

Life's little lesson

Sunday, August 25, 2002

BY STEPHANIE HANES / Monitor staff

Jim Dozois is clutching the lectern, trying not to think. If he lets his mind start to churn, he'll lose his place. He'll forget which pain he has described out loud and which he has only felt. So he switches to autopilot and lets the sorrow unfold itself.

He tries not to look at the girls crying three bleacher rows back, because that will make him sob even more. He can hardly bear to glance at Doug and Patty Hall, who sit to his left, next to each other on plastic folding chairs.

Doug Hall's hand is on his wife's knee, his eyes on the man who killed his son. As the younger man's words dip into memories, Hall's facial muscles contort, fighting tears and agony. But he wants to be there, and will be there, every time Dozois speaks. Later, when he catches Dozois near the lectern, it will be in an embrace.

Lawyer Jacalyn Colburn watches from stage left, nervous for her client, bracing for the words that will once again make her cry. She is still not used to her own tears, which she has shed often in this case. Before she met Dozois, she had never cried in court.

Judge Edward Fitzgerald sits in his gray suit near the top of the gymnasium's bleachers. He rests his elbows on his knees, blending into the now-silent mass of high school students. He watches this test of his judicial philosophy.

Healthy, handsome and 24

years old, Josh Hall surrounds them all. He is standing in the snow with a knit hat covering his dark hair, or reaching into a tree and laughing, or casting a line into serene lake waters, always grinning with perfect teeth from the poster-size photographs that decorated his memorial service 17 months ago.

Since Josh died, his parents and his best friend have been living a story of tragedy and forgiveness. With a lawyer, a judge and others, they have attempted the torturous piecing together of shattered lives and faced the realization that those lives will never be fully healed.

Despite pain and anger, they have dedicated themselves to good, have struggled to love when it was easier to hate. Together, Josh Hall's family and the judicial system have taken uncharted steps to help a man others might have decried as a killer. That young man has struggled to live with his grief and be worthy of their trust.

This is the story of the Hall family, Jim Dozois and their grieving communities. They hope it is also a story of the people they will save.

At the time of the accident I was living with Josh and his family. I met Josh in 1995. It was my freshman year at New England College, and for the six years after that, our friendship grew. It grew so strong that I felt closer to Josh and his family, that I even stopped going home. . . . Their family was one I thought I would be a part of for the rest of my life.

Jim Dozois (Doe-ZWAH) found home in Henniker. Before he drove north that New Hampshire summer, he had moved almost every year, from Framingham, Mass., to Bellingham and back to Framingham, to Southboro, to Northboro, wherever his mother could make ends meet.

In 1995, he unpacked in New England College's freshman dorms. He intended to stay put.

Josh Hall was already home. He had grown up five minutes from campus, as much a part of the area as the hills and trails and sparkling Contoocook River. He had had no intention of going to the college next door, but on the way back from a financial aid trip to Unity College in Maine, a small environmental school, he had turned to his parents and said, "I just can't do it." Unity was too rural, even for the boy from central New Hampshire who spent life outside and identified birds by sight and song.

Hall enrolled at NEC, planning to stay a semester and transfer. Then he met Dozois, and a roommate named Chris Page, and the other men and women who wove themselves into a tight ball of friendship. So he stayed, too, and invited these new people into his world.

"I had to get a new washing machine because my other one kind of died," Patty Hall says now, laughing as she recalls her son's crew tromping through her Weare home. "It was almost like we were house parents. As soon as they'd walk through the door they'd say, 'Hi mom, hi dad, where's the food?' And right to the refrigerator."

Both Josh and his younger brother, Johnny, brought friend after friend into their family. At one point, Patty Hall said, there were five young men living at the house.

Her older son's regular companions, though, were always Page and Dozois - the three musketeers, she called them.

Bonding

From the moment Page and his parents walked into the dorm room where Hall was settling in with his folks, the two young men clicked. They lived together during their pre-college summer session and met Dozois when the school year started. Sophomore year, they all moved to Sanborn House.

They bonded the college way. Page and Dozois, both communications majors, stayed awake to study and write papers. Page and Hall lined up chairs in front of the Sony

PlayStation, and Hall shouted and squirmed as he watched Page maneuver characters in the video game "Resident Evil." They talked about girls, they played guitar. They walked to parties together.

They also bonded Hall's way. All three four-wheeled near Hall's parents' house, a few miles from campus on Lake Horace. They trudged through the woods, fished and canoed.

For Page, who is 25 now, with dark hair and striking eyes and the same rugged look as Hall, those connections were healing.

At 14, Page had held his 16-year-old brother in the back of an ambulance in the Dominican Republic and watched him die. His brother had crashed while the two were riding rented motorcycles on the island.

"Josh kind of filled that void," Page said this summer, on break from the Actors Studio Drama School at the New School in Manhattan and on one of his regular visits to the Halls. "I mean, you can't fill that void. But he did a pretty good job."

Dozois, too, called Hall a brother. They worked together in the rental shop at Pats Peak, the ski mountain Hall had grown up on.

"You would always see them together," said Jim Wall, 48, director of services at the Peak.

In some ways they seemed like opposites, he said, with Hall the rugged outdoorsman and Dozois a neat freak. "The stories about Jim's dorm room are legendary," Wall said.

