

NATIONAL

Morbid Web Site Makes Amusement of Online Profiles Left Behind by the Dead

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Fifteen-year-old Kayla Reed bared her soul in her MySpace profile.

In it, she discussed her love of hip-hop music, her dream of attending beauty college, and her first thoughts on waking in the morning — “going back to sleep.” The teenager went on to confess that she had been drunk before and had shoplifted, “but it was only a candy bar.” Eerily, Kayla’s profile even announced that she wanted to die “in my sleep.”

But the Livermore, Calif., high school student was not so fortunate. Earlier this year, her decomposing body was found in the San Joaquin Irrigation Canal, seven weeks after she had been reported missing. Her killer is still at large.

Kayla is one of more than 1,000 deceased young people whose Web pages on the popular social-networking site MySpace have now been archived at MyDeathSpace.com, whose front page promises “One death or suicide per hour for the next 10 days!”

For each death MDS features, it posts an obituary, a photograph, and visitor comments about the death, along with a link to the dead person’s MySpace profile. Also available on the site is an interactive map of America,

allowing visitors to find information on deaths in any region of the country by clicking on the skull of their choosing.

“People want to see interesting deaths, with interesting individuals,” MDS’s founder, Michael Patterson, told The New York Sun. Asked if there were any profiles that might be too embarrassing or undignified to use on MyDeathSpace, Mr. Patterson responded: “If they’re dead, they are put on the site,” adding that the more unseemly profiles “are more interesting.”

“If you have pictures of yourself doing drugs, and you die from an overdose, that will be posted,” he said, perhaps alluding to the MDS profile of 27-year-old Adam Anderson, “a.k.a. Xanax the Clown,” of Billings, Mont., who died of an apparent drug overdose in July and whose MySpace page is replete with drug-related imagery, from pills to syringes.

“It was never my intention of creating a memorial site,” Mr. Patterson, a 25-year-old San Francisco paralegal, said, though his Web site has been sometimes incorrectly lumped in with a growing number of spaces for online mourning. “Sure, it says to be respectful on the front page, but I didn’t want to create another Legacy.com or Memory-of.com or one of those sites,” he said, referring two other death-related

domains that, unlike MDS, are devoted to paying homage to lost loved ones.

Instead, Mr. Patterson said he wanted his site to be a wake-up call to young people. “I wanted kids to read about people their age dying in drunk driving accidents and then not have that fourth or fifth drink that weekend when they’re attending a party. ... Teens think they’re invincible. Looking through the hundreds of deaths on MDS shows you they are not,” he said.

With the proliferating number of new social-networking Web sites, the existence of MyDeathSpace — which for now features only the deceased users of MySpace and not of other networking sites — raises a larger question: Do our online profiles live indefinitely after we die? In some cases, the answer is yes.

MDS is possible only because MySpace lacks a policy of proactively removing profiles created by users who have passed away, Mr. Patterson said.

MySpace did not respond to requests for comment for this article. However, it seems that few similar sites are willing to make the effort to sort through sometimes millions of profiles to find out which ones represent the dead.

A public relations and marketing manager for another popular networking domain, Friendster.com, Jeffrey

Roberto, said its policy is to leave up any profile unless a family member requests that it be removed.

“A family member must contact us and verify that they are, in fact, a family member,” Mr. Roberto said. “If nobody contacts us, the profile will remain.”

The gay chat forum Adam4Adam.com said it has a similar policy on deceased users’ profiles.

“We deactivate them as soon as we get notified,” a site administrator told the Sun in an e-mail message.

Thus, despite the national press coverage of the bias slaying of a 28-year-old black gay man from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Michael Sandy, his Friendster profile and the Adam4Adam sex ad that ultimately connected him with his killers are both still on the Internet. It appears that no family member has asked to have them taken down.

“Let’s get to know each other,” Sandy’s Adam4Adam ad reads. “Hey, looking for a real thing here. ... Looking to date Latin, Asian, Arab, or white.”

Sandy, who died in October, used the ad to contact four young white males for sex. Upon meeting him, however, they beat him and chased him onto a highway, where he was hit by a car. His attackers then rifled through his pockets for money and abandoned him.



MYDEATHSPACE.COM Adam Anderson, 27, with his daughter in a photo featured on his MySpace profile. He died of an apparent drug overdose in July.

The dance pioneer who inspired Madonna’s “Vogue” video, Willi Ninja, also has a sex profile on Adam4Adam, even though his September death also received widespread press attention. “Would like a partner to help finish that dance piece in life,” Ninja’s profile reads.

Back at MyDeathSpace, Mr. Patterson said he has no plans to expand his

project to include profiles from sites other than MySpace.

Asked if he would be willing to post his own MySpace profile to MDS when he dies, Mr. Patterson told the Sun, “I have left specific instructions with my Web guy to go onto my profile and make it public if I die.”

“It would only be fair,” he added.