

Exclusive: 24 wild & crazy hours with Detroit's test-tube quint

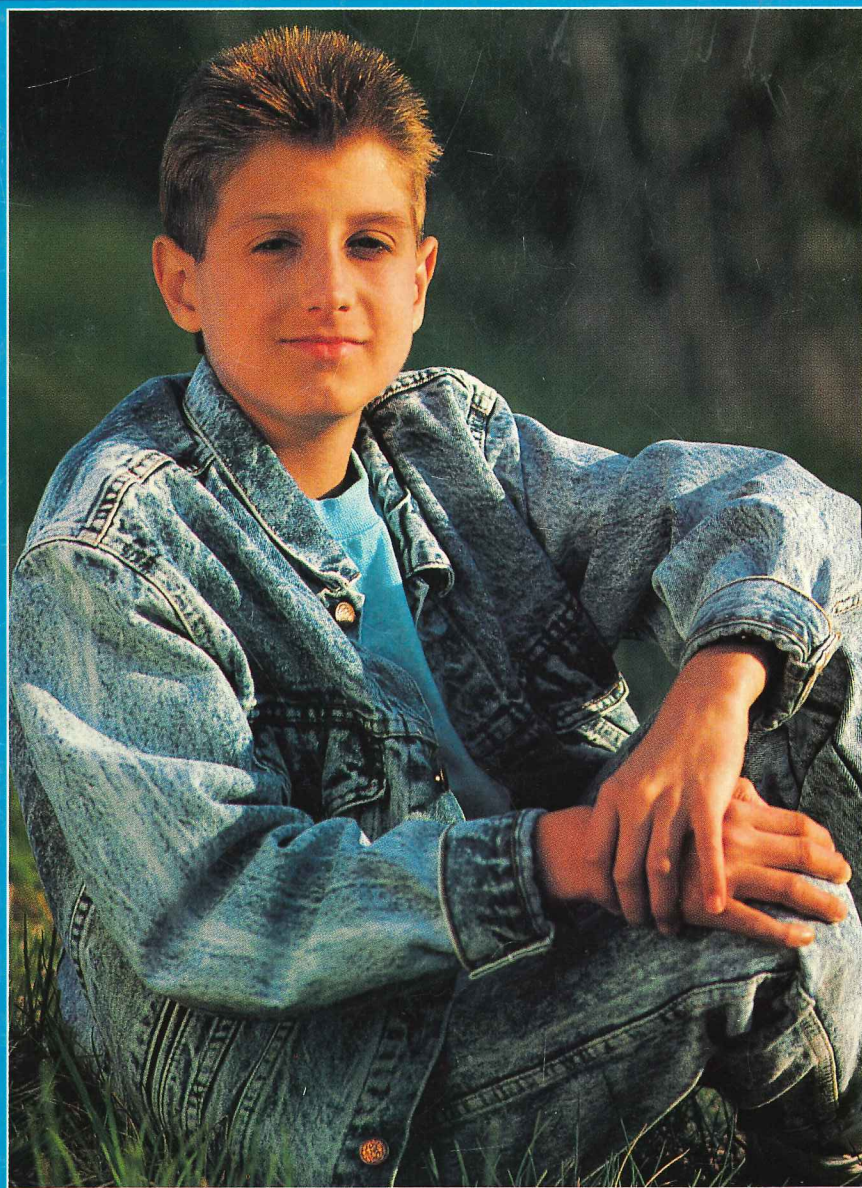
MAY 30, 1988 ■ \$1.69

People

weekly

- **BOOK EXCERPT:**
Talking Straight
by Lee Iacocca
- **The biggest rock
show of the year**

AMAZING GRACE



In the shadow of death from AIDS, hemophiliac Ryan White, 16, has found a great gift for living. This is a boy you'll never forget.



Cover

Ryan = man, Sufferer
(cf. wisdom)
is welcomed (H&G)

THE QUIET VICTORIES OF RYAN WHITE

Driven from his childhood, a courageous AIDS patient finds refuge and friendship in a small town with heart

Ryan White nearly died last January, one month past his 16th birthday. He was rushed to the hospital with pneumonia, the result of his AIDS: He has been taking AZT since last August, and it has helped him put on weight and generally improved his health, but it cannot stop his lungs from

about dying, I'd die. I'm not afraid, I'm just not ready yet. I want to go to Indiana University."