After college, before Dozois and Hall went to Alaska for the summer, Hall had it out with his friend, telling him the cleaning was driving him crazy. They screamed back and forth - "like a married couple," Dozois said - and then laughed, and soon drove off to Alaska, where Dozois tried to relax more and Hall tried to be neater.

Still, Hall would sneak into the bathroom and rearrange his friend's shampoo bottles. Just to mess with him.

"They were both willing to go against the grain," Wall said. "Against the typical 'macho' thing." They had no qualms about showing affection, he said, to each other, their friends, their family.

"There would be times when the kids were saying, 'Let's go out, let's go out,' and Josh would say, 'Nope, I'm going home to have dinner with my dad. He's cooking clams casino.' "

Map of sorrow

Doug Hall knows that story, and so many others of the son who, even in high school, wasn't afraid to kiss his father goodbye.

As Hall tells those stories, the corners of his blue eyes crinkle, the lines joining a widened map of sorrow. He smiles, too, in a full-hearted way that makes clear where his son got his grin. Then something snaps him back to pain, and his facial muscles fight to hold up his smile and hold down the tears.

Josh Hall loved the woods because of his father, who took his sons hunting and fishing from the time they were toddlers. His parents bought him Audubon books and watched the Discovery Channel with him.

Throughout college and after, father and son often slipped into nature together. One day, not long before his death, Josh called his father at Concord Hospital, where Doug Hall is an administrator, and persuaded him to skip work to play in the woods.

"We're walking down this old logging road and he puts his arm around me," Doug Hall said, remembering. "He says, 'Have I told you yet today how much I love you? And how much these days mean to me?'"

Josh Hall learned from his parents to be unabashed about those words. Patty and Doug Hall said them to their sons and the friends who came into their home and hearts.

They told Dozois they loved him. They told him while he was their son's college friend spending time at the house, when he stayed over during school breaks, when he moved in after the boys finished school. They told him in the weeks before the crash, as he and their son packed for another summer in Alaska. They try to tell him now.

It makes the guilt even more unbearable.

"Five years of my life was in Henniker, in Weare," Dozois said recently. "I had moved around so long. Once I got to college, I stayed there. I finally had a home. This was where I was comfortable - in Henniker, at Josh's house. . . . Now I can't stand it. I don't even like going there. The tension, the memories, everything - just, I don't like it."

The next thing I know, I'm waking up on the roof of my car. I'm told that my car went one direction and I overcorrected and went in the other direction. My car skipped across the cement. My car then proceeded to flip over several times, and then hit a snow bank and was propelled 15 feet in the air, where it hit a telephone pole. And then we, we were on the hood of the car.

When I woke up, I was no longer in my seat belt and I was on the hood of my car staring down at all the glass. And it took me some time before, to begin to realize, that we were in an accident, and that Josh, that Josh was in the car, too. And I finally realized so I went over. He was still in the seat belt. So I yelled at him and he didn't answer. So I tried yelling louder. Still no answer. So I started to scream. And he still didn't answer. That's

when I reached over to grab on to him. And I could tell right there that he was already dead.

I started to freak out, I started to kick out the windows . . . then I guess I must've blacked out again because when I woke up I was on 114. And the next thing I remember was some lady was holding me on the ground. . . . I'm saying, "Oh my god, I killed my best friend."

March 24, 2001, was a Saturday. That meant it was quieter in the Pats Peak rental shop, since the weekday hordes of kids from school ski programs weren't there. Josh Hall even got off early, about 1 p.m., and drove home to help his father and brother install an evaporator in their sugar house.

The day sparkled with blue sky and blinding white snow, deep from a winter of storms. The Halls worked, and then Doug made scallops wrapped in bacon. Johnny, two years younger than Josh, pulled his older brother on the sled the family used for ice fishing. Their parents snapped pictures.

"We just had a beautiful, just the best day," Doug Hall said.

Dozois closed the rental shop around 4:45 and drove the few minutes on winding Route 114 to the Halls' house. Patty and Doug's best friends were there, adding to the buzz of people and laughter. Dozois grabbed a beer.

About 7, Dozois and the Hall brothers started getting ready to go out. It was a friend's 30th birthday, and he had just had a baby, so they were going to swing by the party to wish him happy birthday and see the child.

They had work the next morning, so they weren't planning to stay out late.

Dozois offered to drive. He had only had his car, a black 1997 Volkswagen GTI, for seven months. It was still exciting with its all-leather interior and sunroof, a "V-6 on roller skates," as his friend Page described it.

Dozois planned to put the car into storage the next week because he and Hall were driving to Alaska in Hall's Toyota pickup.

Doug Hall had borrowed Dozois's car twice that week, and the younger man had asked if he had "gotten on it," if he had pushed the car to its swift limits. Hall told Dozois he didn't need to drive a fast car fast; that everybody already knew it went fast.

"Be safe," Doug Hall called after the young men.

Josh Hall turned around at his father's words.

"I will," he said. "I love you guys."

He walked toward the car.

The crash

There were about 30 people at the birthday party, Dozois remembered later, with a keg and some music, people milling inside and out, some drinking, some not. He drank about three-quarters of the beer in a small, plastic cup and then stopped when someone, thinking the drink was abandoned, tossed in a cigarette.

