

# Lessons From Loss

**Struck by tragedy, a UNH couple seek to pass on what they've learned**

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Wednesday, September 30, 2009

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*DONNA AND STEVE HARDY, 2009*

Donna Hardy feels herself welling up as she stands on the threshold of the rehab room at Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital. Before her are young men without arms, without legs, struggling to strengthen the limbs left intact and learning to use the new limbs with which they've been fitted. She holds on to her husband, Steve, a UNH kinesiology professor, asking if they could stick together until she gets her bearings. Even though these determined warriors, just home from Iraq and Afghanistan, are expecting the visitors, it is too difficult. She needs to hear Steve say the words first.

And so he does. "I'm Steve Hardy," he says. "My son was killed in action, and our university has developed a program in his memory to give you hats. I'd be honored if you'd wear one."

A blue and white baseball cap is accepted, condolences are offered and questions asked about Chief Petty Officer Nathan H. Hardy, a Navy SEAL who was killed during a raid on an al-Qaeda suicide bomb cell. Handsome, mischievous 29-year-old Nate,

Steve and Donna's youngest son, has been dead 16 months. But what his parents can't believe is that this soldier before them, this amputee as young as the students Donna tends in her administrative post in the UNH psychology department, is intent on comforting them. It takes Donna's breath away.

And so she summons her confidence and begins delivering hats—to the soldier with a new prosthetic leg, to the fellow who lost an arm from a roadside bombing, to the young burn victim so bloated from steroids he can't speak. How do you compare their losses with mine? she wonders. You can't. Life is sometimes filled with overwhelming challenges, but you can learn from them. Or at least that's the philosophy that has pushed her, and Steve as well, out of bed each day, and not just since they faced the phalanx of Navy officers in a Hewitt Hall conference room that February morning in 2008, but also since the early hours of another winter day 15 years earlier. The day when their eldest son, Josh, their artist-surfer-skateboarder, died in his bed after a 17-month battle with brain cancer. They have been struck by the unthinkable twice.

But it is not pity they seek from these wounded veterans, or those attending memorials, or the audiences at speeches Steve is asked to make. They do not want pity from Durham neighbors and friends. What the Hardys want is to share the lessons they've learned from this long journey through grief. As they wind their way through Walter Reed, they know that—to quote a SEAL slogan—the only easy day was yesterday. But they also know you can't give in, which is what their sons have taught them, and what they hope to convey to those who care to listen.



Lesson #1: Face your challenges honestly

At 61, both Steve and Donna Hardy look fit and strong, a reflection of the daily exercise regime they have followed for as long as anyone can recall. Their middle son, Ben, who is 32 and a writer in Burlington, Vt., remembers childhood friends stopping their play to watch his parents jog by. No one else's parents did that. Donna still runs four miles every morning, calling it her therapy. Lithe and muscular, she is barely 5 feet tall, yet

Nate's friends think of her as the boss, always cleaning, always laughing, always behind the wheel of the orange Volvo named Gertrude, chauffeuring kids to soccer games or to Harvard Square to buy music. When she told them to take off their shoes, they did.

Steve is the philosophical one, soft-spoken and wise, forever interested in others. Nate's friend Matt Renner remembers many conversations with Steve that began with "What do you want to do, Matty?" And when they weren't talking careers (which for Renner turned out to be co-producing TV's "The Deadliest Catch"), they were talking sports. Steve Hardy loves sports, whether it is competing (he played hockey as a youth in Waltham, Mass., and later for Bowdoin College) or teaching (sports marketing, the history of hockey) or writing (two books and countless articles). Yet while his students say he can talk eloquently about any aspect of athletics, what has endeared him to them, says former student Maja Hansen '96, is his calm.

"He's the duck floating on the lake," she says. "Underneath, his legs may be moving, but he has a demeanor that's in control."

It is that control he called upon in August 1991 when a CT scan of Josh's brain revealed a tumor. As Steve and Josh sat in a waiting room before Josh underwent an MRI, a nurse mentioned how sorry she was to hear about the brain cancer. Josh and Steve exchanged a look. They had heard the word 'tumor,' which sounded fixable. Cancer was a different story.



*JOSH, 1992*

"Does this mean I'm going to die?" Josh asked his father.

"Well, Josh," Steve said, in a tone that he hoped would cover his fear, "we're all going to die sooner or later."

Josh, then 16 and heading into his junior year of high school, pressed on. "But am I going to die sooner?"