"How does it feel knowing you're going to die?" another boy wonders.

"Someday you'll die too," says Ryan. The boy, about Ryan's age, looks shocked. "Things could always be

worse," Ryan adds, not wanting to cause discomfort. "It's how you live your life that counts."

"DO YOU CRY?" a woman yells. Adults tend to talk at him that way. "Kids don't talk to him like he's retarded," Ryan's mother, Jeanne, whispers. "I wonder why adults do? Ryan can't figure it out."

"I cry a lot for emotional reasons," Ryan answers. "Not for pain." At that the woman herself starts to cry. Ryan begs her not to. He's just fine, he assures her, and he's having lots of



At first surprised by his warm welcome, Ryan is now at home in Cicero. "People seem friendlier," he says.

sometimes filling with fluid or prevent other opportunistic infections brought on by the disease. Ryan is feeling better now, though, so he has agreed to travel to Omaha to talk about AIDS with reporters, a religion class at Father Flanagan's Boys Town and 100 adults at the Joslyn Witherspoon Concert Hall. He believes it is important to talk about AIDS; he feels people ought to know what he knows. But he is more comfortable discussing his illness with kids than with adults. "Kids listen," he explains.

"Are you afraid of dying?" asks a student at Boys Town.

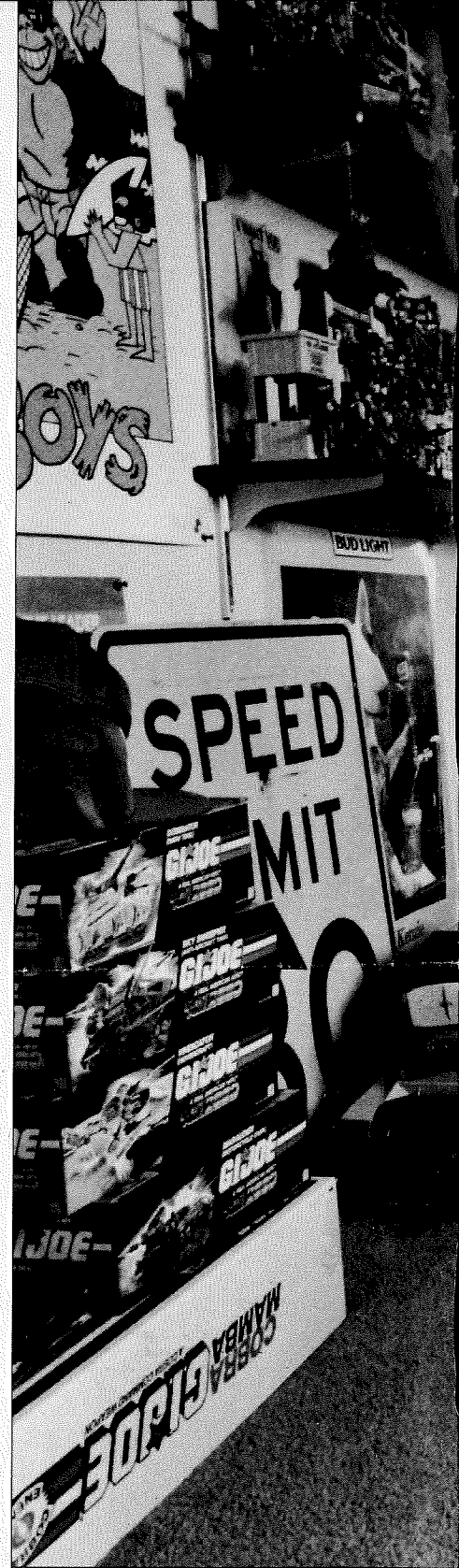
"No," Ryan says. "If I were worried

fun here in Omaha. Obediently, the woman stops crying

"What was it like in Kokomo?" a girl asks. Kokomo is the Indiana city where Ryan was born and grew up. He was expelled from school there after he contracted AIDS 3½ years ago from a transfusion of contaminated blood. He, his mother and his sister, Andrea, now 14, fled Kokomo only a year ago.

"A lot of people would back away from me on the street," Ryan says. "They'd run from me. Maybe I would have been afraid of AIDS too, but I wouldn't have been mean about it."