He said he also had a few sips of Jaegermeister, and a sip of Jack Daniels. Not chugs, not even shots. Just sips.

After a couple of hours at the party, Dozois and Josh Hall said their goodbyes and headed home. As they drove through Henniker, by the flashing yellow lights a block from the heart of campus, they spotted a few college friends heading into the Lucky Star, the white clapboard Chinese restaurant and lounge on the corner.

"We figured lucky occurrence, let's stop in, hang out for a while and then go home," Dozois said.

That's what they did. They went into the bar and talked with friends for about an hour. Dozois didn't drink - he bought a beer, but Hall drank it. When they got back into the GTI, the two friends were laughing and joking, Dozois said.

Dozois drove about three miles on Route 114, past the entrance to the Peak, near the entrance to the Henniker transfer station. The last thing he remembers is hearing his best friend's laugh.

Around 11:30, a woman driving in the other direction saw the headlights approaching her take a jagged left, then roll over and over. She stopped and ran toward the accident in the bitter air. She heard someone yelling, "Help me, help me." She got to the mangled car but could not open the doors.

She heard the person inside yell, "My friend isn't answering me." But in the darkness she could see no one else. She told the man she would go for help.

Other cars stopped. One man, coming from a play at John Stark Regional High School, Hall's alma matter, told the police he saw a figure sitting on the guardrail, covered in blood and broken glass. Debris from the car littered the snow bank around the telephone pole. The car had landed on its roof.

The figure was distraught, the man told the police, saying his friend was still in the car. At first, the man could find no one else. He crawled into the car through a shattered window, then tried again. Then the man saw the body. The passenger's torso was draped though the rear window, a puddle of blood melting the snow beneath him.

The passenger had no pulse.

Crime scene

The 911 call came through police dispatch as a vehicle rollover. Henniker officers Matthew French and Ryan Murdough responded in separate cruisers. French arrived at 11:37 p.m. Murdough, whose shift was just ending, got there at 11:38.

"While I was approaching the vehicle, a male subject that had blood all over his face, arms, hands, clothing came up to me and stated that he needed to have a seat in my car," Murdough wrote in his report. "He stated this a couple of times and I said to him who are you. He stated that, 'I am the operator.' "

Murdough reported that he walked the young man into the back of his cruiser and "noticed an odor of alcoholic beverage coming from the area of the subject's mouth."

The police turned their headlights onto the wrecked vehicle. The gleam illuminated the body folded through the back window. Rescue workers from Henniker arrived.

After they had taken the passenger's pulse, they covered the wreck and the body with tarps. The police told the rescue workers that they should treat the accident as a crime scene. They began to secure evidence for the accident reconstruction team. An assistant county attorney arrived to keep an eye on the process.

The Henniker Rescue Squad took Dozois to Concord Hospital, where another assistant county attorney and more officers waited. They were there for the negligent homicide investigation.

In the hospital's X-ray room, a Henniker officer read Dozois his rights, and doctors drew his blood. A state trooper escorted him to the Merrimack County Jail.

When I went to jail, I had his blood all over my hands. I washed it off, but it's still here. I still look down at my hands and see his blood in my fingernails.

(Tomorrow: Finding justice)

Tuesday, August 27, 2002

Two forms of prison

BY STEPHANIE HANES / Monitor staff

Before he killed his best friend, Jim Dozois had never been to jail, had never even gotten a speeding ticket. He tells that to the high school students who come to hear him speak, and he tries to swallow the sobs that catch his voice.

It has been a year and five months since the ambulance and the police cars found Dozois on Route 114 near Weare, trembling as he walked from the mangled black metal that had been his Volkswagen GTI. His best friend, 24-year-old Josh Hall, was in that twisted frame, already dead.

In the hours after the crash, word of Hall's death reached those who loved the young men. In the weeks and months after, friends and family members began repairing lives that had shattered like the car's windows. They fought to push past hate and anger, to reach for purpose and forgiveness.

By the time Dozois was sentenced, those in the most pain had planned, with the help of lawyers and a judge, a course they hoped would lead toward renewal. If Josh Hall could save lives in death, they believed, then they might be able to heal. At least enough to live.

Finally, I was given that half hour of free time that allows you to get out of your cell, possibly take a shower, maybe make a phone call. But I was too ashamed. I didn't call . . . I said, 'Screw it, I'll stay.' So, I stayed in my cell. I called nobody. I figured, 'I'll stay here either until someone comes to get me or, or, whatever. I'll stay here.'

The night of the accident, doctors decided that Dozois, then 23, was healthy enough for jail. Hall had died almost instantly of head injuries. Dozois had a bruise from his seatbelt and small cuts from broken glass.

The police cuffed him and took him to the dingy booking room in the Merrimack County House of Corrections, where jail officers stripped and searched him and ushered him into a small concrete isolation cell.

Patty and Doug Hall were making Sunday breakfast when an officer knocked at their front door.

"It's like everything they talk about," said Doug Hall. "As soon as the door opened . . ." He trailed off.

The officer told them about the accident, about Josh.

In shock, Patty Hall asked about Dozois, who lived at their house. Dozois and Josh had been close since their freshman year at New England College. They were planning to leave in two weeks for a summer in Alaska.