Steve studied his beautiful blond son. "Not if we can help it," he said. From then on, when it came to attitude, Steve and Donna took their cues from Josh, who tackled the illness with a fierce honesty. One of the reasons people crumble in the face of hardship, Steve believes, is that their false optimism is crushed by harsh reality. Josh knew his odds were slim and he packed his hours doing what he loved. Two days after returning

home from surgery to remove the tumor, he was skateboarding off a friend's new ramp. He spent the winter snowboarding and the spring surfing, despite his doctor's protests. In between, he sketched and painted and jammed on his drums with his friends. When the seizures started, he asked to meet some of the Seattle grunge bands he loved so much. Three weeks later, thanks to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Josh, his family and his best friend stood on the rooftop of the Sub Pop record label's building in downtown Seattle, surrounded by members of the city's premiere bands, including Pearl Jam, the Posies and Soundgarden. During the three-day visit, he hosted a radio show, hung out with Nirvana, and was featured on the front page of the Seattle Times.

After Josh returned home, his condition worsened and cancer left him limp and blind. Yet he didn't complain, his parents say. "People talk about how brave Nate was, but no one was braver than Josh," says Steve. In the last days, he inspired his friends, too. One classmate, Chris Jerard, says that Josh showed him "how to take life day by day and live it to the fullest. To always hope for the best and to be gracious in the face of unfair events—and even bodily pain."



*JOSH, 1992*

Lesson #2: Find a passion and pursue it

In the dark days following Josh's death, Steve and Donna heeded their son's example and tried to focus on what they loved—their two sons, Ben and Nate, Steve's teaching, Donna's gardening. Ben, who was in high school, channeled his energies into his schoolwork and his soccer. Nate, 14, was angry. He had always been, as Jeanne Beland '76G says, the "ignition," the first one up at sleepovers, the first one to jump from the railroad trestle, the one who wouldn't slow down long enough to turn a knob, preferring to kick open the door instead. "He would set a room in motion," says Beland, who, as the mother of one of Nate's friends, installed a special kick plate on her front door just for him. But Nate's considerable energy became considerable trouble as he moved from middle to high school. Containing his anger was tough; he was always ready for a fight. Donna remembers too many lacrosse games when Nate spent more time on the bench with a yellow card than sprinting on the turf. He was almost sent home after his first day on a soccer trip to England when he started a brawl at a pub. Stopped by chaperone Rick Renner, Nate agreed to behave but then challenged Renner to an arm wrestling contest. Nate lost, but years later, when he was, as Renner

remembers, "a monster" from his SEAL training, he challenged "Uncle Rick" again. This time he won—in less than a second.



For Nate, Steve would say, it would be either the SEALs or Sing Sing. And although no one is sure of all the reasons, Nate had wanted to be a SEAL since sixth grade. Both grandfathers were World War II veterans, but it was the physical challenge that Nate talked about—the grueling six-month training that washed out more than half the recruits, and the idea of carrying out secret missions by land, sea or air. He practiced rappelling from the giant beech tree in his back yard and, as his neighbor Pat Lang recalls, ran through the woods in camouflage and black face paint.

Hoping to channel his youngest son's energy constructively, Steve helped launch Nate's SEAL training, arranging for him to learn scuba diving from a former SEAL and taking turns with Donna driving to Connecticut once a month so that Nate could train in a program for teenage SEAL-hopefuls. Sherif Farag, another friend, used to time Nate's sit-ups and pull-ups and combat-boot-clad runs.



*NATE AND BEN, 1998*

Often the Hardys are asked, even by their closest friends, how they could allow their youngest son to join one of the most dangerous professions in the world after already losing a son. "It was simple for us," says Steve. "As long as Nate was happy doing what he was doing and he had a passion that was worthy of passion, what else could we ask for?" Josh had taught them to follow your dreams, and if Nate's dream was chasing war criminals in Kosovo, well, that was a lot healthier than some other alternatives. In his eulogy at Nate's memorial service, Ben spoke of Nate's fascination with the ancient Spartans and their unwavering commitment to their fellow warriors. Nate, who died

when a bullet pierced his aorta as he tried to evacuate his fatally wounded partner, 29-year-old Mike Koch, lived a warrior's life, said Ben, "and died a warrior's death, a good death." The two partners are buried side by side in Arlington National Cemetery. In that the family finds great comfort.

### Lesson #3: Anger gets you nowhere

While the rest of the world debates the merits of the Iraq War—and Steve and Ben cheerfully admit that they used to like nothing better than to engage Nate in political debates—the Hardys recognize that Nate's world was black and white, a world of good guys and bad guys, and that Nate faced the bad guys every time he went on one of his tours—four in all. They remind themselves that long before President Bush began lobbying to remove Saddam Hussein from power, there were terrorists attacking civilians and soldiers around the globe.

It would be easy to blame the Iraq War, or the researchers who have yet to cure cancer. But anger won't return their sons, Steve says. And it won't make them feel better, says Donna. They have learned that asking why leads nowhere. "No one has an answer, so don't waste your energy," she says. "It will beat you up." This, says their friend Susie Renner, they learned from Josh.