"RYAN, HOW DOES YOUR CHRIS-



TIAN FAITH HELP YOU WITH YOUR DISEASE?" bellows a minister.

"I've learned that God doesn't punish people," Ryan answers. "I've learned that God doesn't dislike homosexuals, like a lot of Christians think. AIDS isn't their fault, just like it isn't my fault. God loves homosexuals as much as He loves everyone else." The minister looks uncomfortable.

Don't fear of God's punishment

2
Afterward, a reporter asks Ryan what was the worst thing about Kokomo.

"I had no friends," Ryan says. "I was lonely. All I wanted was to go to school and fit in."

They say that fighter pilots are at their best in the heat of battle: Their reflexes are almost inexplicably quick, their choices of action far

sure than in practice. Researchers know a biological cause for that—the surge of adrenaline provoked by any sudden, life-threatening danger. But the experiences of others, who look death in the eye under less dramatic circumstances, suggest a deeper reason. Having faced their own end, they become more graceful, more finely focused, wiser, seemingly purified of the petty dis-

"Here they were willing to educate themselves," says Ryan, in his bedroom. "And that made the difference, I guess."

tractions that plague and mess up most lives. The transformation is usually stunning and indelible, and it is never more wondrous than when it takes place in a child. Sage Volkman, 6 years old and terribly disfigured by a near-fatal fire (PEOPLE, Mar. 21, 1988), emanates just such

(→ 91)

uncanny grace, and so does Ryan White, a new kid in Cicero, Ind., who faces death from AIDS and until that day is fashioning something remarkable and inspiring out of his life and his dreams in a small American town.

There is, on the surface, nothing very remarkable about Ryan White. He doesn't look like an inspiration: Only 4'9" and unlikely to grow much taller because of his disease, he talks simply and with uncertain grammar, just like any other kid, and in a high-pitched little voice that often seems about to fail him. What interests him at this point in life is almost breathtakingly commonplace: He loves junk food, Max Headroom, war games, skateboarding and any number of sports that he is warned against playing; he pines for a driver's license, and his fondest wish is that most ingrained of all childhood yearnings, to be one of the gang. What he says to people about AIDS isn't even especially extraordinary—you can find all of it expressed better in the Bible. What distinguishes Ryan White and makes him worthy, or even demanding, of our attention is precisely all that: While he has been facing death calmly, he has learned what he wants, and it is not much different from what everybody else wants. He is telling us that the ordinary, far from having minor, faintly deplorable value, can be ennobling, and he is proving it to us every hour.

Given the commonness of his days, at least those days when he is not addressing people on the topic of AIDS, the serenity, courage and wisdom of Ryan White can even become a bit unnerving. He constantly lives with the prospect of death, and what he wants most is his driver's license and a car? The answer is "Sure," and Ryan, who should know, sees no contradiction.

The fact that he can want and now hope to have such things is a big part of his personal triumph. It is also a testament to the goodness and spirit of the people of one small American town, a place called Cicero, which, through the crucible of AIDS, has em-

braced him and helped him become the remarkable boy he now is.

To understand Ryan's transformation, one must look at his life in three stages, the first two of which were ceaselessly and often bitterly miserable. A hemophiliac from birth, Ryan grew up pale, frail, brooding and withdrawn because he couldn't physically keep up with other kids. Then, at the



MARY ANN GARTNEY/AP

Olympic diving champ Greg Louganis, who hosted a gaunt Ryan at last summer's Pan Am Games, says, "He's a hero to me."



JEANNE WHITE

Elton John brought Ryan and his family to Disneyland a year ago. "I'm very proud of him and what he's achieved," says Elton.

age of 12, he was given the fatal, tainted transfusion. When the people of his hometown of Kokomo (pop. 48,000) learned of his illness, they said he could not go to school. His mother sued to have him readmitted, but by the time her case was won, the battle for Kokomo's heart had been lost. Fear and hatred were rank in the air. Townspeople slashed the tires of the White family car and pelted it with eggs. On radio phone-in shows people called Ryan "faggot," "homo" and "queer," and more graphic obscenities were scribbled on his locker at school. Finally somebody fired a bullet through the Whites' living room window. If responding to AIDS has become one of the litmus tests of human decency, many in Kokomo failed it badly. Last May, Ryan, Andrea and Jeanne, who was divorced 10 years ago, moved the 25 miles to Cicero (pop. 3,400).