The officer said he did not know about the driver.

Friends drove Doug and Patty Hall to Concord Hospital, where Doug is the director of cardiopulmonary services and Patty works as a lab technician.

"Honest to God, you see it on TV all the time," Patty Hall said. "And I think we were just acting automatically. We really didn't know."

Concord Hospital's chief operating officer came into the room, grim-faced. Colleagues followed.

The Halls wanted to see their son.

"We didn't realize how bad it was," Patty Hall said.

A security officer they knew told them to wait while he found Josh in the morgue. He wanted to prepare the Halls.

"He came back up and said, 'Just remember the way he was,' " Doug Hall said, sobbing at the last word.

That day, word of Josh's death passed from person to person, connecting those who cared about him.

Chris Page, 25 now, was close to both Dozois and Hall. He was 14 when his 16-year-old brother died in a motorcycle accident, so he recognized the spinning confusion that hit him after he picked up the phone in his Jersey City apartment that Sunday.

"The question that continues to go through your mind is 'What is going on?' " he said recently. "It's, 'How can this be possible? What do you mean?' "

At Pats Peak, the ski mountain where Dozois and Hall worked in the rental shop, rumors circulated about an accident. Someone from the Peak was supposedly involved, the rumors went, and someone might have been killed. And neither Hall nor Dozois had shown up for work.

Jim Wall, the Peak's director of services, made some calls. When he learned about the death, he gathered his staff and struggled to tell them the news. He watched as his friends broke down.

"You can't imagine how much these kids were loved by the people who worked with them," he said.

Arraignment

In his silent, dirty cell, Dozois knew none of this. The Halls had tried to call him, but jail officials said they could not talk with him.

Public defender Jacalyn Colburn learned about Dozois when she got to her office Monday morning. She drove straight to the jail, where the staff took her to a small, windowless holding room. They brought Dozois to her.

"He was handcuffed, clearly disoriented," Colburn said. "He was unbelievably emotional."

For two hours, she said, Dozois cried. She pieced together information for the arraignment, an early step in the legal process. But mostly she listened and tried to comfort.

"He was unable to give me much in the way of detail because he was so distraught," she said. "He was still clearly experiencing the fresh pain of losing someone he loved."

Soon after 11 a.m., Dozois's arraignment began in Concord District Court. He and Colburn participated by video from jail. Dozois swayed unsteadily, wiping his eyes.

"James Dozois, can you hear me?" the courtroom clerk asked. "You're charged with a class A felony."

The charge was negligent homicide, she said.

Dozois saw Doug and Patty Hall sitting in the courtroom. Patty's sister, whose house Dozois and Josh Hall had lived in one summer, was also there. Dozois saw his mother and his father.

The judge set bail at \$20,000. As the lawyers spoke of other conditions, the people in the courtroom saw Dozois drop from view. He had collapsed, overcome by emotion.

After the arraignment, Dozois's father went to a bail bondsman and offered his house as security. Within hours, he and Dozois's four brothers, mother and stepmother went to the jail to take Dozois home to Massachusetts.

Dozois walked toward his family in the orange jumpsuit, the only clothing he had.

Josh's death was like an earthquake that shook the entire country. People came from Alaska, Colorado, Utah, all over the place to pay their respects to Josh. There wasn't enough room in the lecture hall to hold all the people for the occasion - the doors were all open, the aisles were all full, and there were lines outside the door.

And there I was, seeing all the anger, the hurt, the loss, all rolled up at once. Everybody was hurting. Knowing that it's because of you, it's, it's too much.

Patty and Doug Hall telephoned Dozois that week. They told him they were angry at him but still loved him. Josh's memorial service was Thursday, they said, and they wanted him there.

Dozois dreaded the idea. He wanted to hide from the pain, and from the people he had hurt. But there was no way to say no.

Thursday morning, Dozois's mother drove him from Massachusetts to Concord. Chris Page and Johnny Hall, Josh's younger brother by two years, took him to Weare.

"He could barely walk," Page said. "I don't think I've seen anybody in that state."

Patty and Doug might still love Dozois, but Johnny had told everyone he felt only hate. The ride from Concord to Weare was silent.

The service took place at the New England College science building, where the men had graduated. On the stage, posters of Josh Hall showed a healthy dark-haired young man grinning at a ski mountain, in the woods, on the water.

Jim Dozois sat behind the Halls. He sobbed and looked ahead blankly. People who saw him said he seemed wrapped in his own sorrow, in shock.

Friend after friend spoke, many choosing to project from their seats rather than navigate the bodies crammed in the aisles. Page talked about college friends and told Dozois they would all get through this.

Wall, from Pats Peak, stepped through the people to get to the podium so he could look Dozois in the face.

"He was our friend the day before this happened," Wall said recently, recounting his message that day. "He is still our friend. We have the chance to save Jim's life. We didn't have a chance to save Josh's. And I think Jim's life is worth saving."

Snow

Dozois's parents took him home to Massachusetts. The Halls drove to the home where their son's and Dozois's bags still sat packed and ready for Alaska.

As they walked toward their house, Doug and Patty Hall saw two otters sitting on a snow bank. They had never seen the animals before in the 13 years they had lived there.

The otters did not run away. They watched the wounded family walk forward.

