A man of uncommon grace and courage

By Daniel Ruth, Times Correspondent

Certain stories stay with you forever, haunt you forever, beckon you forever. Maybe it's the pain. Maybe it's the unimaginable tragedy. And maybe it's the incredible dignity, all conspiring to make a long-ago moment forever vivid.

Dr. Gilbert Kushner died a few days ago at 76 from complications from lung cancer. He was a world-renowned scholar, a beloved member of the University of South Florida anthropology department and one of the most decent men I ever had the pleasure to meet.

In October 1973, I was a very young police reporter for the *Tampa Tribune*. Although I had only been on this beat for a few months I had already covered a number of grisly crimes. But nothing would top what I was about to step into.

On a bright Sunday afternoon, 11-year-old Jonathan Kushner set off on his bike from the family's Carrollwood home to a nearby convenience store. His route would take him through a wooded area, which has long since been developed.

Also in the woods that day were two psychopaths, Johnny Paul Witt and Gary Tillman. The men snatched Jonathan. It serves no purpose here to go into the grisly details of what happened next except to note what they did to that little boy transcends horrific.

It would be several days before Gilbert and Lorraine Kushner would learn the fate of their son, but for a brief period there was maybe a chance he would be found alive. I was assigned to stay close to the family as law enforcement officers and hundreds of volunteers fanned out across Tampa Bay in a search for Jonathan. But it was not lost on anyone that this was likely a death watch.

For all the joys of being a reporter, there is the dark side to this craft. There are times when a reporter's life intersects with people who are at the lowest point of their lives. The moment may last an hour, or a day, or a week, or more. And for a few days in late October 1973, Gilbert and Lorraine Kushner welcomed me into their home and permitted me to witness their fears, their anxieties - their hopes.
I had just arrived at my apartment when the phone rang. It was my editor. Jonathan's body had been discovered. And it was bad. Still, I immediately offered to go to the site where the body was being retrieved. Gruesome as it would be, I knew the alternative would be even worse. And I was right.

Go to the Kushners, I was told. It was Halloween night. Throughout the community children were dressed up as ghosts and goblins. Family friend and local attorney Arnold Levine answered the door. I told him I wasn't there as a reporter and wanted to offer my condolences. Inside, surrounded by friends and family, the emotionally exhausted Kushners were quietly sitting together.

I feebly expressed my sorrow for their loss and told them if they wanted to make a public statement I would be happy to convey it for them. The Kushners thanked law enforcement and all the volunteers for everything they had done to find their son. They spoke about how moved they had been by the outpouring of public support. Then I felt the firm hand of Arnold Levine on my shoulder.

He was furious with me for asking the Kushners what I thought was an appropriate question, and I was quickly hustled out the door. Arnold Levine was protecting his friends. I understood.

Services were held for Jonathan the next day. A huge gaggle of journalists stood around waiting for the family. When they arrived, Gilbert Kushner walked over to me, shook my hand and invited me to join his family inside the synagogue for the funeral service. At the very nadir of this man's greatest personal tragedy, he graciously wanted me to know he wasn't offended by my question the evening before.

We never spoke again. Many years later after I became a columnist, Kushner would occasionally e-mail me with a funny comment about something I had written. When Tillman became eligible for parole in 1998 (Witt had been executed), I e-mailed Kushner and asked if he wanted to comment. He declined. Tillman is still in prison.

Since 1973, I have probably driven up and down that stretch of Orange Grove Drive in Carrollwood thousands of times. I am always reminded of what happened there. A little boy rode his bike to the store and never came home.

And now with the passing of this man of uncommon grace and courage, in a sense a little boy has at last been reunited with his father - Jonathan Kushner has come home.