When Ryan arrived in his new town, he was at a physical and emotional nadir, a tortured outcast who was given only months to live. He was vomiting every 20 minutes, and his weight was down to 54 lbs. He shivered all the time and warmed his hands over the burners on the electric stove in the kitchen. He thought often about dying and went almost at once to check out the local cemetery. He liked it because it was peaceful.

"I wanted people in Cicero to be nice to me," Ryan recalls now, "but I was ready for anything." In fact, he wasn't prepared for what happened. A couple of weeks after the Whites moved in, there was a knock at the door of their modest, tri-level home on Overlook Drive. Ryan answered and found 16-year-old Wendy Baker on the doorstep. She'd seen stories about Ryan on the news, and besides, her parents had always told her it was important to be nice to people. "I just wanted to meet him," she says. "I thought he was so brave."

"I don't take to strangers right away," Ryan says. "I was suspicious—like 'Why is this person here?'"

Still, he and Wendy had a nice talk. "He was real sick, but real friendly," says Wendy, a pretty high school junior.

Cover

"I always wanted to be a cheerleader, but I didn't think I was pretty enough. Ryan talked me into trying out."

To his amazement, Ryan quickly made other friends too. When they had learned Ryan was coming to town, school principal Steve Dillon and superintendent of schools Tony Cook decided not to leave his welcome to chance. "We knew what happened 25 miles up the road," Cook says. "We didn't want that here. We wanted to help the little guy get back in school where he should be." They arranged for each student to attend a two-hour seminar on AIDS. Teachers sent AIDS material home with all students and asked them to be sure their parents read it. To give the kids time to adjust, Cook also asked Ryan to start school two weeks late, which he did. "We have bright, sensitive kids here," Cook says. "I knew they wouldn't turn their backs on Ryan. I had faith they could persuade Mom and Dad—that our community would see a sick child and want to help."

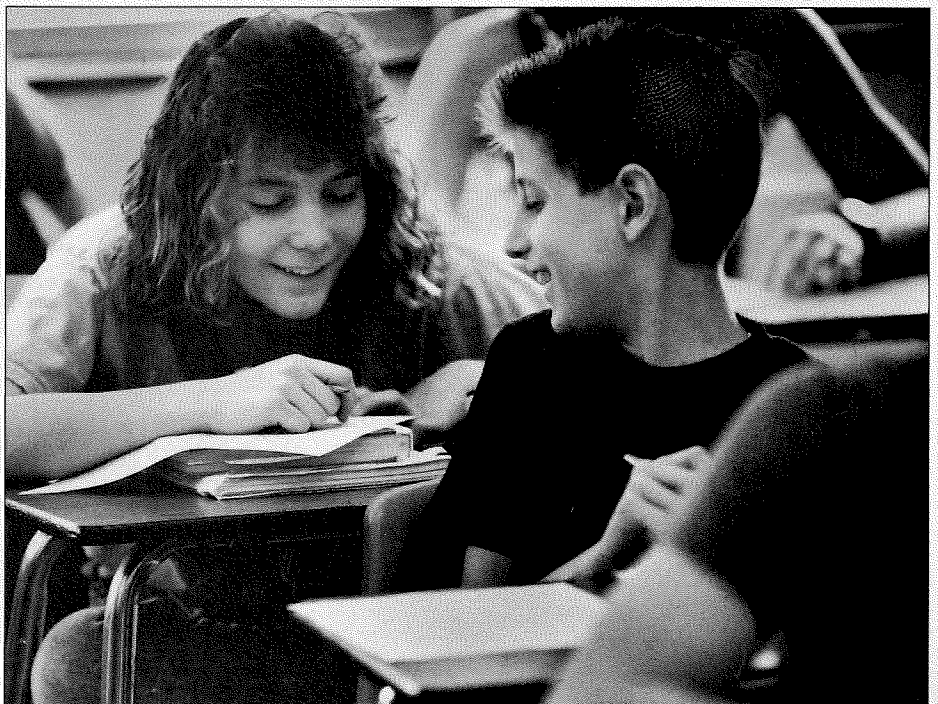
His confidence was well placed. "We saw what happened in Kokomo with those stupid people," says Eric Howell, a senior at Hamilton Heights High School. "We aren't like that here. We wanted Ryan to be comfortable." Almost everybody felt the same way. When Betsy Stewart, whose husband, Jim, is president of the local Kiwanis, heard that the Whites would be moving in two doors down, she baked chocolate-chip cookies and took them over. One woman did approach Karen and Bill Blake, who had just moved in across from the Whites, with dire warnings about the new kid with AIDS. "I told her to get lost," remembers Karen, helping to spread dirt on Jeanne's lawn. "I had better things to do than listen to that crap."

