The Story of Frank 'Bopsy' Salazar: Make-A-Wish's First Wish Kid
by Megan Griffo

The story of a 7-year-old boy named Bopsy has been told countless times before.

It's been forwarded in email chains, posted on Facebook, retold in sermons and undoubtedly shared over dinner tables. It appeared in an edition of "Chicken Soup For The Soul" and in a Phoenix Fire Department newsletter. But along the way, details have been lost and added, switched up and sometimes completely mangled. On occasion, Bopsy is renamed "Billy." But the decades-long game of telephone hasn't erased one, indisputable fact -- Bopsy's story is worth telling.

Now, 32 years after Bopsy lost his life to leukemia, The Huffington Post spoke to his mother, the fireman he idolized, and the man who made him the Make-A-Wish Foundation's first-ever "wish kid." This is the real story of Bopsy.

In 1978, 5-year-old Frank "Bopsy" Salazar was diagnosed with leukemia. Doctors advised his mother, Octaviana Trujillo, to check him in to St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. At the time, Trujillo was 26, single, and couldn't afford to put Bopsy on her health insurance. She checked him in anyway.

Over the next two years, Bopsy was treated by Dr. Frank Barranco, a physician who the 5-year-old adored and who eventually introduced him to the people who would make his last days count.

Barranco told Trujillo in December 1980 that a woman named Linda Pauling wanted to speak with her. Pauling had lost her 7-year-old son, Chris, to leukemia that spring. But before Chris passed, the Arizona Department of Public Safety had fulfilled the little boy's dream of becoming a police officer. DPS officers Jim Eaves and Frank Shankwitz had met Chris with a patrol car and motorcycle and made him the only honorary Arizona Highway Patrol Officer in the department's history, Shankwitz told HuffPost.

The incredible effort inspired Pauling and Shankwitz to start the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

"[Pauling] told me that instead of letting the kids just feel sorry for themselves, they wanted to grant wishes, to do something every kid would benefit from, to fulfill their dream while they're still a part of this world," Trujillo said.

Shankwitz took over from there, and he went to visit Bopsy to find out more about the boy's dreams. After learning that he'd be granted a wish, the 7-year-old mulled it over.
"I want to ride in a hot air balloon," he told Shankwitz. Then he thought about it some more.

"No, I want to go to Disneyland." He paused again.

"No, I want to be a fireman."

But Shankwitz didn’t make him pick. With the organization just breaking ground, he thought, "Why not?"

All of Bopsy’s wishes would be granted. He got his balloon ride and his trip to Disneyland, which catalyzed a long-lasting relationship between Disney and Make-A-Wish.

But the part of the story that’s made it into the email chains and Facebook posts has been Bopsy’s visit with the Phoenix Fire Department. And that’s largely because of "Fireman Bob."

Like so many people in Bopsy’s life, Fireman Bob -- whose real name is Bob Walp -- did more than was asked of him to help the sick boy.

"We didn’t want to just give him a tour," Walp told HuffPost. "We decided to give him a badge and a jacket. We let him use the hose. We took him in the truck."

It’s a sweet story that could have just ended there, but doctors, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and the Phoenix Fire Department weren’t through with Bopsy.

For the next few months, the 7-year-old defied odds. But in April 1981, just after Easter, he was again admitted to St. Joseph’s and told he had days, maybe even just hours, to live. That’s when someone from the hospital decided to give Shankwitz a call. Suddenly, Bopsy’s wish wasn’t quite over.

On a day when Bopsy was particularly weak, Shankwitz paid him a visit -- one that was eventually interrupted by a knock on the window. When Bopsy looked over, he saw Fireman Bob with a large, goofy grin on his face.

Fireman Bob climbed into the room. Then, one by one, four other firefighters climbed up to Bopsy’s third-floor window to give him a wave.

Bopsy was elated. He looked up to his mother.

"You know, Mom," he said. "I’d really like to go down to see them. I want to be out there with my team."
When Bopsy was wheeled downstairs, he was met by the members of Fire Station 1 and their truck -- renamed "B1" for "Bopsy 1." The firefighters then took the ladder and raised it as high as it would go. One of them climbed to the top.

"It was like saying, 'Look, you're on your way to heaven," Trujillo told HuffPost. Toward the end of the visit, Bopsy turned to Fireman Bob.

"Am I a real firefighter?" he asked.

"Well, yeah," Walp responded. "Of course you are."

Bopsy passed away the next morning, with his mother, grandmother and aunt by his side.

After Bopsy's death, Trujillo distracted herself with work and graduate school. She earned her PhD in 1991, became the first chairwoman for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona in 1994, and was hired as a professor of American Indian education at Northern Arizona University in 2002.

But Bopsy's been with her all along. He's been with her in the dozens of letters from strangers she's received and in phone calls from family members and friends. He's with her every October when, as part of a Yacqui custom, she puts an altar in her yard to commemorate him. And he's with her every Nov. 2 when the Yacqui community in Guadalupe, Ariz., gathers at its cemetery to celebrate the lives of those they loved so much.

At this time of year, she often thinks of the moment a few weeks before Bopsy passed, when he realized how upset she was about his condition and tried to console her.

"I'm gonna be fine. I'm always going to be your guardian angel," he told her. "I'll be part of the galaxy and part of the heavens, and I'll take care of you."

And he has.

Trujillo doesn't get too caught up in the lost or fabricated details of Bopsy's story. Every version of it still holds a part of the 7-year-old boy who became a real fireman.

"My son is alive and well," Trujillo says, "in so many people's minds."