*JOSH, BEN, AND NATE, 1983*

Josh had not complained during his illness nor wallowed in self-pity. Some of his music mixes were dark—Steve recalls one song by Dumptruck with these lyrics: "When everything you do these days leaves you with such a bitter feeling... drifting on an ocean until you die," but others were uplifting, such as Jimmy Cliff's "Sunrise," which starts with a rooster crowing.

As the cancer progressed, his friends visited less and less. Yet instead of holding a grudge, Josh said he understood. After his death, his parents found a will in which he asked each of his friends to select something of his to remember him by.

At the end he wrote: "That's about it. Just tell everyone good bye and thank you." "Seventeen years old," says his mother, still marveling.

Since anger didn't work for Josh, Steve and Donna won't let it work for them. If Josh could see past his own pain, then they, too, will focus on the light.

#### Lesson #4: Be part of something greater than yourself

During a visit to Virginia Beach in 2007 to meet their new grandson, Nate's wife, Mindi, told her in-laws about a Bronze Star Nate had earned. "Where is it?" Steve asked Nate. "I want to take photos." Nate shrugged, admitting he had tossed the medal into his locker at work. Steve was incredulous, asking him why he didn't bring it home for his parents to see. Nate shot him a look. "Dad, I don't do this for the medals," he said. "I do it for my country and for the guys next to me."



*NATE AND MINDI WITH PARKER, 2007*

Steve replays this scene often, not only to remember Nate's humility, but also his commitment to a cause greater than himself. While a natural response to loss is to retreat, Steve and Donna have found more solace in action. To honor Josh, they created a scholarship for Oyster River High School students who, like Josh, find refuge in the art room. To honor Nate, they have funded awards for two Oyster River varsity athletes.

More recently, they have helped their boys' Oyster River classmates coordinate an annual civic celebration in their memory to help raise money for a local teen center. They have worked with UNH to honor veterans with the Operation Hat Trick campaign, and have attended numerous memorials and dedications in honor of the men and women who serve. Steve is deeply proud of the ministry Donna has developed for parents who have lost children. When she learns of a death, she calls or visits, offering hugs and advice. "I've been there," she says. "Maybe I can help."

While their friends fear that the constant outreach is too much, the Hardys call it giving back. The Durham community, says Donna, has been an incredible source of support, from the friends and neighbors who provided shelter, food and chauffeuring to Nate and Ben during Josh's illness, to the dozens who flew to Arlington to bury Nate, to the hundreds who attended his Durham memorial, to the army of friends who help raise money for the Oyster River scholarships by selling \$1 raffle tickets. The prize is one of Donna's hand-stitched quilts.



Most impressive to those who know them is their willingness to not just hand over the awards, but also to speak publicly. They speak at every Oyster River baccalaureate, not only about their sons but also about the teenagers who are receiving the awards. Their strength, says Robin Lent, whose daughter was a classmate of the boys, is "amazing." Only occasionally do they waver. One such time was the UNH men's hockey banquet last spring. There to bestow the Nate Hardy Ironman Award to the player who excelled in conditioning, Steve learned that the 2008-'09 hockey season was dedicated to Nate. The goal was to play in the Frozen Four in Washington, D.C., where the team would visit Nate's grave at Arlington. Four seniors spoke, apologizing that they had come close (they lost to Boston University in the regionals) but not close enough. Steve cried.

Despite the tears, this kind of outreach has helped them heal, says their minister, Mary Westfall '01G, of Durham's Community Church. "They are more able to have that gracious and generous spirit," she says, "because they have allowed other people into the broken and beautiful places in their lives."

#### Lesson #5: Hope

After Josh died, his family discovered a journal he had kept. On the cover was: "Never deprive someone of hope. It may be all that she or he has."

At the time, Ben and Nate were the two reasons Donna and Steve got up in the morning. Now with Nate gone, Ben remains one of their sources of hope, or "sunrise," as Steve calls it.



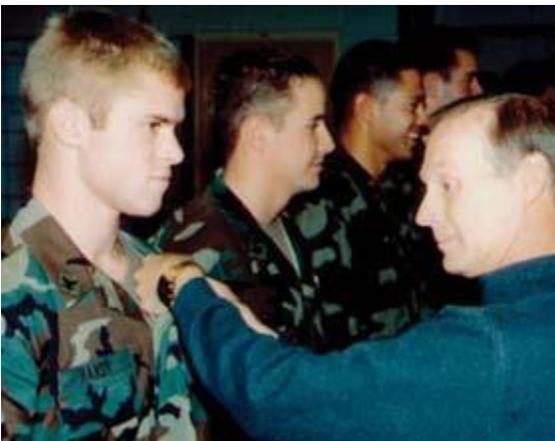
*BEN, 2006*

Ben, blond and athletic like his brothers, says after losing Josh and then Nate, he's found perspective. "If I live a life full of grief and doubt and fear, I'm wasting that time," he says. So he has carved a life in which he devotes his days to two things he loves: writing (he's the assistant editor of [bobvila.com](http://bobvila.com)) and soccer (he's the assistant men's soccer coach at Middlebury College).