The next day, it snowed. It snowed so thick and deep that Josh Hall's friends who had stayed the night were stuck in his parents' home. They leaned on each other that weekend, remembering college days, crying and laughing, waiting for the plows to come.

It was as if Josh Hall, who loved nature almost as much as he loved his family and friends, was letting them know he was still nearby.

I used to think I had hundreds of friends. They still say they love me, that they're still my friends, but, you know, they've got to grieve Josh's death, and it's too hard for them to do that and try to console me, the person who's responsible for it, at the same time. So we just, we just don't talk. Because it really hurts. I think it's easier for us that way, to avoid it.

In Massachusetts that spring, Dozois got a landscaping job and worked as much as he could. When he wasn't working, he cleaned. Or slept. Anything to stay busy, to keep his mind off death.

He went to therapy, where words tumbled out. It left him exhausted. His girlfriend, Jill Fitzgerald, came often from her home in Connecticut to be with him.

Chris Page phoned, but Dozois never returned the calls. He didn't phone the Halls either, although they called him sometimes to say they still loved him.

Even though they said a call from Dozois might help Johnny Hall move through his anger, Dozois didn't do it.

"I start dialing really fast, but I can't finish," Dozois said.

In Weare, the Halls went through the motions of living. When the anger started to take over, they tried to remember that their son would have wanted them to forgive.

Their minds tangled in the "what ifs." What if their son had driven that night? What if he had enrolled somewhere other than New England College? What if they had never moved to Weare from Claremont in 1988?

"It's like trying to create this false reality for yourself," Page said. "It's really tough."

Almost every week, Page took the train to New Canaan, Conn., to visit Libby Clark, Josh Hall's girlfriend. They grieved together.

They bought feather-shaped silver earrings and removed the hooks. Each kept one as a reminder of the young man who could identify birds by their looks and sounds. Page put one on a chunky silver necklace, which he wears constantly. They sent another set to the Halls.

The judge

The criminal case moved forward.

"Jimmy said from the beginning he didn't want to go through trial, and did not want to put the Halls through any more anguish," Jacalyn Colburn said. "But as his lawyer, it's my responsibility to not immediately jump to the plea bargain stage."

All the lawyers knew the case was unusual. Dozois wanted to take responsibility for the crash and wanted no trial. The Halls did not want Dozois to go to jail.

"We didn't think (Dozois) could survive a prison environment for any great length of time," Doug Hall said. "And we really felt that two lives would be lost instead of one."

The Halls told this to the prosecutor's office. They said they wanted a sentence that let Dozois save another's life rather than one that consumed his.

Dozois, who had been a communications major in college, thought he could help young people by talking about the crash.

Judge Edward Fitzgerald, who was presiding over the case, is known as a judge willing to use the system in new ways. Lawyers on both sides believed he would try a unique sentence.

But the judge had also said the charges against Dozois were serious. He did not want to send a message that the judicial system did not condemn the actions. Any plan, he said, had to be convincing and airtight before he would approve it.

The lawyers, Dozois and the Halls sketched and revised plans. The Halls said the talks to young people should focus on their son and the impact of his death. Lawyers wrote a provision that said poster-size photographs of Josh Hall would be displayed at any speech. Dozois called schools and youth organizations in New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

By fall, the lawyers, the Halls and Dozois thought they had a plan that the judge would approve. Still, Dozois felt sure he would have to go back to jail, at least for a short time. He believed Fitzgerald would incarcerate him as a warning. He also realized he needed more time there if he wanted to talk to students about what it meant to be in jail.

But the thought tormented him. Each time his sentencing hearing was postponed, he felt more anxious. He felt helpless not knowing when he would have to leave the world he was tentatively rebuilding for the filth of the Merrimack County Jail.

"We were just sitting here waiting and waiting," he said. "It was hell for everyone around."

He decided to go back to jail on his own. Maybe, he figured, Fitzgerald later would sentence him to time served.

I couldn't believe I put myself back in that place again. When you walk in, you walk into a processing room. They strip-search you. They make you take all your clothes off in front of the guards, the inmates, it doesn't matter. They strip you of everything, and it's not just your clothes. Your self-respect, your dignity, your hope, your dreams. Everything you thought you had - or that I thought I had - that I brought into that was gone. Everything was taken away from me and stuffed into a bag and thrown into a locker.

Dozois took a month off from work between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and his brother drove him to Boscawen.

"It was like he was taking me to school or something," Dozois said. "I got out of the car, gave him a hug and I went inside. And that was the last time I saw my family until visiting day, and that was the last time I saw outside until I got to leave."

After some days of evaluation, jail officers moved Dozois to medium custody. The slender, well-mannered 24-year-old walked into a room of yelling inmates tattooed with swastikas and white-power symbols.

Dozois was not abused in jail, he said, but he saw the circles inmates form to hide fistfights from the control rooms. He said he saw beatings inside cells.

"You don't even feel human when you're in that place," he said.

Letters

He got more letters than anyone else in the unit. Friends and family wrote daily, as did people he did not know. A 5-year-old who heard his mother talking to Dozois's mother on the phone wrote.

"I'm really sorry that you lost your best friend," he scrawled. "If you want I'd love to be your friend. You can come over and play with my trains any time you want."

Dozois cried when he read that.

