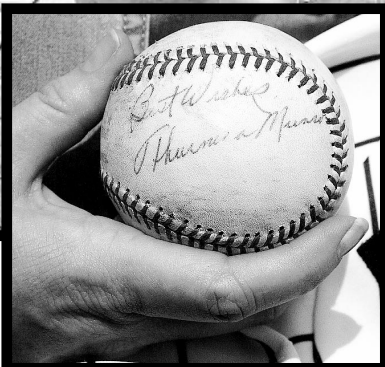
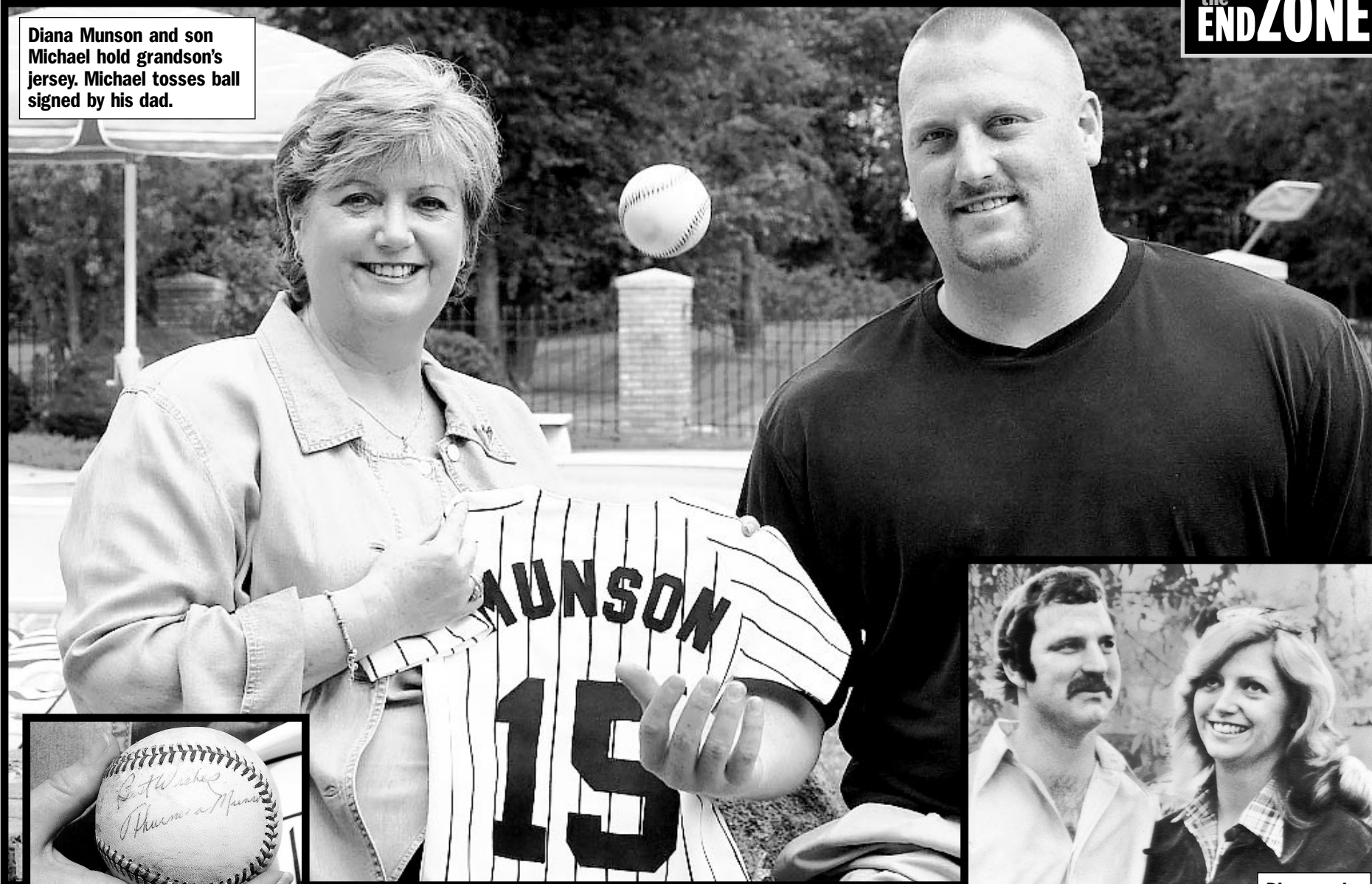
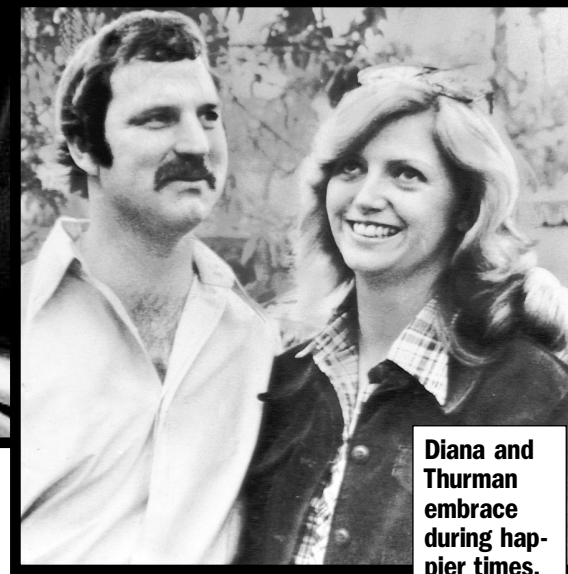


Diana Munson and son Michael hold grandson's jersey. Michael tosses ball signed by his dad.



