

# A boy copes with loss

By TRACIE WHITE  
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**"I'M NOT REALLY** any different than other kids," Arlen says. He scratches his sunburned nose, tugs at his baseball shirt.

Arlen knows a lot about baseball, about playing at the beach. He knows that math is his favorite subject, and that social studies isn't. He knows that he'll be a fifth grader in the fall.

And that his little brother can be a pest sometimes.

At 9-years old, he also knows about AIDS. When he smiles that wide grin, he knows that people see a reflection of his mother who died of AIDS three years ago. He's been told that his 6-year-old brother, who shares that same wide grin, also has the HIV virus. And that his 30-year-old uncle has the same thing.

He knows, but still it's hard to understand.

"My mom told me she had AIDS, but I didn't really know what it meant," Arlen says. He looks up, wrinkles his brow, and shrugs.

Arlen's life has been touched by AIDS probably more than his share, but he's not alone.

The number of AIDS cases in Santa Cruz County has continued to grow since the first death more than a decade ago, reaching 179 by the end of June. A sudden surge in deaths over the past six months — 20 in all — has left signs of fatigue, strain and discouragement with victims, their families and caregivers.

Arlen's family has been struggling with that strain and discouragement for years.

When he was 3 years old, Arlen's mother was diagnosed with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Vickie "Sissy" Marshall was seven months pregnant with Arlen's little brother at the time she was diagnosed. She contracted the disease from her boyfriend who was an intravenous drug user, says Pam Wilson, her mother. She died four years later, about a week after her 22nd birthday.

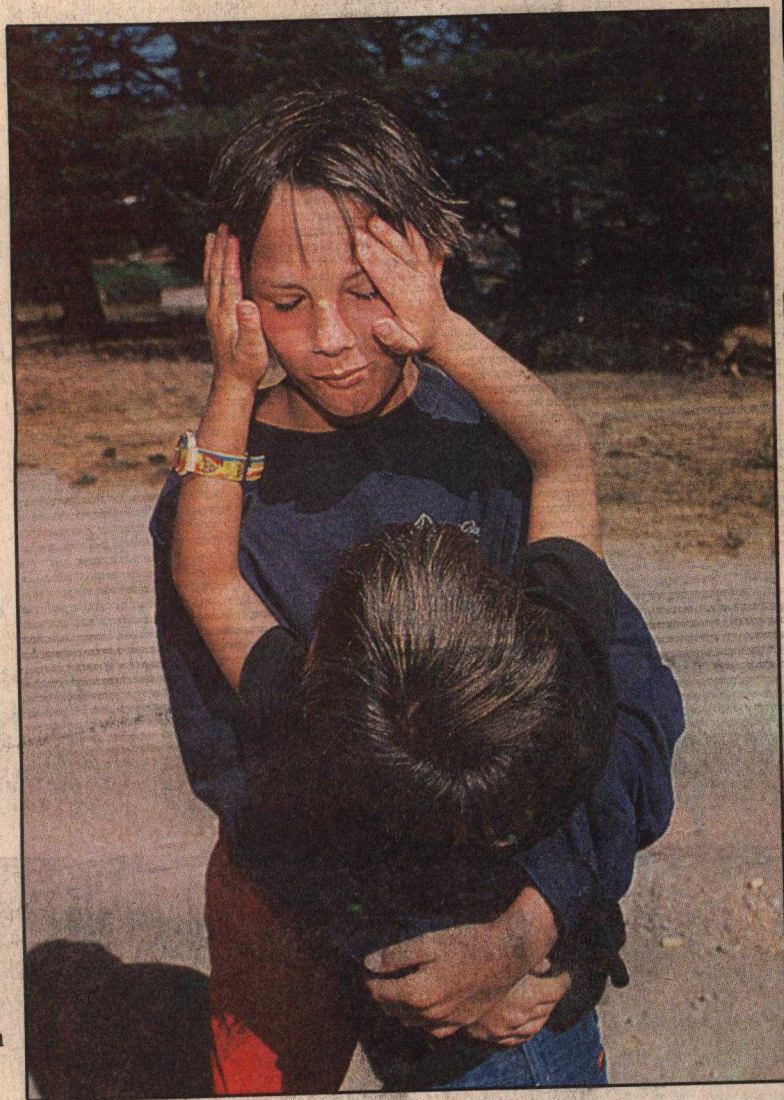
"Vickie couldn't bear the guilt," says Wilson. "She told my mom, 'I can't live to see the baby die. I have to die first.'"

Wilson asked that the newspaper not print the names

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## The Toll



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Arlen, 9 and his little brother, 6, goof off at the beach.

of her grandsons because of the stigma still attached to the disease. The boys have different fathers and different last names.

The baby was born HIV-positive and was started on AZT at 2 weeks old. Six years later, he still looks healthy and strong. He talks about being a construction worker or a fireman when he grows up. But the boys' grandmother, who promised her daughter she'd care for the two boys, says he's beginning to show signs of weakness. His coloring is beginning to pale, his energy

### More inside

■ AIDS has struck hard, killing 20 local residents in the first six months of this year, leaving AIDS workers, family members and friends depleted and weary. For a look at how the AIDS epidemic has hit Santa Cruz, see Bay Living .....Page D1

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'I look at the baby and I don't know how I'm going to make it'

— Pam Wilson,  
Arlen's grandmother

## A boy

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level is fading and his mind isn't as quick as it used to be.

"There are times he tells me what he wants to be when he grows up ... you know he's not going to grow up," Wilson says.

The family doesn't discuss his brother's almost certain death with Arlen.

"We're not even sure how to really deal with it," says Linda, Arlen's great aunt. Arlen has been living with her this summer in between camping trips with his friends. He'll move back home with his grandmother and his brother when school starts in the fall.

"What that little boy has to live with ...," Linda said. "He's the one who's going to have to live with all this. I don't know. it's going to be really, really hard.

"He keeps having to give more and more, first when his mom was sick, then after she died he had to give more for his brother. His brother gets a lot of special attention. Arlen's really had to set himself aside for a lot of years now."

Arlen's learned to deal with all of this by withdrawing. He's always been more quiet and reserved than his little brother, his grandmother says.

His brother demands attention — he's a fighter like his mother

was. That's how he's lived so long.

He also loves his brother Arlen with a passion.

"I look at the baby and I don't know how I'm going to make it," Wilson says. "I don't know how I'm going to make it through Vic. She was my life."

Arlen has trouble talking about AIDS. But he doesn't have any trouble talking about his mom. He has photo albums filled with her pictures and keeps his favorite photo of her by his bedside. He has a videotape of her in the hospital on her 22nd birthday, a few days before she died. He keeps the tapes he has of her singing to him by his bed and sometimes sings along with them.

"Mine and her favorite song was 'Love Can Build a Bridge,' and 'The Sweetest Gift,'" he says, returning from his bedroom with a copy of the tape in his hand.

With his hands shoved in the pockets of his shorts, his voice joins in with his mother's voice for a while, then he quietly climbs back in the living room lounge chair.

Arlen doesn't really understand what AIDS is, but he knows it took his mother away from him. He remembers her, and he remembers that she died.

"She got cremated," he says, matter of factly. "Her ashes got spread out on her favorite park."