He spoke to his girlfriend every day. He saw Colburn, his lawyer. His parents visited him. His mother always cried when she saw him in the orange jumpsuit, sitting across the chest-high barrier in the no-touching-allowed visitors' room.

In December, after four weeks in jail, Dozois went home.

Valentine's Day of this year, we were in court. My family was there, Josh's family was there. That was one emotional day. It was so emotional that everybody in the courtroom

except the judge himself was crying. The bailiffs, the lady who was keeping records, everybody was crying.

Assistant County Attorney Scott Jordan stood in the courtroom in front of rows packed with Josh Hall's and Jim Dozois's family and friends. He outlined the sentence: one to three years in prison, all suspended, three years of probation, mental health counseling, 50 hours of community service, no license, no alcohol. And the 16 speeches.

At least eight speeches must take place in New Hampshire, Jordan said, and Dozois must let the county attorney's office and the Halls know about each one at least two weeks in advance. Enlarged photographs of Josh Hall should be displayed.

If Dozois had gone to trial, Jordan said, the state police would have testified that he was driving 92 to 106 mph in a 50-mph zone. They would have talked about the car swerving across the road and catapulting into the sky, hitting the utility pole in the air and landing on its roof. They would have told about Dozois sobbing into his blood-covered hands.

At trial, he said, prosecutors would have said that tests of Dozois's blood alcohol level were inconclusive. He had clearly been drinking, Jordan said, but was probably not over the legal limit.

"These 16 speaking engagements will not be an easy thing," Jordan said. "At each one, he will have to speak about his best friend and the night he killed him, 16 times in all."

Colburn stood from the defense table.

"Judge," she said, "I honestly don't believe that there is any amount of incarceration that could punish Jim more than he punishes himself every day."

Doug Hall stood and pleaded through tears for the judge to shift the paradigm of justice, to show compassion.

Dozois's mother, Julie Gregorich, told the judge that Jim was her youngest son and that they had been on their own after his brothers went to college. She told how he cleaned the house before she got home from work, how proud she was of him.

"I have been with him and his despair, and I don't know how he can manage to go on with his life," she said. "The smile is gone from his eyes."

Sobbing, Dozois spoke.

"People have repeatedly told me that things happen for a reason," he said. "Well, I fail to see why Josh had to be taken from us and why I had to survive, living with the recurrent nightmares, the guilt, the loneliness and the memories of Josh. There are many days that I wish I were by his side soaring with the eagles. Because I am still here and because Josh

is not and because so many have suffered already, I have trouble understanding what good could become of me."

Next to him, Colburn cried. So did Jordan at the prosecutor's table, the stenographer typing Dozois's words, the friends and family in the seating area.

"I thank you, Judge, for taking the time to hear the others and myself talk," Dozois said. "I guess I just now leave myself in the mercy of your hands. That's all I have to say."

The sentence

Fitzgerald was silent. Then he called a recess so he could go to his chambers and think. When that recess ended, he called another one. He paced.

Finally, he opened court. Dozois and Colburn stood as Fitzgerald spoke.

"Mr. Dozois, you are a very lucky individual because you have the support not only of your family but of the family of the person whose life you took in this matter," he said. "I'm sure counsel has told you that I have had some misgivings about the appropriateness of this sentence. I'm concerned about the message that it sends to society in terms of the view that the court will take and that society will take of acts such as this because the act in and of itself must be horribly condemned.

"I join with the Halls, however, in hoping that you might prevent some other person from engaging in the same type of thing that you did. If that happens, all the years in prison that I can impose are not worth that one saving effort. . . . I am accepting the negotiated disposition."

He looked over the courtroom.

"Mr. Dozois, upon your plea of guilty to Indictment 01-S-645 charging you with negligent homicide, a finding of guilty is entered."

Tomorrow: Living with pain

Monday, August 26, 2002

Living with pain

BY STEPHANIE HANES / Monitor staff

For most of the 90-minute car ride here, Jim Dozois squeezed his eyes shut, letting the radio wash over his anxiety. When he watches the road, he sees accidents everywhere.

Even if he was allowed to drive, he wouldn't. He'd want to brake or swerve or maybe just cry.

The last time he drove was March 24, 2001, the night his car wound up a crumpled wreck off Route 114 in Henniker. His best friend and passenger, Josh Hall, died when the Volkswagen GTI flipped off the dark road, hit a telephone pole and landed on its roof in a snow bank.

Now, in front of hundreds of high school students, Dozois goes back to that night. He stands sobbing, grasping index cards he doesn't use, talking about the pain he's caused.

Dozois, 24, pleaded guilty last winter to negligent homicide. Among other penalties, he was ordered to give 16 speeches at area schools. Josh's parents, Doug and Patty Hall, requested the sentence, surprising lawyers accustomed to families pushing for punishment and revenge.

Now, 17 months after Josh's death, the Halls and Dozois lean on the court-imposed structure that supports their lives, clinging to the idea that together they can coax good from tragedy. They do what once seemed impossible: They go on.

Dozois is halfway through his presentations. He has a job, a house and some friends whose kindness has amazed him. But he cannot bring himself to telephone others, and guilt and longing for his friend still overwhelm him sometimes.