LUKE PALMISANO SPECIAL TO THE NEWS



Diana and Thurman embrace during happier times.

'We had to leave that airplane knowing that Thurman was not coming with us.'

port, and Thurman is gone," he says. Diana Munson collapses to her knees on the front lawn. A few moments later, she goes inside and gathers Tracy and Kelly and Michael and tells them that Daddy has gone to heaven, because God must've wanted to have more good people there.

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Bobby Murcer hears the news from the Yankees and he and Kay fly straight to Canton and spend the night with Diana and the kids. Other friends and family members are around, 20 people in all. They stay up all night, talking around a big round kitchen table, a night of tears and reminiscence and questioning and devastation.

"It was just the worst day of all of our lives," Diana Munson says. "It doesn't get any easier. It just gets different."

Almost immediately, people begin leaving memorials by the burned blacktop of Greensburg Road, and by the tree stump maybe 75 feet away. George Ackley would drive by it every day and get chills. Diana Munson saw a psychiatrist after the accident and he told her she eventually would need to go to the crash site and feel all her pain and anger. Two years later, she did just that. She drove the 10 miles or so from her dream house to Greensburg Road and walked the pavement and the gnarly field, and down the little dip toward the stump. She went everywhere, every last stinking spot. She hated every moment. It almost made her physically sick. "If I was ever going to really heal, I had to do this," she says.

Every year on Aug. 2, seemingly without fail, Diana Munson notices when it's 4:02 p.m. She'll see it on a bank sign or hear it announced on the radio, or see it in the house. It isn't what she needs, but she does what she has done for a quarter-century. She gets past her pain, and lives her life, with strength and grace. She has five grandchildren, and Kelly Munson, the middle child, is a few weeks away from having No. 6. They are a blessing beyond all measure.

She was angry at God for a long time, but that has passed. She has deep faith. She says she knows he had a plan. There were signs. Why was John Denver, who died in a plane crash, in his cassette player? How could she and Thurman have had that touching phone conversation after she watched "A Star Is Born?" It was a chance to say goodbye.

"I'm never going to have happiness the way I had it with Thurman," she says now. "It was the happiest I've ever been in my life, being married to him and raising our children. I can sit around and complain about how I missed out and the kids

missed out, or I can choose to say, 'How blessed are we? We had Dad for the years we had him. We're healthy. We have wonderful children and grandchildren. We have way more than most people ever have as far as love and good memories, and isn't that what it's all about?'"

■ ■ ■
2:45 p.m., June 25, 2004. *The trees have been taken out of the field just north of the runway that Thurman Munson crashed into, and the bluff the runway rests atop has been regraded so it's not so steep. The field is a patchwork of weeds and wildflowers, eerie in its stillness. The stump is long gone. "I've been here 20 years and the stump hasn't been here since then," says Todd Laps, airport operations supervisor, as he drives down Runway 19 toward Greensburg Road in his red pickup. It is a cool day with a light breeze, not unlike the conditions of Aug. 2, 1979. Along the wall of the operations office, surrounded by fat reference manuals, is a black three-ring binder, thick and well-worn, with an index card taped to the cover. It reads,*

"Munson Crash, AUG. 2, 1979"

It's full of details, depositions, photos, a compendium of tragedy on a metal shelf, with everything but the heartache.

"He was a living legend around here," Todd Laps says.

■ ■ ■
Along the far back wall of the Yankee clubhouse, next to Derek Jeter, is the locker of the first Yankee captain since Lou Gehrig. It has No. 15 on the top and has a catcher's mask and chest protector and Jeter makes sure everyone knows this is sacred space, a place belonging to Thurman Munson. Diana Munson has never been in the clubhouse to see it. Next Saturday is Old-Timers' Day, and she and Tracy, Kelly and Michael will be part of it. Kelly remembers playing in the clubhouse as a little girl with her sister, eating candy bars and being with their dad. She loves the smell of the Stadium. It smells like no other place and she loves being there, and yet when she walks in and hears Bob Sheppard's voice, well ... How are you supposed to feel? "There's probably nowhere that it hits you worse," she says.

Still, it will be great to be back. Diana Munson doesn't like to ask for special favors, but she's thinking if she can work it out she would like to have a quiet moment in the locker room, with the kids, a moment to see her husband's locker and look into it and even though she knows she'll be crying, it will feel really nice to remember the good times once more.