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## **Touched with Fire: New Day Campaign** **(<https://bmoreart.com/2015/12/touched-with-fire-new-day-campaign.html>)**

*December 11, 2015*

*Words: Nicole Ringel ([Https://Bmoreart.com/Contributor/Nicole-Ringel](https://bmoreart.com/contributor/nicole-ringel))*



Peter Bruun Talks about the New Day Campaign and Elisif's Story with Nicole Ringel

On October 15, one of the sixteen New Day Campaign (<http://www.newdaycampaign.org/exhibitions/elisifs-story/>) exhibitions opened at Stevenson Art Gallery. The exhibition, *Elisif's Story* (<http://www.newdaycampaign.org/exhibitions/elisifs-story/>), is an intimate portrait of Founder/Director Peter Bruun's daughter, Elisif, whose death from a heroin overdose inspired the project.

The work itself consists of a compilation of stories and interviews narrating both the progression of Elisif's addiction, and the brilliance, creativity, and brightness that marked her personality throughout her life. The stories, told through her friends and family, are accompanied with 25 expressive line drawings on intense red surfaces. The combination of lights, stories, and drawings provide a space for a cathartic, emotional experience that challenges the taboo surrounding addiction.

I met with Peter Bruun at McDonogh School, the site of another upcoming New Day Campaign Exhibition, *Touched with Fire: Kristin and Elisif* to talk about the New Day Campaign and its recent projects.

**(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3900.jpg)**

**DSCN3900**



**Thanks so much for meeting with me! Your work starting up the New Day Campaign has been both expansive and inspiring – Could you explain the origins of the project and how its vision was conceived?**

So as you know, Elisif died February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Two things happened immediately on the heels of that. That day the drawings that are on display at Elisif's story came into my head. For me, they represent they represent Elisif's restless spirit and vibrancy, and they just came ready-made in my head. I didn't start working on them for 2 months, but when I did it was several months of just flowing. Right away, art making was a means of moving through my greif.

The other thing that happened was that as an artist, curator, organizer, and community artist who uses art to bring people together around issues and ideas, I had an existing newsletter that I was sending out month-to-month. When she died, there was a newsletter coming up. So, I spoke with my family and they gave me permission to come right out with her story. So in that newsletter, besides just simply announcing her dying, having several reproductions of her art, and commenting about that, I wrote a blog post. Actually I wrote it without knowing it was a blog I think 2 or 3 days after she died. I just wrote it, and I called it “A New Day.”

In that blog post I wrote about Magic Johnson who came out with HIV twenty some years ago, that was a turning point. Homosexuals were thought of as bad people who got AIDs; but once Magic Johnson got aids, how could you think of homosexuals that way? It was a cultural turning point.

Elisif died two weeks after Philip Seymour Hoffman, and the last conversation I had with her was about him. What I wrote was that the headline for his death was, “Too bad, the disease won out.” It wasn’t “too bad, another celebrity fuck up.” It was phrased that he was a good guy, and it was too bad that he fell to the disease. I thought that in that, there was hope for a new day when those with addiction are not seen as weak or immoral, but as bravely fighting a chronic, life-threatening disease. The new day is when my daughter is seen as not immoral and weak, but as brave and strong.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3903.jpg)



So I wrote that blog post, and sent it out. There were about 3,000 people in my email list, and normally 600 people open a newsletter and about 60 people will read a blog. This one exploded. More people read the blog than I have in my email list. People started to reach out to me with their stories, secrets, and appreciation for my talking about it. Also with questions, like “What are you going to do? You’re going to *do* something, this is great!”