New loss has made life even harder. An accident last month killed his stepbrother, and friends wonder how much hurt Dozois can bear. He does, too.

Josh Hall's other friends hang on to mementos and stories and visit his parents regularly. When they get new jobs or new loves, they sense his absence.

Hall's parents try to focus on what they can do for their son's memory, whether it is going to the speeches or raising money for the Audubon Society. They worry about their other son, Johnny, for whom forgiveness comes harder. Sometimes they slip themselves, falling into despair and even anger bordering on hate. But always they return to Josh, to the way he lived, the world he wanted.

"We try to see everything through Josh's eyes," Doug Hall said recently. "And through his heart. And try to honor what, and think

what, he would do, or want us to do. And really, that is the motivator for everything that we've done."

His parents are the most amazing people you could ever have the pleasure of meeting. They're the nicest, warmest people that I've ever met. They are here today because they are here supporting me and they're here because they hope that I can get the message to

you. They don't want their son dying for no reason. If at least one life can be saved from me doing these speeches, at least, at least he didn't die for nothing.

At his first presentation in May, Dozois was terrified. It was at John Stark Regional High School, Josh Hall's alma mater.

Dozois paced, hands in the pockets of his khakis. He exhaled heavily. His girlfriend, Jill Fitzgerald, and the roommate who drove him there, Rick Johnson, sat in front of the lectern, a few rows up.

Students chattered their way into the gym, clomping up the wooden bleachers and jostling to sit near friends.

"My name is James Dozois," he began, straining to force out the words. "I killed my best friend."

As he spoke, the students' shifting and whispering stopped. Bodies leaned forward. Some students started to cry as Dozois cried, and someone passed tissues. Fitzgerald's body shook with sobs as her boyfriend described his agony.

Doug Hall sat a few yards to the left of the lectern. When Dozois finished, Hall stood, faced the crowd and asked if he could say some words. He hadn't planned this, but sitting there he was overwhelmed by a desire to talk about his son, to make these young people understand.

The teens sat motionless.

Hall struggled to get the words out. They were in his throat, blocked by tears.

Hall had been close to his son. Josh skipped evenings with friends to spend time with his dad, and Hall sometimes cut out of work to hunt or fish with his son. The winter before Josh's death, Hall flew to Colorado to drive his son home from a job in Steamboat Springs. On the trip they talked about Josh's dreams, they joked, they said, "I love you."

Memories swirled, and Hall told the students he remembered his son sitting on these same bleachers. He begged them to keep living, to protect their friends and parents from this torment.

"Be there," he said. "Be there, so your parents can go to your wedding, your birthday."

Sobs warped his words.

Aftermath

Even now, after eight speeches, the pattern holds: Dozois is full of adrenaline on the way home, talking with Rick Johnson about what he did well, what he forgot to say. Then he collapses.

"I usually have a tremendous headache afterwards," he said. "Forget it. I've got the biggest migraine for the rest of the night. It's one reason I like to fall asleep. It makes it go away."

The students always come to him after his speech. Some hug him, others share stories.

"I had high school boys coming down and crying, saying, 'Jeez, I got in trouble two days ago for drinking, and I even knew you were coming. What was I thinking?'" Dozois said. "And guys in high school, image is everything. To see them cry . . ."

He showed letters he had received from students.

"Thank you sooo much for coming to our school and speaking to our class," one girl wrote. "As soon as I left the assembly I called a good friend of mine and told him I don't ever want him driving home drunk again. He listened to me and hasn't since." She signed her name next to a bubble heart.

"Thank you for sharing your experience with all of us," another girl wrote. "I know it must have been hard, but you quite possibly could have saved many of my classmates' lives. I thank you for that."

Dozois clings to those reactions.

A living hell

Patty Hall attended only one talk during the spring, at Hillsboro-Deering High School. She hadn't been able to get off work for the others. She sat next to her husband, who had been to every one. She watched silently, sometimes covering her mouth with her hand as Dozois talked about the crash or showed pictures of the crushed car.

Mid-sentence during that speech, Dozois stepped away from the lectern and asked for water. He doubled over and swayed, as if he was about to pass out.

Doug Hall walked to Dozois and held him.

"I said to Doug, 'I don't understand how he could put himself through that all the time,'" Patty Hall said recently. She paused and looked at her husband. "But that's his punishment.

"Whenever I get angry, I just think of what he's gone through. I hope that I never have to experience anything like that. He's put himself into a living hell."

I didn't believe something like this could happen to me, or even to someone that I loved.

Seven weeks ago, Jim Dozois's older stepbrother was riding his motorcycle when he swerved to avoid an open manhole, skidded on sand and crashed into a telephone pole. His injuries were similar to Josh Hall's.

Dozois rushed to the hospital and stood with his family around his stepbrother, 31-year-old Brian Belodeau. After 10 hours of surgery, they stopped the drugs and let Belodeau die.

"It seems like God's little sick joke against me," Dozois said.

When she heard the news, Jacalyn Colburn, Dozois's lawyer, wondered: How much hurt can someone take in a year?

"A lot," Dozois said. "A lot can happen in a year. I'm definitely stronger for it. I just feel beat up. I definitely couldn't take much more."

He is trying to heal with his family, his friends. He has not looked at his speech all summer. He knows it by heart, though, and could recite it on demand.

