

FRIENDSHIP ENDS IN TRAGEDY

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Part One

The arrow's path

A moment of horseplay forever changes the lives of two Orleans County families

BY STAFF WRITER

ROBIN L. FLANIGAN



ALBION – The boys take turns shooting arrows at a blue, 5-gallon pail cover lodged in an old apple tree behind the barn.

Just another day at the Hucknall homestead, where teens unhappy with their own parents come to stay for the weekend or months on end. John and Valerie Hucknall know how many stay on a given night by the number of shoes near the door.

Their youngest son Jeremy, 17, hits the target from about 20 feet away. So do Chris McClary, 16, and Brian Rushing, 17. When Jeremy's older brother Josh and his friend Ed Pulaski hop on a tractor to prepare the field behind the tree for planting, the boys change direction, not wanting to hit them.

It is a snowless, 36-degree November afternoon.

John emerges from the kitchen and shouts from the farmhouse porch that lunch is almost ready. Homemade bread and beef stew.

Chris and Brian head into the apple orchard to look for some lost arrows, while Jeremy and 16-year-old Chris Beecher station themselves in a nearby laneway, shooting into the air.

Chris McClary walks out of the orchard. Jeremy partly draws his bow and points it toward him.

Chris holds up his left hand.

"No!" he exclaims, ducking behind the passenger side of a burgundy Geo Prizm. He stays there, crouching.

"Watch this, I'll scare him," Jeremy says to Chris Beecher. He pulls back on the bow and releases a broadhead arrow just as Chris McClary stands up. The arrow skims the windshield and Chris goes down. Brian hears him hit the ground. It's "a weird thump like I never heard before," he says later.

Jeremy drops the bow and runs over to Chris, unsure whether he hit him or simply knocked off his baseball cap.

The arrow has pierced the left side of his head, just above the temple. Jeremy swears and runs to the house for help as Brian heads toward the field, yelling for Josh and Ed.

When the three boys reach Chris, he's thrashing around, trying to pull out the arrow. Brian grabs one hand, Ed grabs the other. Josh takes off his shirt and holds it against the wound to slow the bleeding. Jeremy, returning with his parents, lifts Chris' feet off the ground as his father clips the arrow short with tin snips. Chris Beecher drapes his coat over his shaking friend.

"Now you really did it. You messed up this time," Brian tells Jeremy repeatedly.

A son remembered

What happened at the Hucknalls' was – and still is – the talk of this Orleans County town. Albion is a small place, where people need to exchange only the last four digits of their phone number.

Some think Jeremy got off easy. Originally charged with second-degree manslaughter, he pleaded guilty to criminally negligent homicide and was sentenced in February to four months of weekends in jail and five years of probation. Cindy McClary, Chris' mother, made an emotional plea in court for leniency, something she believes her son would have wanted her to do. Jeremy and Chris were like brothers.

Others say that killing his friend is punishment enough. Chris died at Erie County Medical Center in Buffalo, about seven hours after being hit. More than 700 people attended his funeral.

They argue their opinions and go on with their lives. News helicopters no longer swirl overhead. Reporters no longer keep vigil in cars parked across the street. Three months from now, an entire year will have passed.

But the story is far from over.

For those closest to the tragedy, time has been no healer. They continue to struggle - trying to forget, wanting to blame, wondering how to move on now that Chris is gone.

His family was able to pay for the funeral but by June, money still is tight. So on a Thursday night early in the month, hundreds of people attend a benefit dinner at the American Legion hall downtown to raise money for a headstone.

Jeremy is here, stirring spaghetti, washing dishes.

"My son was loved, really loved," Cindy says through tears as she watches people stream in. Teachers, county legislators, neighbors and classmates. "There were times he didn't feel he was."

Sophomore year had been hard for her middle child, a sarcastic comedian with an adventurous spirit.

He was still adjusting to the move he made with his mother and two brothers two years earlier, after his parents split up, from a spacious trailer - where he had lived 13 years - to a smaller apartment. He was bored. He wanted to quit school.