Around then I knew why I was an artist, curator, and organizer. For 15 or 20 years I had been using art to bring people together around issues and ideas in a variety of ways, and when she died I knew why I had that skill set. Elisif was an artist and I knew I wanted to have her work, someone came to me with an idea for another exhibition, and I knew I was putting together Elisif’s story; so,

there was a constellation of about five exhibitions which over a number of months just kind of brooded and simmered. Then, late fall of 2014, it all came together in my head as being interconnected. The name “New Day Campaign” Just kind of popped into my head; it made sense. There was another project I had been working on called *Autumn Leaves* that I completed in November, and then at the last event connected to that exhibition, I announced The New Day Campaign.

It was completely unformed at that point; I announced that I had three or four themes, I had five exhibitions, and I invited people to get involved. Two months later I had an organizing meeting and 80 people came to it. At that point, it was up to eight exhibitions, and an undetermined number of events. Through the spring I began having meetings with people who wanted to get involved. I began talking to galleries, I began talking to treatment centers, I began reaching out to artists and writers, a group wanted to put together a film series, and ultimately because I kept seeing a path for it to happen, it grew and grew and grew until by late spring it was 15 exhibitions and 60 events.

That’s what we printed with the brochure. Now, we actually have 16 exhibitions and 63 events. It is an extension of my story. It started with Elisif’s story, and it has been driven by my personal need to do this. That’s what the New Day Campaign is.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3897.jpg)



**You mentioned that you were ready for this project in that for the past 20 years you've been developing the community organizing skills to channel the tragedy into a productive response, but it also sounds like based on the response to your actions that there was a community ready for the conversation as well.**

That's absolutely right, but what I knew what to do was direct and contain all of that interest. I could organize and channel it so that it didn't become stray cats going every which way. I could hold that space. That was the skill set that I really developed: working with people and understanding what their interests were and finding a shelf to put that interest on to serve a larger purpose.

What has been initially astonishing to me about the whole campaign has been how fast it has grown, and how quick the turn around has been from this one, catalyzing event to such a vast, expansive project.

Correct. That is because of all the people who came at me. There was so much good will, so much giving, and so much need, so many people coming to me saying, “I’ve lost someone, I’ve been effected by it, I care about this, *What can I do.*” What *can* you do? And then they would share a skill set, and I would find a way to fit that into the larger project.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3908.jpg)

DSCN3908



There are obviously a lot of collaborations at work—could you describe some of the key

**contributions and developments that have occurred over the course of the projects?**

There have been organizational phases. The early phase there were working groups. There was a group to think about how reading and literature could be a part of it, there was a group to think about the film series, there was a group to think about how to bring in expert voices, there was a group that thought about ways of getting art. But, it was very opportunistic in terms of the collaboration.

So, I came up with the idea of an exhibition called *People and Places* and the idea was to illuminate stories from the different treatment providers and resources in the area. The idea was not white wash how hard it all is, but to really talk about the good news that's out there. The good people doing good work deserve recognition. I put together a task force to work on that exhibition based on stakeholders, treatment providers, who would be profiled in that, who would be interested in seeing this done right. In the meantime, I knew artists (and artists came to me) who I commissioned work from. Then it was matchmaking between the artists and the sites. I would introduce an artist with to a site and suggest that they collaborate with the site to come up with the work.

Then what happened, in that case, was that a friend of my daughter's from North Carolina emailed me and said, "I'm a writer, what can I do?" To which I thought, I can't write all of the text panels for this exhibition. So I gave her information about the artists, subjects, and staff contacts from the sites so that she could write the text labels. Suddenly she was a collaborator as a writer, and she had never even met the people who were responsible for generating the information she was writing from.

Then there was Sharon Strouse, who I collaborated with in this exhibition and *Touched with Fire: Kristin & Elisif* at McDonogh School. I learned about her daughter, and I said that we should have an exhibition together. The two of us came over here, thinking that this was a good space to have an exhibition about stand out artists in high school whose lives began falling apart in high school. It seemed like the best place. That's how the whole process has been; there have been these opportunistic things that happen, and then teams that work in response.