Welcome at last, Ryan has changed. Since his weight and overall health have improved, he no longer suffers constantly from chills and nausea, and he can eat normally. He has lined up a summer job in an Indianapolis skateboard shop and plans to get his driving license next month; several car dealers have banded together to give him a 1987 Chevy Cavalier. The flowering of Ryan's personality has been even more remarkable. "I can assure everyone he has AIDS and it's still fatal," says Ryan's doctor, Martin B. Kleiman of Indiana University Medical Center. "But all the scientific data we had would not have



Ryan likes to skateboard through his new neighborhood and often gets a willing assist from his stouthearted mutt, Wally.

The liveliest equation in algebra class at Hamilton Heights High School is Ryan and best friend Heather McNew.



pointed to him being with us today and doing so well. Ryan has just blossomed, and I don't know why. I'd like to think it's because I'm a good doctor, but I can't take full credit. He's on no unusual drugs, no unusual therapy. He's got a great attitude, and that plays a big part. He's optimistic, not a quitter."

"Ryan is the happiest person I know," says Jill Stewart, Betsy's daughter, who drives him to Hamilton Heights High each morning and home each afternoon in her banged-up orange Toyota. "I've never seen him in a bad mood, never heard him complain. You just feel good being around Ryan. He's brought our whole school together."

There is one change in Ryan's life that perturbs him; he is famous now and wishes he weren't. He also has acquired celebrity friends, whom he likes very much but is reluctant to talk about. When Elton John heard of Ryan's troubles last year, he flew all the Whites out to Disneyland, and he calls or writes every week. Ryan has also come to know Brooke Shields, Tom Cruise, Bobby Knight, Yoko Ono, Sean Lennon, Ed Koch, Elizabeth Taylor, Charlie Sheen and Greg Louganis, the Olympic diving champ, who invited Ryan to last summer's Pan Am Games and even gave him one of his

gold medals. "I was dyslexic when I was growing up," says Louganis. "I was called stupid and retarded, so I could sympathize with not being accepted."

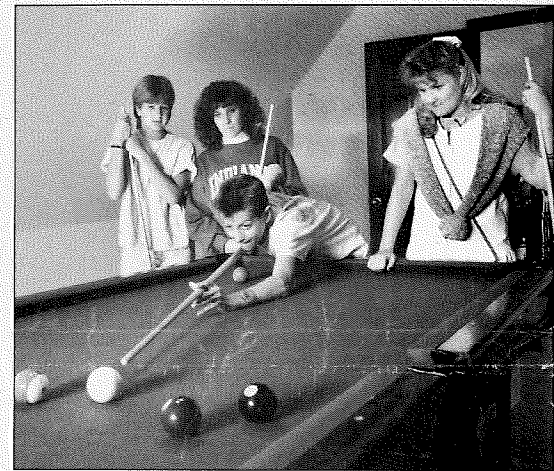
The trouble is, having famous pals is not always consistent with being accepted as a normal ninth grader. Ryan hates—*hates*—being singled out in school, and kids sometimes tease him about being a big shot. "Ryan just wants to be left alone," says Tony Cook. "After a few weeks the kids were finished dealing with the fact he had AIDS. The attention brings it all back—at least that's how Ryan sees it."

"It's embarrassing," Ryan says. "I'm helping people, I think, and I don't want people treated like me. But now I just want to be like everyone else, 'cause that's what counts in high school." As a result, he is choosy about public appearances. A few weeks ago the producers of TV's *3-2-1 Contact* asked to do a feature on him; it would be for kids, so of course he agreed. But—he was firm about this part—there would be no camera crews disrupting classes and making him uncomfortable. Instead, he would stage a make-believe algebra class after school.

