

MEMORIES OF JOEL FADE SLOWLY

Antioch couple rely on fond memories

- Patricia Yollin, Chronicle Staff Writer

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The Hansons' days are not so bright since the tragic loss of their son one year ago. Each family member deals differently with the absence of the energetic, engaging 16-year-old, who always seemed to see life for its possibilities.

First of three parts.

Joel Hanson is buried in Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Lafayette. His mother has not visited the grave since the funeral almost a year ago.

"I won't go," Eileen Hanson said. "He's not there. He's more here than there."

"Here" is a 58-acre ranch outside Clayton, in rural Contra Costa County, where Joel lived until last Dec. 27, when he was shot in the head at the home of some friends in Brentwood.

He died the next day, at the age of 16. When his parents were asked if they were willing to donate his organs, they said no. And then they changed their minds.

"I thought, 'How would I feel if I was the parent of someone who was dying?' " Eileen recalled.

On Dec. 29 at UCSF Medical Center, 28-year-old Matt Callison received Joel's heart, and 26-year-old Carrie Shellhammer got his lungs. Joel's kidneys, liver and pancreas went to three middle-aged adults.

For Callison and Shellhammer, 2004 has meant resurrection, reclaiming lives that might have ended if Joel hadn't died. For the Hansons, it's been a year of loss, pain and unanswered questions.

And even now, at year's end, there are still many things connected to Joel that Eileen Hanson can't bring herself to do.

She won't drive by John Muir Medical Center, the Walnut Creek hospital where her son died. She won't open a booklet from an event that honored donor families. She won't deal with her son's belongings.

But she and her husband are open to meeting Callison and Shellhammer.

"I think I would be OK with it," she said. "They're the only future Joel has."

On a recent December afternoon, the kind where day turns into night before you know it, Eileen watched her younger daughter, 15-year-old Joy, ride a horse around the pasture.

"She's not wearing a helmet," Eileen said with a sigh.

Joy, a sophomore at Brentwood's Liberty High, and her 19-year-old sister, Jamie, a student at Los Medanos Community College in Pittsburg, both live at home. Josh, at 22 the oldest of the four Hanson children, works for the California Conservation Corps and has a place in Fortuna in Humboldt County. He and his girlfriend are expecting a baby in January -- one of the few auspicious developments in a year Eileen wants to forget.

"I can barely wait to get the year over," Eileen said. "It's been the worst year of my life."

In May, her father-in-law died of lung cancer. Months later, her mother ended up in the emergency room. In mid-November, Jim Hanson tore a tendon in his left arm and had surgery. He spent a day and a half in the hospital after reacting badly to anesthesia. A week later, he was back, with pains in his chest that turned out to be muscle spasms.

"That was pretty scary," Eileen said.

She's 48 now and met her husband, who's a year older, at a dog-training class when they were teenagers. She now trains dogs four nights a week and tends to farm chores during the day.

"I've kept myself real busy," Eileen said. "Too busy, from Jim's point of view. If I'm not exhausted, I can't sleep."

There is plenty to do. The ranch is teeming with animals -- 98 goats, 80 sheep, 50 chickens, 12 ducks, 11 pigs, 10 cats, four dogs, two horses and two rabbits -- and they all need care and attention.

"The worst time is when I'm cleaning stalls," Eileen said. "I have time to think about Joel."

He was a mix of charm and charisma. An animal lover and 4-H diehard, Joel was also a champion swimmer. In July, a memorial plaque was put up at the Rodeo Swim Club to remind people of that.

But reminders are not something Eileen needs.

"One of the hardest things after Joel died was going to Costco," she said.

Joel was crazy about the store's chicken nuggets, cheddar cheese, beef jerky, salami.

"I've tried to section a lot of things out of my mind," Eileen said.

It even took a long time to go back to St. Bonaventure's in Concord, where Joel's funeral Mass drew more than 400.

"I've just become more emotional in general, but I've gotten to the point where I can talk about Joel and not cry," said Eileen, who cried anyway.

In April, about 1,400 people showed up in Hayward for the California Transplant Donor Network's annual ceremony to honor families of organ donors from the previous year. The Hansons were not among them.

"We weren't ready," Eileen said.

