

'Grief is the price for love'



STAFF PHOTO/JOHN D. HANLON

Terry Buettner calls this tree in the back yard of her family's Brighton home "Alex's Tree," since her 14-year-old son spent hours in its branches reading or swinging. Alex was struck by a car while riding his bicycle last month and died shortly afterward from his injuries.

Brighton parents deal with the unbearable pain of losing their son in a bicycling accident

By SARAH DANIELS

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Terry Buettner expects her 14-year-old son, Alex, to walk through the front door at any moment.

Her mind knows this is an impossibility, but her heart isn't ready to accept that her son is dead.

She thought nothing could be more difficult than losing her sister, who died from leukemia at the age of 23. She was wrong.

"This is," she says. "You never expect to bury your son."

Alex was struck by a car in the intersection of Highland and Monroe avenues on Sept. 2 as he pedaled his bicycle home from East High School in Rochester. He liked riding up there to watch building progress on the new bleachers at school. Although he was wearing a helmet at the time of the accident, he died two days later from massive head injuries.

"Grief is the price for love," Terry says, sitting in a large blue recliner in the living room of her Brighton home.

The large chair makes her look small. Her hands lay limp on the armrests.

Immediately after Alex's death, the house was filled with relatives for a week. Terry's mother stayed on with the family through the second week. Her husband, Brian, an attorney, has had to return to work. Their 8-year-old daughter, Mary Catherine, is at school. Terry is alone — only the gentle hum of the clothes dryer breaks the silence.

Terry says it's horrible to be alone. She constantly breaks down in tears but realizes she needs to go through that as part of the grieving process.

Just months before, Alex and Mary Catherine couldn't wait for each other to get home from school. They would head out to the back yard to jump on the trampoline or catch bugs in the small woods. They watched TV together or rode their bikes around the neighborhood.

Now, Terry says, Mary Catherine doesn't know what to do with herself.

"They played together incessantly," Terry says. "Mary Catherine is just lost without him."

Reminders of Alex are everywhere. An elaborate Celtic knot he tied lies in a basket on the coffee table. The piano

Bereaved mother says grief is the price for love

► **GRIEF**, from page 1A

The couple bought for him stands in the living room where he played Beethoven and Chopin. His beloved cat, Shadow, prowls in the back yard.

Terry calls her son "my Renaissance boy, my Leonardo da Vinci." Her face lights up and her eyes shine as she talks about him.

If you wanted a smart, sweet, really happy kid, that was Alex," Terry says.

When Alex was a toddler, he was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. People with Asperger's are usually very bright but have difficulty with social cues. Alex could read and write at the age of 3, and he skipped the second grade.

But Alex usually had trouble telling when his mother was angry or when classmates were sad, for example.

Alex had a deep need to understand everything — astronomy, global warming, knitting. The week he died, the Buettner's roof was being shingled. Alex sat down on the lawn with the roof tile instructions to learn how to do it himself.

"One thing I miss the most is him bopping in the house with a smiling face because he learned something," Terry says.

Alex also had a gentle soul, she says. He loved spending time with his little sister, and couldn't understand violence or teasing.

He would occasionally slip a small, blue stuffed toy bunny he had since he was a baby in his pocket and carry it with him throughout the school day.

That little blue bunny, Lippity, sits on top of two clean pillows, neatly stacked on his carefully made bed in his bedroom. Alex's treasures fill the room — an arrow he made in Boy Scouts, books crammed onto a large bookshelf in the corner, intricate line drawings of people, buildings and animals, an unabridged dictionary, a black-and-white photograph of Lippity that he took for an art class.

His parents know they have to clean out their son's room, but not now. Brian says they'll do it next year.

"These were the things he loved," Terry says with a catch in her throat.

It's a difficult room to go into, but she finds herself going in there often — mostly when she needs to cry.

Brian said he often wakes up in the morning forgetting for a brief moment that his son is gone. He slowly comes to the realization that Alex isn't there, and Brian doesn't want to get out of bed.

"It's still unbelievable that he's not here," Brian said.

Terry knew something awful had happened to Alex that day when a police officer and a social worker appeared at her door. Terry and Mary Catherine were home at the time.

Terry immediately called Brian, who left for home on his bicycle. He got a flat on the way home, so the trip took 45 minutes.

Terry and Brian dropped Mary Catherine at her best friend's house and rushed to the hospital.

When the Buettners arrived at the hospital, they were told Alex probably would not survive. After he was declared dead two days later, many of his organs were donated, including his heart, liver and eyes.

"It was hard," Terry says. "We told the doctors Alex wanted to donate his organs."

Alex had noticed an organ donation sticker on his mother's driver's license and said he had wanted to be a donor, too. Terry now takes some solace that her son, though lost to her, had a significant impact on the lives of five other people.

She has yet to visit his grave in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. She hasn't been able to bring herself to do it.

"My whole life revolved around him for 14 years," she says.

She and her husband are dealing with Alex's death differently. Brian feels a need to sit down and reminisce about Alex.

"Talking about it is difficult, but it's helpful," Brian says. "I want to be able to talk about things that were enjoyable and things that I'll miss."

Terry says her husband broke down in tears the other night at dinner. The family used to joke about how the kitchen table was too small for all of them. It no longer is.

"You just realize, walking around the house, it really seems empty," Brian says.

Mary Catherine is frightened to go to her best friend's house, where she stayed the day Alex was taken to the hospital. She told her mother that every time she goes there, something bad happens.

Neither Brian nor Mary Catherine have touched their bikes since Alex's accident.

"I feel guilty I can do it and he's not able to," Brian says.

Terry tries to do things that need to be done, like the dishes and the laundry. She tries to hold it together around her daughter and in front of others, but breaks down when she is by herself. She has problems concentrating. Leaving the house to pick up a prescription from the pharmacy

is overwhelming. She can't put a dinner together.

"Yesterday, I cried all day," she says. "I don't even know why."

The couple feels guilty about the way their son died, asking themselves why they bought Alex a bike and why they let him ride on Monroe and Highland avenues.

Two days before the accident, Terry and Brian discussed the Highland and Monroe intersection with their son. They said it was dangerous and gave Alex strategies for crossing safely. The morning of his death, Alex was excited about getting out on

his bike, telling his sister that it was perfect bicycling weather.

He was struck later in the day in that very intersection.

Terry's unsure how the accident happened. Perhaps Alex read the lights wrong. Perhaps he misread the situation. Terry and Brian haven't called the police to find out exactly what happened. To them, all they need to know was that it was an accident.

"He died doing what he loved," Terry says. "He must have been really excited, with the wind whipping in his face."

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