But he had changed by summer. He was hanging out with Jeremy more, fishing and playing pool and volunteering at the Legion. With Jeremy's help, he built a yellow birdhouse for his mother: He walked into the living room and asked her to close her eyes. She was lying on the couch with a headache and didn't feel like obliging, but gave in when he wouldn't go away.

"Mom, I remembered your favorite color," he had told her. "Here's your sunshine."
Cindy wasn't so worried about him anymore.

The phone rang Nov. 9 just as she was planning a drive to the Hucknalls, to see whether Chris wanted to go out for Chinese food. When she heard that he had been hurt, that an ambulance was on its way and that she needed to come to the farmhouse immediately, she figured he had fallen off an all-terrain vehicle. She was always after him to wear a helmet.

No one said anything when she arrived. Their hands were over their mouths. It was obvious things were worse than she thought.

Grief and anger

Cindy refuses to read the police reports and witness statements. She appeared in court only on the day of Jeremy's sentencing.

"We have to believe what's in here," she explains, patting her heart, "that kids were being kids. He popped up, it was too late and he didn't get down fast enough. This time, it beat him. If I try to believe anything different than that, it will kill me."

Her ex-husband – their divorce was final three days before Chris was killed – sees things differently. Steve McClary has no sympathy for Jeremy, whom he wanted put behind bars for at least 15 years, or for Jeremy's father, who he believes is partly responsible for Chris' death because he wasn't supervising the boys.

Steve and his fiancée, Janette Pinson, show up at the spaghetti dinner after reading about it in the *Pennysaver*.

"This is his father and no one told him this was going on," says Janette.

John walks up to thank them for coming but is called away. Janette catches up with him and asks him to keep his distance. There's too much anger – Chris is the fourth member of Steve's immediate family to die in three years.

Steve wonders whether Chris would be alive if they had spent more time together. In recent years, they saw each other about twice a month and on holidays, despite living four miles apart.

But he doesn't dwell on that. Steve most regrets not knowing what Jeremy looked like - he had never seen him before – when he was saying his last goodbye: "If I knew it was him at the hospital, he would've been laying right there next to my son."

Fear for the future

John Hucknall sits at his kitchen table three weeks later, taking long drags off his Marlboro.

Forty years ago, he found his younger brother behind the barn – about 60 feet from where he knelt beside Chris – fatally crushed by the '47 Chevy he had given Jimmy two weeks earlier for his 16th birthday. The bumper jack that Jimmy used to crawl under the car had collapsed.

John's father never got over the loss, and John fears the same for his own son. He has seen them both withdraw and then break down when they thought no one was watching.

"This is the first year since '48 I haven't done a small garden," he says. "Too much going on. I just don't have any ambition, I guess."

The barn needs a new roof. The orchard needs mowing. The beehives need to be split.

Jeremy has been smoking marijuana. In mid-June, he failed a drug test given after he failed to talk with his probation officer every day, as required. The probation violation means house arrest and a court appearance in 20 days.

John remembers when he was young, messing around with bows and arrows, shooting them toward the sky. His friends did the same thing. No one ever got hurt.

He thinks about the people he has known who have committed suicide over smaller things and wonders how much adversity his son can withstand.

Jeremy, the youngest of eight children, is extremely sensitive and not much of a talker. He went on antidepressants nearly 10 months before all of this, when there were mornings he refused to get out of bed for school – prompting his siblings to dump buckets of cold water on his head. His doctor doubled his dosage this February.

His parents wish the Probation Department would let Jeremy talk when he's ready. After all these months, even they approach the subject in bits and pieces. A lot at once will shut him down. He's

always been that way.

But rules are rules, and now he's facing more time behind bars, under stricter conditions.

The weekends in county jail have been rough enough. He knows state prison would be worse.

"When you're brought up on a farm, you have to be tough," John says. "When you're brought up in a large family, you have to be tough. He's not.

"You don't take a little Honda car and try to make a tractor out of it."

Part Two

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If only he had that moment back

*Two families face the reality that a son – and friend –
is gone forever*

BY STAFF WRITER

ROBIN L. FLANIGAN



ALBION – Jeremy Hucknall sits on the porch step under a cloudy sky, his arms squared over his knees.

People have been swapping all kinds of stories about him getting busted for smoking marijuana.