His picture appeared in a booklet distributed at the ceremony, next to words written by Eileen.

"Joel loved to make people laugh and felt the world was full of friends that he had not yet met," she wrote in part.

When the booklet arrived in the mail, it was immediately put in a drawer, unopened. The new coat and shoes Joel got from his grandmother last Christmas were also stashed away. Police returned them, at Eileen's request -- her son had them with him when he was shot.

Joy and Joel Hanson were born only 22 months apart and were often mistaken for twins. For two or three months after Joel was killed, Joy mostly sat and did nothing.

"When I came out of my shell, I yelled a lot," Joy said. "Then I calmed down."

She used to bang on the wall of Joel's room to make him turn down the radio. But nights on the ranch are different now.

"It's quiet," Joy said. "It echoes."

"Sometimes it's kind of weird," Jamie said.

Joel's death has changed her, too.

"I've grown up," Jamie said.

Eileen said the loss of a son affected the way she treats her daughters.

"I'm more protective of the girls," she said. "I don't want them to get hurt."

On Aug. 6, Joel would have turned 17. The Daileys, close friends who live a few miles away, cooked dinner for the family and rented a movie about a goat herder.

On Thanksgiving, the Hansons went to a relative's house in Sacramento. Joel's cousins were there.

"Joel would always be the instigator, and they'd play football," Eileen said. "This time, they just sat in the house."

She figured Christmas would not be too hard, because Joel was shot after the holiday.

"You can't really dread Christmas -- it's going to come," she said.

As it turned out, Christmas Eve, spent next door at the house of Eileen's mother, was more problematic than expected.

"Today was a tough day -- all those last Christmas memories coming to a head -- hopefully tomorrow will be less harrowing," Eileen said in an e-mail late on Christmas Eve. "The quote that they used for Joel's memorial trophy is: 'Fair's not about the animals, it's about the people.' Right now, life seems to be about the memories."

Christmas itself was less harrowing.

"It's going pretty well today," she said by phone Saturday night, amid the clatter of plates and chatter of guests. "When we came home last night, there was just this terrible letdown that he wasn't here."

The next obstacle will be the day Joel would have graduated from Liberty High.

"It's one of those days you look forward to," she said during the mid- December interview. "It's June 10."

It will also be Jim's 50th birthday.

"I was always a real date person," Eileen said. "Now I don't want to be that way anymore."

It's still jarring, she said, to see the dates of Joel's birth and death -- the finality of it all.

"I know he's not going to come home, and I've sort of accepted that it's the truth," Eileen said. "There are so many things that I think, 'Darn, we never did that.' You wonder, if you'd done something differently, would it have been different? But, no. It was his day to die."

Friday night, July 16: Awards night at the Youth Fair at the Contra Costa County Fairgrounds in Antioch.

Joel was always a dominant presence at the fair. His absence was almost as emphatic.

"I keep looking for him," said Eileen, leaning on a fence as she watched Joy show her Nubian goat.

Joy was wearing Joel's Future Farmers of America jacket. He never had a chance to show in it.

Between the competition and prizes, there was a break for dinner. People retreated to their weeklong encampments. The Hansons and their friends cooked up spaghetti, chatted about sheep and goats, and talked about death.

"The last time I talked to Joel was Christmas Day," said Tyler Smith Brown, 17, who lives in a trailer park next to the Hansons' ranch. "On the 27th, we were supposed to go snowboarding -- but we didn't."

At the Youth Fair, Tyler passed out flyers he'd made after Joel died, showing a smiling photograph of his pal from a previous fair.

"In memory of our beloved friend," they said. "Fly high, Joel. We love you."

On this Friday night, the extraordinary camaraderie that's always part of the Youth Fair was deep and keenly felt -- but it was underscored by a sense of loss.

"It's strange being here without my husband," said Joel's grandmother, Maxine Hanson. "We were married for 53 years and 14 days."

As she reminisced, the lavender, rose and magenta clouds were starting to lose their color. It was time for trophies and ribbons, and for something new as well: the 4-H Joel Hanson Memorial Award, created in January, Eileen said, to "honor the kind of kid who puts a smile on your face."

The Hansons sat high in the bleachers, watching fleece, rabbits and homemade ice cream win acclaim.

