



ONE FAMILY'S PERSISTENCE FOR 'THE JESTER'

David Saltzman's "The Jester Has Lost His Jingle" was published by his family after his death.

DURING A TIME of high tension over terrorism, David Saltzman left for a college summer program in Europe, and when his mother, Barbara, returned home from the airport, she found this note: "Mom," he'd written, "if anything happens to me, I don't want you to cry. I want you to remember I've had a wonderful life." And in a way, the children's book he began to write and illustrate the summer before his senior year at Yale University — just before he was diagnosed with the Hodgkin's lymphoma that eventually killed him — was his final note. And again, it was a message of affirmation. That book, "The Jester Has Lost His Jingle," is a colorfully drawn story about a jester banished from a kingdom who, with his wooden friend Pharley, goes in search of laughter in a depressing world. He finds it in:

a little girl in a cancer ward, and he brings back the message that when you're feeling blue, "remember where laughter's hiding . . . it's hiding inside of YOU!" Since the day he died, just short of his 23rd birthday in March, 1989, his mother has made keeping those words and his memory alive her mission. "I refused to let it die with David," Barbara Saltzman said in a telephone interview from her California home. "I felt David's book was a major legacy." The family promised David to get the book published. The day he died, his mother, an entertainment editor at the Los Angeles Times, and brother Michael, a television producer, gathered the pages of the manuscript, but his father, Joe, a University of Southern California journalism professor, found the task too painful. But publishing houses told the Saltzmans that David's book was too long and its rhym-

ing verses unfashionable. The family refused to countenance any changes: It would be published exactly as David intended, and so they decided to publish it themselves. Using credit, borrowed funds and savings, the family last year produced a glossy, opulently printed hardback book under their own imprint, The Jester Co. Inc., with an afterword by renowned children's author Maurice Sendak, who had met the talented art and English major at a Yale speaking engagement. Sendak wrote, "It is difficult to remember all the bright, promising youngsters. It is easy to remember David. . . . That he managed through his harrowing ordeal to produce a picture book so brimming with promise and strength, so full of high spirits, sheer courage and humor is nothing short of a miracle." The book hit No. 16 on The New York Times Book Review Best Seller List on March 24, David's birthday. And last month, it was the most requested children's book in

the country, according to Ingram Book Co., the nation's largest book wholesaler. By now, there are about 150,000 copies of the book in circulation, 22,000 of them donated to sick children.

Barbara Saltzman is especially moved by the response of children on the cancer wards where she gives readings, overcoming a dread of hospitals that developed during David's treatments. He'd undergone chemotherapy and radiation before graduating magna cum laude from Yale in 1989, and then underwent a bone marrow transplant in the year before his death.

People — many of them parents who have lost children to illness — call her, come up to her, send letters. She tells of a man in line for a book-signing who brought his 7-year-old son's copy of the book and said the boy would be undergoing a second bone marrow transplant and that the book had gone through 30 irradiations with the child, who'd received it when he was first diagnosed.

The response testifies to the impact of the book's message, she believes, that people "have the power to smile and feel good again no matter what the world throws at them."

"The fact that it was produced by a young man facing his own mortality, the fact that he took his own death in the eye and still delivered a colorful, upbeat message delivered by characters who are lovable and loving, I think people are really touched by that."

She dislikes being labeled a "grieving mother," as if that alone could explain her passion for her son's work, or the suggestion that she devotes herself to the book to keep his memory alive with her: She misses him terri-



bly, and his memory does not depend on any book.

Yet it gratifies her to meet with groups and talk about her son, to hear schoolchildren ask questions about him, to inspire them by his example, to see his smiling young face looking out from growing numbers of newspapers seven years after his death.

"The positive nature of David's personality has made it impossible for us to sit and grieve and cry. He made us promise not to do that," she said. "I can't say I keep my promise all the time."

This year, she quit her job at the Los Angeles Times to run the family company full time. The company recently produced a jester and Pharley doll, and she has visits of jester costumes, paper plates and napkins



Left, David drawing for "Jester." Above, at his 1989 Yale graduation with his parents, Barbara and Joe, and his brother, Michael.

for Jester birthday parties, Jester T-shirts and sweatshirts, Jester caps and a Jester newsletter. Producers are talking about animated Jester films and dramas about David's life. She'd like to publish David's journal, his other writings.

She would love to see the Jester as ubiquitous as Winnie the Pooh. She feels it belongs with the classics on every child's shelf.

What success there's been has been bitter-sweet, without David there to enjoy it. But life is fleeting, and what matters, she said, is doing something positive in that short span, "and I think David achieved that. I had to be his messenger because he wasn't here." ■

Barbara Saltzman will sign books at the Borders Book Shop in Levittown (3350 Hempstead Tpke., 516-579-6880) tomorrow at 7 p.m., and at FAO Schwarz in Manhattan (269 Fifth Ave., 212-755-1225) on Saturday from 1 to 8 p.m. — Carol Polsky