This is the designated afternoon,

Ryan (frolicking with Gizmo and mom, below) puts a neighbor's pool table to good use with, from left, sister Andrea and pals Wendy Baker and Jill Stewart.

and Ryan has invited his best friends to his fictional class: Wendy, who first knocked at his door; Jill Stewart, the senior class president; and, naturally, Heather McNew, star miler of the Hamilton Heights Lady Huskies, who is his nearly constant companion. When Elton John asked Ryan to be guest of honor at a lavish L.A. fund raiser for kids with AIDS on July 8, Ryan said sure, as long as he could bring Heather. "We talk constantly, for hours each night," she says shyly. "We go to shows, school dances and ball games. He's the best friend I've ever had. You know why? Because he always cares what's happening with me. Most people are your friends till they get busy or have something better to do. Ryan's



not like that. He's always got time."

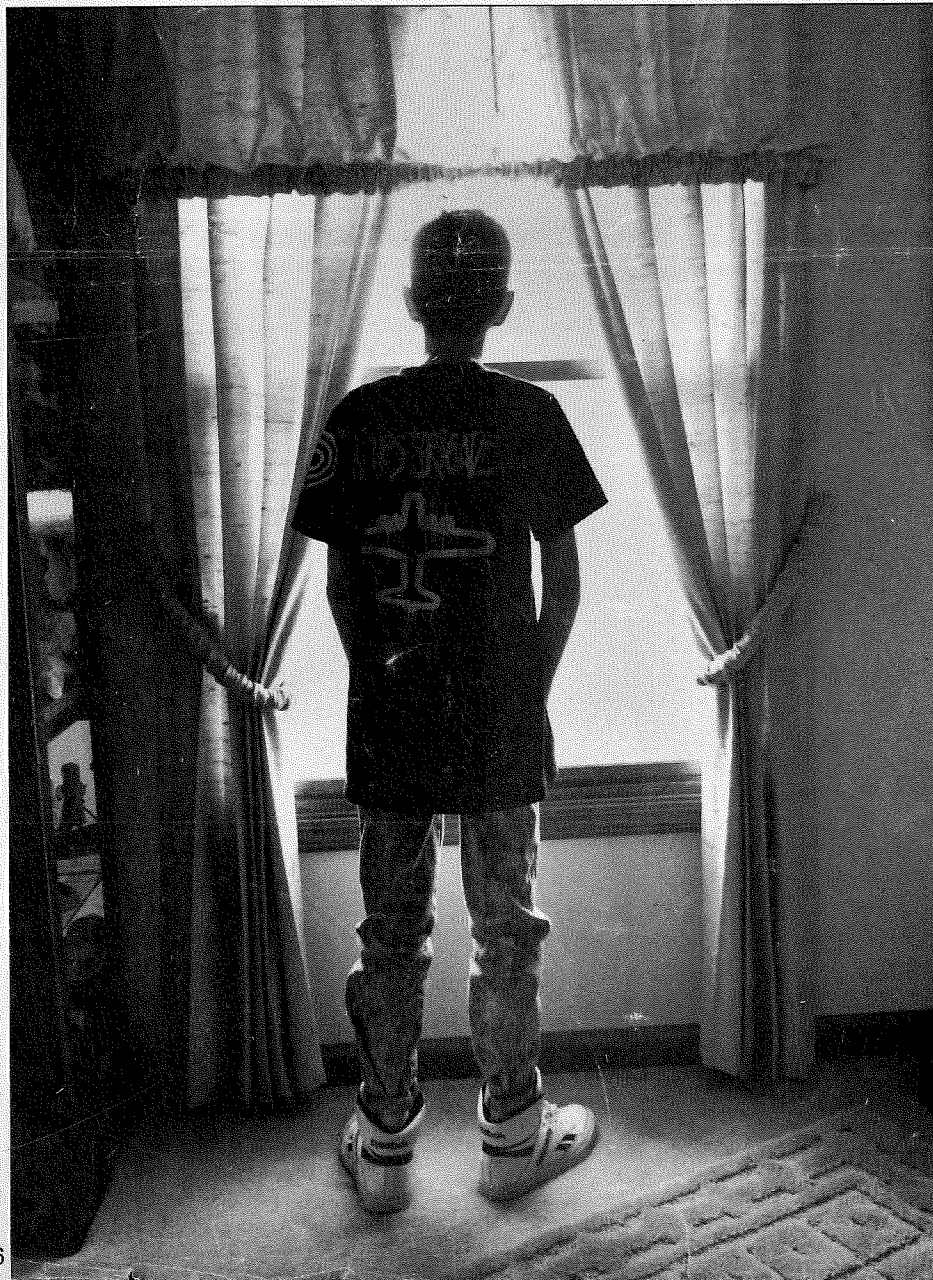
The cameras roll and a teacher asks Ryan to do some square roots. No problem: He aces algebra. Then, sitting behind Heather, he pokes her playfully with his pencil. She giggles.

