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## A-Minus!

Brett Gosnell's family honors first-year writers and instructors who exceed expectations.

By Sally Ruth Bourrie Posted August 11, 2008, 3:30 PM EST



**Nobody was ever more thrilled to be at the University than the late Brett Gosnell (College '08), who insisted that he and his friends arrive at football games two hours ahead of time.***Photo courtesy of Gosnell family*

 [Brett Gosnell slideshow](#)

Brett Gosnell leapt into Karen Rheuban's car. He'd never received an A-minus for his writing! He'd been high-school valedictorian, he wanted to be a writer—and a lawyer—just like John Grisham. She'd never seen him so mad.

"Giving him an A-minus was the best thing she ever did," Mark Gosnell, Brett's father, says of Brett's writing instructor, Jill Rappoport (PhD English Language and Literature '06). "It challenged him and it really turned him on. Jill pushed him. It was very, very important to him."

"The A-minus made him value my comments, and held him to the high standards he expected of himself," which far exceeded course requirements, says Rappoport, now a professor at Villanova University. "I had to remind myself I was talking to a first-year. He had that effect on everyone."

When Brett died months later, on Aug. 17, 2006, it was this relationship the Gosnells returned to the University to commemorate by founding the Brett Baxley Gosnell Prize: \$1,000 each to a College student and his or her instructor for the best first-year essay. Abby Adams (College '11) and her instructor Zak Fisher (PhD English '11) were the inaugural winners. The judge was John Grisham.



"Through Brett," Grisham says, "I realized there is no such thing as a bad day."

In 2003, Brett was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare pediatric muscle cancer. He continued to excel despite aggressive chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

After graduation from high school, he attended college classes near home in Hickory, N.C., but his dream was to attend the University of Virginia. In spring 2005, he and his father drove to Charlottesville. Brett wrestled with the decision, alone in thought on the Rotunda steps.

"You can imagine how difficult it would be to send your child off four hours from home knowing his future was uncertain," says Rheuban, professor of pediatrics and pediatric cardiologist at the U.Va. Health System, whose son was Brett's roommate. "When Mrs.

Gosnell, Mary Ann, heard that I was a physician, she burst into tears and shared the story of her son, who was determined to have a college experience at the University he loved. So it was easy for me to be of service.”

“It’s like God came down and said, ‘I’m going to give you a little break here,’” says Mark. “Brett had a second mother at U.Va. with a medical degree who could watch over him day to day.”

And she did. Rheuban and her family took Brett to chemotherapy at the U.Va. Medical Center. He signed up for afternoon classes to accommodate the treatments, which lasted all morning. Still, he maintained a 3.8 grade point average and never missed a football game or tailgate party.

“Brett was inspirational; he was a beautiful person, and to see his commitment to excellence was so impressive,” Rheuban says. “It was so heartwarming. You just wanted to do for him, to make his life better—and he has wonderful parents.”

Through Rheuban, Brett met Grisham and they “hung out” at Java Java coffee shop. “We rarely talked about his cancer,” Grisham says. “He preferred to talk about more pleasant things, and that was fine with me. “Brett was always very thoughtful, kind, soft-spoken, and he was extremely smart. He was also cautious. Although he wanted to be a writer, he was careful with his dreams.”



In spring 2006, Brett e-mailed his last paper from Hickory, the day before an aggressive, 10-hour surgery that, if successful, might have allowed him to live another year. The paper was about cloning and attempts to resurrect the dead, says Rappoport. "He was strongly opposed to it. He believed nature should take its course."

After Brett's death, the Gosnells met with English Department Chair Jahan Ramazani (English Language and Literature '81). "As a personal honor to Brett—U.Va. was so important to him—we just had to do something up there," says Mark. "Writing was his passion and that class was his favorite class he took in just his short year there."

Ramazani encouraged an award for both first-year and instructor. He told the Gosnells, "'We need to give more to our graduate assistants because we're losing too many to other universities. They're the ones who teach the first-years.' We said, 'OK, you know your needs,'" says Mark. The Gosnells currently pay the awards outright while raising an endowment.

"The student wins but so does the instructor," says Ramazani. "What the graduate student is doing is unglamorous, but it's fundamentally important to the student's education, to teach them to write clearly and to energize their writing."



Back in Hickory, Brett treasured signed galley proofs from Grisham, says Mark. "He was sick and sitting there reading it. He said, 'This is what I was going to be.'"

But Brett never felt sorry for himself. Days before he died, he secretly dictated a “challenge” for his friends, which ends, “Do something meaningful with your life. After all, that is how you can most honor me and my life.”

*Editor’s note: Brett’s brother Andrew is a member of the class of 2011.*

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Sally Ruth Bourrie is editor of A&S Online and Arts & Sciences magazine.

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