

MAKING MUSIC FROM A FAMILY'S LOSS

By Steve Israel
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This is the letter none of us should have to read.

Army Pfc. Jesse Givens wrote it to his family on April 22, 2003, when he was stationed in Iraq. Givens, of Springfield, Mo., asked that it be delivered only if he died.

When a colleague of Sullivan County composer Lee Hoiby sent him the letter, Hoiby gasped. Then the musician, whose work has been praised by Time magazine and The New York Times, sat down at his Steinway piano in his studio beside a rustling stream in the Delaware River hamlet of Long Eddy. He composed "Last Letter Home."

These are excerpts of the letter. Melissa is Givens' wife. Dakota is his stepson, then 6 years old. Bean is the nickname of his then-unborn son, Carson.



Times Herald-Record/MICHELE HASKELL

Sullivan County's Lee Hoiby composed "Last Letter Home," based on a letter from a soldier killed in Iraq.

My Family,

I never thought that I would be writing a letter like this. I really don't know where to start. I've been getting bad feelings, though and, well, if you are reading this ...

The happiest moments in my life all deal with my little family. I will always have with me the small moments we all shared. The moments when you quit taking life so serious and smiled. The sounds of a beautiful boy's laughter or the simple nudge of a baby unborn. You will never know how complete you have made me. You saved me from loneliness and taught me how to think beyond myself. You taught me how to live and to love. You opened my eyes to a world I never dreamed existed.

Dakota ... you taught me how to care until it hurts, you taught me how to smile again. You taught me that life isn't so serious and sometimes you just have to play. You have a big, beautiful heart.

Through life you need to keep it open and follow it. Never be afraid to be yourself. I will always be there in our park when you dream so we can play. I love you, and hope someday you will understand why I didn't come home. Please be proud of me.

Bean, I never got to see you but I know in my heart you are beautiful.

I know you will be strong and big-hearted like your mom and brother. I will always have with me the feel of the soft nudges on your mom's belly, and the joy I felt when I found out you were on your way. I love you, Bean.

Melissa, I have never been as blessed as the day I met you. You are my angel, soulmate, wife, lover and best friend. I am sorry. I did not want to have to write this letter. There is so much more I need to say, so much more I need to share. A lifetime's worth. I married you for a million lifetimes. That's how long I will be with you. Please keep my babies safe. Please find it in your heart to forgive me for leaving you alone ... Teach our babies to live life to the fullest, tell yourself to do the same.

I will always be there with you, Melissa. I will always want you, need you and love you, in my heart, my mind and my soul. Do me a favor, after you tuck the children in. Give them hugs and kisses from me. Go outside and look at the stars and count them. Don't forget to smile.

Less than two weeks after Givens wrote this letter, he died. Givens, who had enlisted right after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, was sitting in a tank near the Euphrates River. The land gave way, the bank collapsed and his tank fell into the river. There was no combat. He was 34 years old.

Bean, his son, was born on May 29, 2003, less than a month after his father died.

Are there lessons to learn from Givens' letter?

"You can't worry about silly little things in life, like it's raining and I left the window open. Or I had a flat tire," says Hoiby, sitting with a friend he loves, surrounded by the music that is life.

Outside, the stream rushes and a waterfall roars with a force as timeless as Pfc. Jesse Givens' love for his wife, his son and the baby he never held.

Love Always,
Your Husband,
Jesse

Lee Hoiby and baritone David Trombley will perform "Last Letter Home" at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Eddie Adams Barn, North Branch Road, Jeffersonville. The performance is part of The Weekend of Chamber Music summer festival. The program also features works by Beethoven and Ives. The cost is \$25. There will be an open rehearsal of the program at 7 p.m. Friday at the Eddie Adams Barn for free.

The Weekend of Chamber Music kicks off today with a free concert at 3 p.m. behind the Presbyterian Church on Main Street in Jeffersonville. For information, call 932-8527 or visit wcmconcerts.org.