When he starts his presentations again this fall, he might also talk about Belodeau. His stepbrother's accident is different, he says, because it was not caused by recklessness. But it still shows how quickly someone can go, how worlds change in a blink of the eye. And it shows how people push forward.

Dozois's family members are leaning on each other, he said. His friends are supporting him. He is managing.

"What the hell else am I supposed to do?" he said. "I've got no choice."

A new life

It is hard for Dozois to focus on life goals, dreams or any of the concepts common to young college graduates. Instead he tries to push through the hell he created, and the new one that found him this summer.

"I want to get comfortable and relaxed for a while," he said, sitting on the couch in the tidy house he shares with Johnson in Northboro, Mass.

He and Johnson knew each other before Dozois went to college. They had lived together after graduation, before Dozois moved in with the Halls.

Dozois sees his family often. They rallied around him after the accident and support each other even more now.

He and Johnson have friends over to their house, with its big-screen television, funky lamps and vacuumed floors. They watch sitcoms or pay-per-view fights, or just eat dinner. Dozois and Johnson are thoughtful hosts, appearing unasked with glasses of water, insisting that house rules prohibit guests from clearing plates or washing dishes.

Johnson has been a rock all along, after Josh Hall's death and after Belodeau's. He drove Dozois to speeches during spring and helped him revise his presentation. When Dozois, whose license will be suspended for at least five years, needed work close by, Johnson helped him get a job at his father's Goodyear Tire franchise down the street.

Abandoned plans

Dozois likes the job but hesitates to talk about a career path.

"I had all these plans, wanted to do all these things," he said. "I wanted to travel a lot. I still can - it's not like my life's over." He paused. "I didn't expect myself to be a salesman for Goodyear. It's a good job, but it's not what I went to college for five years for. I wanted to do marketing, promotions, something like that. It's just different."

It's hard for his girlfriend, too. The two used to share those plans. They wanted to see the world and live together and someday get married. But that was before, when Dozois used to clown around and smile. Now, even though he still wants those things, he has put them on hold.

"I changed a lot from the accident," he said. "It's tough. But it definitely, definitely improved the relationship. It shows how much she will be there for me. And how much I want her there."

Every month he must check in with his probation officer. He finds it humiliating. He has a pile of court papers in his bedroom. Someday, when he is off probation, when he no longer worries about going to prison if he violates a detail of his sentence, he will have a bonfire. He will destroy those descriptions of the crumpled car, of his best friend's body.

He still talks with friends about Josh. Not about the accident, but about the things he and Josh did together, their stories. He saves his feelings about the crash for a therapist and hundreds of high school students.

Sometimes he thinks it might be easier to be in jail, away from his life and the people he's hurt. But he tries to drown that thought.

"Most important, I'm home," he said. "I'm around my friends. I'm not hanging by a sheet in my cell."

Old friends

Chris Page, who was best friends with Dozois and Hall, has seen none of the speeches. But he hears about them from Doug and Patty Hall.

"Tickets never stopped an accident," Page said. "I think speeches like these really will."

He hopes the sentence will help his friend, but he has no way of knowing. Dozois hasn't spoken with Page in months.

"He just doesn't call me back," Page said. "He's got a lot of guilt on him."

Page's own brother died in a motorcycle accident when they were both teenagers, and Josh Hall had filled that void. Page's friends ask why he doesn't detest Dozois.

"He's my boy," Page said. "I have no hatred. I don't hate the kid. I'm just angry at the whole scene. I think he needs to get in touch with where he's at. . . . He saw Josh dead, probably crushed by the car. . . . His hell started from that moment. I can't imagine seeing my brother in that situation and knowing I was responsible."

When Page learned he had won a part in a play in Sarasota, Fla., this summer, a prime job for an actor in training, he wept. Josh Hall was the first one he had telephoned when he was accepted into the Actors Studio Drama School at the New School in New York City after college. This time, there was nobody to call.

A world of goodness

Sometimes Patty and Doug Hall think they've gotten to a better place, where their longing is slightly less painful, where joy is possible. Then the pain comes fresh. They see a sunset without Josh. They talk about a vacation to New Mexico they had wanted to take as a family.

"You stand very close to the line," Doug Hall said. "You could easily step over the line. It's almost easier to hate someone than it is to forgive them, it really is."

"He just changed our lives," Patty Hall said of Dozois. "He took so much away from us and a whole lot of people." She paused. "And I think he's well aware of it. He's well aware of what he did."

The Halls' son Johnny, two years younger than Josh, wanted Dozois to go to prison for years. He is still furious and refuses to talk to Dozois or watch any of his presentations. But he has started to talk about Josh, started to stay in the room when his parents show pictures of memorial fundraisers.

Doug and Patty hope he is moving forward, too.

The Halls spend time with friends. They walk to Josh's granite memorial bench in the Deering Audubon sanctuary. They are even more adamant about saying, "I love you." And they hear friends saying those words more.

"If nothing else, through Josh's death, it renews your faith in human beings," Doug Hall said. "It shows you that goodness far outweighs any bad. I mean, there is just so much goodness in the world. And so many caring people. We are so wealthy in the depth of our friends and the people who care for us. That's an immeasurable amount of wealth."

Tuesday, August 27, 2002