The second sunrise is Parker, the cherished grandson who turned 2 in July. "Steve and Donna just inhale him," says Susie Renner. Mindi, Nate's widow, says you will never find more devoted grandparents. "Nothing compares to their pain," she says. "But they still have smiles on their faces. They come in and lie on the floor with Parker." Steve, she says, makes the best "choo-choo" noises.

He's a happy guy, their Parker, sturdy and blond just like his dad, with the same caramel-colored eyes and dazzling smile. When Parker is in the room, so is Nate, says Jeanne Beland. At her son Michael's wedding a year ago, Parker served in Nate's place as a groomsman, the only attendant with a pacifier.

Hope lies, too, in their marriage. Rather than splinter apart from the trauma, Steve and Donna say they have grown closer. They have learned not to criticize how the other grieves. Their friends say it is because they find solutions in each other. Mindi calls them her "ultimate heroes."



Hope lies in the presence of Nate and Josh. Steve and Donna feel them through music, often when a Nirvana song plays on the radio or when a breeze blows as they walk along Marginal Way in Ogunquit, Maine, where Josh loved to surf. Most often, they feel their presence in their yard, in the giant spruce tree, which was planted as a sapling when Josh died, and the flagpole next to it, installed last year in memory of Nate. The spruce, like Josh, is sturdy and quiet. In contrast, the flag, says Steve, is "always flapping, just like Nate." On days when the sadness settles in, the flag will start whipping, as if Nate is telling them to be happy, to move on. These visits, Donna says, are the miracles that buoy her.

Hope, too, is living in the present. When Donna is gardening or quilting, she is focused on that weed, that stitch, not on yesterday's tears or tomorrow's worries. When Steve drives a shovel into the hard earth to create another planting bed for Donna, his thoughts are only on completing the transformation of what once was a two-and-a-half-acre jungle into a series of terraced gardens.



In Mary Westfall's experience, the people who fare the worst in crisis are those who feel victimized, who feel that someone—perhaps God—has turned on them. Steve and Donna, however, see random chance. "They don't see the universe as out to get them. Instead they try to focus on the moment they've got," she says, "knowing that you don't know what will happen day to day, minute by minute. So you just have to live with as much generosity and joy and openness as you can." ~

Sue Hertz '78 is a UNH associate professor of journalism and the author of *Caught in the Crossfire: A Year on Abortion's Front Line*. Her articles have appeared in national and regional magazines.

### A Symbol of Good Will

Operation Hat Trick is a bridge between soldiers and citizens

When she first heard on a morning radio show that the one thing wounded soldiers wanted upon their return from Iraq and Afghanistan was a hat, Dot Sheehan '71 sensed that UNH could help. As the university's senior associate athletic director for external relations, Sheehan is always on the lookout for charitable projects that bring visibility to UNH. The concept percolated, but it wasn't until she heard of the death of Navy SEAL Nate Hardy, the son of her friend UNH professor Steve Hardy, that she thought of a way that UNH could help returning veterans, and honor Nate.

Operation Hat Trick was born—a program dedicated to Nate Hardy that provides blue and white baseball caps to injured soldiers. Sheehan found a manufacturer, Turfer Athletic, to produce the hats at cost; businesses, including BAE and Verizon, to help finance the effort; and retailers who were willing to donate one hat to a veterans' hospital for every two sold. Since Operation Hat Trick, coined from the ice hockey term for three goals by a single player, was launched in November 2008, more than 3,000 hats have been sold or donated.

Yet what began as a goodwill marketing gesture has developed into an effort that has not only cheered recipients—a veteran called it "a symbol of people coming together"—but has also deeply affected the UNH community. Those involved, from Sheehan to UNH President Mark Huddleston, said they were profoundly moved by a visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., in June. "I will never complain again," says Sheehan.

Touring the veteran hospitals, talking to returning soldiers who have lost legs and arms and mental agility, reminded all, including Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, of the enormous sacrifice these men and women have made, and of the enormous challenges ahead. Flying back to New Hampshire last June, Huddleston chose not to do paperwork, as he usually does when he travels, but to reflect on the day. While he, like Sheehan, was haunted by the image of the wounded veterans, he also felt uplifted, grateful for the technologies of modern medicine, for the dedication of the medical staffs, and for the courage displayed by the soldiers, both during their combat tours and in the rehab room. "None of it was easy to see," he says, "but I left hopeful about the human spirit."

#### ALUMNI



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