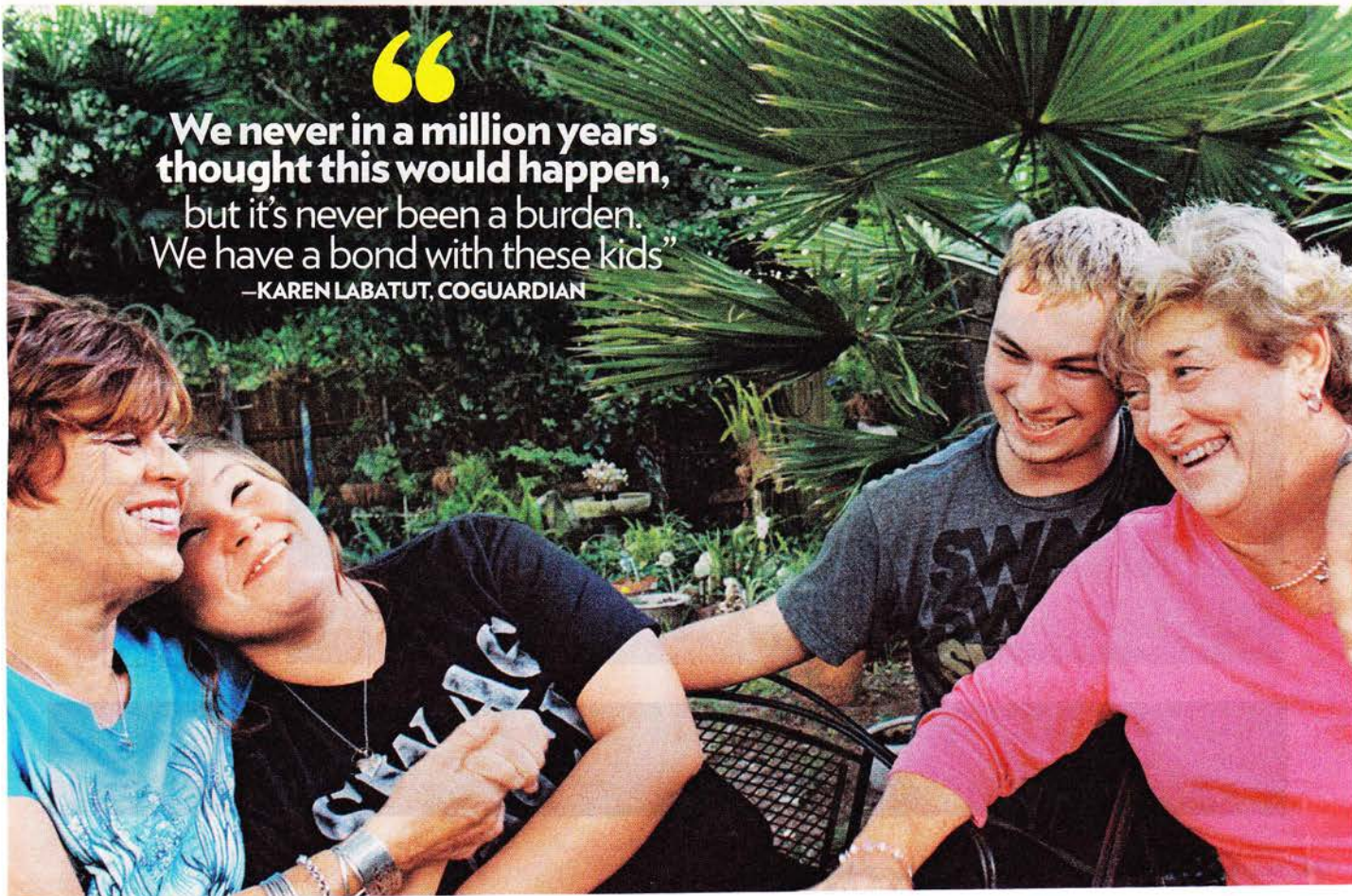
A LITTLE HELP FROM HER FRIENDS

Cheyenne says her high school classmates have been "super supportive." One day a girl she didn't know handed her a hundred dollars. "None of my friends can really put themselves in my shoes," says Cheyenne (at school with, from left, Anna Gourgues, Angelle Waller, Lauren Brooks, Blake Gassen, Devon Bates and Courtney Springmann), "because they all still have both parents. But it's not a problem for me to talk about it." One pal wrote a paper calling Cheyenne her hero. "It made me feel good," says Cheyenne. "It moves me closer to being the kind of person my mom wanted me to be."



LASTING BONDS

"I love Nanny and Aunt Gwen," Cheyenne says of Labatut (far left) and Babin (far right, with Tyler). Says Babin: "The day we [picked out] Chey's prom dress, it brought happy tears to my eyes. I feel we've really helped two young people with their lives. And I feel good."



“
We never in a million years thought this would happen,
 but it's never been a burden.
 We have a bond with these kids”
 —KAREN LABATUT, COGUARDIAN