This is a bittersweet time for Jeanne White. When Ryan got AIDS, she thought he had perhaps six months to live. "So we have been living on borrowed time and loving it," she says. When Ryan nearly died four months ago, Jeanne took a leave from her \$20,000-a-year job as a supply worker in the Kokomo General Motors plant. But now the bills are mounting—Ryan's AZT costs \$10,000 a year, and the house in Kokomo is still unsold—so she has decided to go back to work. She

hopes she won't regret it after Ryan is gone. "When he's feeling good I want to be with him," she says, "but if I don't work, we lose the house."

More than anyone, Jeanne has marveled at the changes in her son. "He's different now. He feels good about himself," she says. "Funny, most kids at 16 feel their lives are just beginning. But if Ryan died in two months I would feel he's lived a very full life. All his wishes have come true. He's back in school. He's got friends now.

"We were driving down the highway last week," Jeanne continues, "and suddenly Ryan said, 'I could have been dead two years ago.' I started to cry when he said that. He said, 'Please, Mom, don't do that.'" She stifles a sob. "Please, don't make it seem like I'm complaining," she asks, as tears stream down her face. "I'm really not."



Of course—you know—there are times, if you are a teenager, when a mother really gets in the way. Right now it's late afternoon in the White house. In a bookcase are pictures of Elton, Louganis, Bruce Willis, Loni Anderson and the cast of *Cats*, and lolling around the living room in a torpor are Andrea, Wendy, Jill and Heather. They're giggling and talking about eating out. They finally decide on Mexican at Chi-Chi's—Ryan's choice—but when Jeanne offers to drive, the kids exchange looks of horror. Jill quickly says she'll borrow her parents' van, and they'll meet Jeanne there.

Half an hour later, at Ryan's instigation, Heather gives a phony, unpronounceable name, and there is great mirth as the hostess struggles to say it. "It's fun to see them try," says Ryan. Shunting Jeanne off to an end of the table, the kids order huge quantities of nachos, tacos, fajitas, salsa. "It's nice and fiery, and I'm starved," says Ryan, salsa on his chin. "Heather's got the junior high record in the mile," he suddenly tells a visitor, switching attention on to her. "Ryan, cut it out," Heather whispers.

The last time the visitor ate out with Ryan, Jeanne and Andrea was in Kokomo a year ago. On that night, Ryan went straight to the restaurant bathroom. When he wasn't throwing up, he was warming his frozen fingers under the hot-air hand drier. When he emerged, pale and slouching, the other patrons stared. He was too weak to eat a thing.

The 3-2-1 *Contact* crew is done now, and in the parking lot at Hamilton Heights High, Ryan catches up with Jill. "Let's get some ice cream," he says. "Come on!" No, Jill says, she has homework and all kinds of chores. As they head toward her car, Ryan keeps cajoling and arguing. When they finally get to the old Toyota, Jill finds the back seat filled with balloons. "Happy birthday!" Ryan shouts at Jill, who is 18 years old today. "Happy birthday!" Then he hands her a smartly wrapped, gold-and-blue enamel pin bearing the legend "Class of '88." Jill squeals with delight. "Look at the balloons Ryan got me!" she cries. "Look at the pin!" And she gives her friend a huge hug.

"Let's go get ice cream," Ryan White says.

—By Jack Friedman,
with Bill Shaw in Omaha
and Cicero

"I hope Ryan's life is full, however long he lives," Jeanne says. "We don't think of the bad times. We just keep trying."