"It's not like I do it to abuse it or anything," the 17-year-old says, his words soft and slow. "It makes me feel better. I'm taking depression pills, but they don't always help."

On a bleak Sunday afternoon in November, he and his friends had been shooting arrows near the barn by his family's Orleans County farmhouse. Jeremy drew his bow toward Chris McClary, 16, who had ducked for cover behind a car. He let go just as Chris stood up. The arrow pierced Chris' head, and he died that night.

Jeremy told an investigator the next day that he was just trying to shoot close to Chris and "scare him as a stupid joke." He pleaded guilty to criminally negligent homicide and was sentenced in February to four months of weekends in jail and five years of probation. His recent probation violation for smoking pot means house arrest, another court date and possibly time in a state prison.

For now, he has one more weekend to go at the Orleans County Jail, where he plays rummy and spades with other inmates, naps and watches TV. On Easter he was served baked chicken and mashed potatoes, both surprisingly tasty.

But everything behind bars is a reminder of what he has done.

"There's nothing to do but think about it," Jeremy says. "Just the fact that he's gone now."

His voice cracks.

Chris spent more time at the old farmhouse than with his own family. Like most of the boys who end up staying there to escape their own family troubles, he addressed Jeremy's parents as "Ma" and

“Pa.” He spent summers driving through fields on souped-up tractors, customizing cars, swimming in Hulberton Quarry and earning meals and lodging – sometimes cash – for odd jobs around the farm and the American Legion hall downtown.

The rusted red schoolhouse bell he and Jeremy were going to hang next to the house still sits on the ground. A hundred pounds of garlic cloves they were going to plant fill plastic buckets on the porch.

Jeremy looks away, toward the barn.

“A couple weeks ago, I came back from jail and I wasn’t exactly feelin’ good or anything. I broke down in tears. I hate it when I get sad. It sucks.”

Jeremy had gone straight from the car to the shower upstairs, then out to the porch to be alone. On his way back inside, he began sobbing, standing paralyzed at the sliding glass door. His mother guided him into the kitchen and handed over the tissues, worried that something terrible had happened over the weekend.

He was like that for three hours.

“I don’t remember a time when he was that emotionally devastated,” Valerie recalls. “He finally spurted out that he couldn’t believe Chris was gone. I just tried to work him through it. I told him that everyone’s grief comes in its own time.”

Searching for closure

Grief also comes in its own way.

Steve McClary brims with anger. He blames the Hucknalls for letting this happen to his middle son, and he blames himself for retreating after splitting from Chris’ mother.

“He may still be alive if I spent more time with him. I know I missed out on things.”

Though he rarely cries or talks about his feelings, he fell apart two weeks ago after getting in fiancée Janette Pinson’s face and yelling: “I can’t bring him back! Can you bring him back?”

Janette believes that Steve and his ex-wife, Cindy McClary – who considered Jeremy another son and asked the court for leniency during sentencing – will eventually regret continuing their combative relationship through Chris’ burial.

“They haven’t done the closure as the parents of this child, and it’s a shame,” she says. “No matter how much you hate that person, you put your differences aside. That was the time to do it, and they didn’t.”

In June, Cindy attempted her own closure, driving by the Hucknall house for the first time since November. Her heart was racing as she passed by, looking over her shoulder for evidence of that cold afternoon. She hasn’t traveled that route since.

She cries every day, unable to return to her secretarial job. She feels guilty that her 22-year-old son, Steve, quit attending Genesee Community College to support her and his brother Tyler, 12. He works full time as a bank representative at Washington Mutual in town.

“I keep letting my kids down,” she says. “I feel sorry for them. They need my help and understanding, but I don’t know how to help them because I don’t know how to help myself.”

Cindy takes comfort in what she senses are signs from Chris – visions of the number seven and pennies scattered around the house even after she has cleaned up. Her sister tells her the pennies are from heaven. She can’t figure out what the number seven means.

She sought counseling for eight months but walked out for good after her therapist mentioned details about the incident that she didn’t want to hear.