**When I visited Elisif's story at Stevenson, the first thing that struck me was the use of light. It was really powerful in the space, and to me the intense progression from dark to light was, in part, representative of the overcoming of the taboo of talking about addiction. What was your own motivation behind the lighting of the space?**

Interesting, that's really nice. I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right. I had never done anything like that before. And I didn't even know if the technology existed. I had really wanted a dark room so that you could really listen to the voices. I knew that I wanted the drawings to be underlit – kind of like a sacred space. I was concerned because I wondered how the viewer would know who was talking, because voices recur.

Then I decided it didn't matter so much who was talking; it was more important to recognize each new voice. Each time a new voice is introduced, a light goes on. That simply felt right. Honestly, I'm not one hundred percent happy with the consistency of the levels of the light, but that's just the limits of the technology.

The idea of lighting up her story as it unfolds is key. The light increases all at once when her friend Molly talks about her passing, and then she talks about the ambulance, and the nurses sprinting. For that passage, all of the lights come up a little bit to heighten the intensity. The growing light is all about the unfolding story. You have the full story, and it's intense. All of the drawings I think of in two ways. First, I think of them as almost the chorus speaking Elisif's story.

Of course each time someone starts speaking a light will come on, and they all stay lit up because they all share their voices through the whole thing. The other way I thought about them is as portraits of Elisif's restless spirit. The line, and the angulating shape is a really vibrant, electric yellow. If you think about that people keep talking about her being "brilliant," it becomes this brilliant yellow line. The red just felt right. Maybe it had to do with intensity, fire, or hotness. There was another interesting thing I realized after I did the installation. I had always seen the drawings as a grid, but I'm Danish, and she is Danish, and the drawings actually look like the grid of the Danish flag. That was an interesting accident.

There are 24 drawings because she was 24 years old, there are 24 voices, and the drawings are 24 inches by 24 inches. All of those drawings are about her *life*, her *lifetime* and her restless spirit. No drawing is settled; each one is angulating in a different way, and each one is unframed. Then, all the lights go out and they come back on for the song. The drawing that is lit up for the song is still, black line. It's called Elisif at rest. It's separate and framed. I see it as her soul at passing. It's her 25<sup>th</sup> year that she never lived. The song was a happy accident.

One of the people I interviewed, Stephan Fink, came to my house for me to interview him. He said that it was really nice to be in my house again. He is a musician, and we have a piano. He said he always loved the sound of our piano in that room, and that he wanted to play a song for Elisif. I said, "Great! Can I record it?" It was a song by Thom Yorke, the lead singer of Radiohead. It was haunting and beautiful. It was a love song to Elisif. I knew that it had to be in this piece a kind of elegy to Elisif. Being with the music, being with the drawing, and this one light... For me it's very moving.

I thought for a long time about whether or not to include Elisif's phone message. She died almost two years ago, and we never disconnected her phone. The reason we never disconnected it is because it's very hard to let go. I knew that voice recorder was just sitting there. I hadn't called it at all. I couldn't do it. I thought about it in this piece. I decided a total dark room was the way to do it, and to have it *sound* like a phone message. Her voice is more distant. I didn't record it until two days before the opening because I couldn't do it. The song and that recording become the bridge to make the whole of it a loop. For me, the start is the sniff, and then "I first met Elisif at spring lake ranch." For other people who stay through the whole thing, it's unsure what the start is. They think maybe it's the song, or the voice recorder. But for me the voice recorder is the end and the start.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3906.jpg)



**The whole progression of intensity that you were talking about throughout the narrative is a really humanizing force. The phone message at the end is also incredibly powerful, and really drives the authenticity of the story home.**

There is one moment – I thought about editing it out – it’s sort of like a wink at the audience. Kirk Wulf, one of the voices, is very eloquent and he has almost a monologue where he says something about “riding the wave of the things you love”, “it’s not surprising that her art was so eloquent”, and “she is Marilyn, and Elvis” and then at the end he is talking about his loss, and he says “I see a camera pulling back and I see Elisif in her mirrored glasses and her blue hair facing more away from people than towards people,” and then he says, “I’m having a really hard time dealing with this. It’s absurd,

I'm talking to her father and I'm talking about my loss." I decided to keep that in, because I suspected and believed that anybody in there would be moved by this story, and have their own emotional responses that are at a certain level. He is reminding them that their emotional response is only a fraction of what he feels, or what I feel.