Just before 9 p.m., when the sky turned slate gray, the Hanson family proceeded to the center of the arena.

"Joel's organs were donated," Eileen told the crowd of 400. "Somebody has his heart, somebody has his lungs, his kidneys, his liver, other important body parts. Joel is still among us. What we have here is his spirit."

The award in Joel's name, \$250 of the \$5,000 raised, was about to be presented.

"Wherever there was something fun, that's where Joel was," Eileen said. "So, Tyler -- this one's for you, kid."

Eileen had learned only hours before that her son's best friend had won.

"When I got to the gate I thought, 'I can't do this,' " she said afterward. "But it's important to me that people remember."

Three months after the Youth Fair, at Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill, Eileen formally gave Tyler the memorial award.

"That night was harder," she recalled. "It was real, giving him the money and the plaque. It was solid. Before, it was words."

Back in the Hansons' living room, daylight and dusk had turned into a mid- December night, one of the longest of the year. Jim Hanson arrived home from his job at the C&H Sugar factory in Crockett, where he works as a longshoreman.

He was wearing a heavy brace on his left arm and said he won't start physical therapy until February. The tendon injury has vastly limited what he can do.

He knelt beside his wife, who was sitting on the couch.

Asked if it was the worst year of his life -- a year when he lost both his father and his son -- Jim cried and smiled at the same time.

"Physically, yes. Emotionally, yes. Spiritually, no," said Hanson, a devout Roman Catholic. "Life is full of challenges, and it's made me realize there's a reason for everything. I don't know what it is -- but I'm not the one calling the shots."

For months, Eileen wouldn't enter Joel's bedroom. Finally, Jim turned it into his office.

"I have his picture there and I talk to him a lot, let him know what's going on," Hanson said. "That helps. But whenever I look at it, I realize that's the age he is, and it's not going to change."

Since Joel's death, Jim said, he and Eileen have reversed roles. Now, he's the one asking her to slow down, to come to church with him, to realize that Joel's death was meant to be.

"I'm a lot less stressed out than I was," he said. "And the cool thing about that long list of animals -- it's very soothing to go out and look at them for five minutes. They brighten up your day."

Although he and his wife are on "different pages," as Jim put it, he suspects they feel the same inside.

"It's not that I don't miss him and that I don't love him," Jim said. "But I've had my time to realize he's not here. It's over and it's done, and I can't change it."

Last week, charges were finally filed in the Hanson case. Paul Graves, a deputy district attorney in Contra Costa County, said 26-year-old Justin Moffett of Brentwood was charged with involuntary manslaughter and being a felon in possession of a firearm.

The shooting, which occurred in the bedroom of a house on Allbrook Drive, in a quiet Brentwood subdivision, was believed to be accidental. Circumstances remain murky.

"The suspect has two prior strikes," Graves said.

Brentwood police Sgt. Doug Silva said Moffett was serving time in Ely, Nev., for stealing a car and wouldn't return to the Bay Area until May.

The .38-caliber revolver that killed Joel was recovered in the Truckee River.

Eileen Hanson says she has received more than 100 cards and letters from people who contributed to the memorial fund. A 14-year-old 4-H Club member sold her goat for \$350 and donated all of it. A librarian dug up Joel's library card from third grade and sent it to Eileen.

And one of heart recipient Matt Callison's fourth-grade students wrote to her, too.

"He said, 'Thank you for letting your son die so that our teacher could live,' " Eileen recalled. "I thought, 'Wait a minute, this isn't how I'm looking at it.' "

She's starting to send out thank-you notes.

"I'm finally at the point I can mail them," she said. "It's the last thing that says he's really gone."

To become a donor

For more information, contact the California Transplant Donor Network at (888) 570-9400 or visit www.ctdn.org.

To contribute

The fund created by friends of Joel Hanson allows an award to be given each year to a young 4-H Club member. Contributions can be sent to: UCCE- Contra Costa 4-H, 75 Santa Barbara Road, Second Floor, Pleasant Hill, CA 94523. Phone: (925) 646-6543. Checks should be made out to Contra Costa 4-H Council (specify the "Joel Hanson Memorial Award" on the memo line).

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