Neither of her sons wants counseling. Tyler still won’t sleep in the room he shared with Chris, even after Cindy took the frames off both beds, bought new sheets and packed away Chris’ things in

March. He goes in only for clothes and PlayStation games. He usually spends the night on the living room couch, though at times he prefers the floor next to his mother's bed.

Steve paid tribute to his younger brother with a tattoo covering his upper left arm.

Their father went to one counseling appointment, making good on a promise to Orleans County District Attorney Joseph V. Cardone.

He refuses to go back. "I told Cardone I'd go. I went. That's it."

Back to court

Jeremy, in a navy suit, sits with his parents on a red bench outside the courthouse. Three of his friends – including Chris Beecher and Brian Rushing, who were there when Chris was hit – sit on another. One of his sisters and a niece wait with them.

It is an unseasonably cool July afternoon.

John Hucknall is clutching a statement he wrote that he later gives his lawyer to show Cardone. He wants to protect Jeremy from his own quiet nature: "He does not speak much to teachers or people he has known for years. I know of at least twice his probation officer was very frustrated and spoke harshly to Jeremy. Certainly this would make him go into his shell and not respond well and could mistakenly be taken as noncooperation."

Inside the courtroom, Judge James Punch asks Jeremy whether he wants to go to state prison. Jeremy says no. Punch acts surprised, says his actions seem to indicate otherwise, then sternly warns him to take probation seriously or face up to four years in the slammer. The judge expects him to shape up and return to court in 60 days. The date is set for Sept. 13.

Valerie heads home while John and Jeremy stop at the Probation Department. Her morning started with a message from her boss that she had been laid off. She plops into a chair on the porch and lights a cigarette.

Brian, 18, and Mike Coville, a 17-year-old live-in since September, drive up in a truck hauling trash bags bulging with clothes. Brian asks to stay awhile; he's not getting along with his father, who wants him to stop hanging around Jeremy. Valerie is playfully reluctant before agreeing.

"Where do they end up? Always here. Never fails," she sighs.

The boys go inside for milk and sandwiches.

For the most part, they try to pretend that everything is normal. They rarely talk about what happened, and what is happening now.

Mike was at the house the day Chris was hit, but he had left about two hours earlier. He lectures Jeremy occasionally about the consequences of violating probation. "He'll sit and listen, but when I get to the fact that I don't want him to go to jail, he kind of nods his head and walks away. That's the last place I want to see one of my best friends go. He don't get mad, 'cause he knows I'm right."

A week later, Jeremy has a black box strapped to his left ankle that tracks whether he stays within 150 feet of his front door – the parameters of his house arrest. He has been passing weekly drug tests and has started work on a two-tiered wraparound porch for his parents. After graduating from Charles D'Amico High School in the spring, he wants to run his own woodworking business out of the barn.

He figures he can stay out of trouble until his September court date: "It's not like I can go anywhere."

A daily visit

Cindy's cell phone rings as she pulls into Mount Albion Cemetery.

It's 9:25 a.m. on a late July morning and Tyler is checking in, just as he had done 55 minutes

earlier and just as he promises to do again at 11 a.m. Her sons got her the phone for Mother's Day so they could stay in touch more often. Steve calls from work during lunch and breaks; Tyler makes unscheduled calls just to report he's going from one house to another next door.

Cindy is back to visiting Chris' grave every morning. She sees children inline skating and riding bikes, the same things he used to do each summer, and she wants to be with him.

Chris is buried at the top of a hill. A strip of towering Norway maples separates the graveyard from a farmer's field. His family believes he would have liked the view of the field in winter, when the leaves are gone.

Cindy stares down at the mementos left by friends and relatives: a camping brochure from the Adirondack Forest Preserve, bandannas, a Marlboro cigarette, two jelly bracelets. There always seems to be something new.

She surveys the items left in the last 24 hours.

A cigar, a fortune cookie.

Pennies.

Seven of them.

She gasps, then steps away, turning her back to the grave.

"I just want to know what he's trying to tell me," she wails. "God, I just want to know."

Robin L. Flanigan worked for two months on this series with photographer Max Schulte.

Sources include the Hucknall and McClary families, eyewitnesses, lawyers and statements to police.

This is the first time the families have given in-depth interviews.