**That was a really remarkable perspective to include. How did you go about compiling all of the interviews? What was that process like?**

It was daunting, healing, and painful. It was urgent for me to do this. Most of the interviews were beautiful to do. I fell in love with almost every single person I spoke with. Some of them were loved ones already. I chose not to interview my wife, my two other daughters, my mother, or my brother. There are only four family members in the whole thing: my mother in law, my father in law, my nephew, and my sister in law. I think that's kind of interesting. Here I am getting to the heart of the story and I leave out those as close as me? Yet I get to the heart? That wasn't a conscious decision. I thought I was going to interview them at the end after I had interviewed others so that I could have them fill in gaps, but I was full. I didn't need it.

A few people didn't want to do it because it was too painful for them, but most people said they would do anything for me. I don't hold anything against those who wouldn't interview with me – I respect that, totally. Those I interviewed, though, within several months of Elisif's dying, so everybody was still feeling pretty raw. Everybody came into it needing to talk. Everybody had things that they needed to process.

**I got that sense from the interviews, too. Everyone you spoke to sounded as if they actively needed to speak about it.**

There were also such feelings of guilt over her dying. That was a recurring theme. Everyone thought it was their fault, and it wasn't, but they felt that way. They also felt like they were confessing things to me. "I should have told you", "I knew this then", "I don't know if I should tell you this now", you know? Those were many of the friends and teachers who spoke that way.

The caregivers were also very generous. It is fairly clear which voices are caregivers, because they know something about addiction. It was important to me to convey the extent to which it was personal for them. I was so grateful. The process for me was a two-part process. I was able to wear that hat of the person carrying out the interview. I was an artist with an eye for what I wanted to get. At the same time, I was the father having this intense, emotional exchange with people I was falling in love with because of their big hearts for Elisif. I was able to hold it together because I was able to hold onto that role of being the artist conducting an interview for this project.

There were moments when I cried along with the person who was crying. It was especially hard going back to Cooper Riis, where she died. I love those people, and yet it was really emotionally difficult. It had been almost a year since she had died, those interviews I did late. It was hard.

There were a couple of interviews that were emotionally traumatic for me. One of which was a person who spoke with resentment toward Elisif, and I wasn't expecting that. That really surprised me. I had a two-part reaction. I had a reaction of being hurt, angry, and traumatized by what was coming out of his mouth, but also thinking, "Wow, this is great stuff. This is the voice of stigma, I need this voice in this piece."

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/DSCN3902.jpg)

DSCN3902



**I think I know exactly which part you're talking about. It struck me that you have both sides of the spectrum included in the piece. There are doctors explaining the genotype related to addiction, and then you have another voice entirely blaming Elisif for everything. What was your**

## **motivation for including that?**

It's the story! It is so hard to have a family member who is not well. That voice of stigma was *my* voice at times with her when she was alive. I was the one saying, "Elisif, you idiot, what are you doing? What's wrong with you? How could you do that?" You say those things because you're emotional, you're vulnerable, and you don't understand. Nobody understands because we don't talk about it. It's just the truth. Then there is the other truth, which is the bigger truth that says it's not a choice. There is nobody suffering more than the person with addiction. It does not help to ask, "What's *wrong* with you?" That's just piling on hurt on top of hurt. To have that understanding, that voice of knowledge and understanding and fact is so important.

As Diana Clark said, "I work with families to understand that it's like a tumor that's causing that." I want people to understand that it's ok to be emotional and upset because you're human; but also to listen to this other truth and to dig down for that compassion. Compassion heals, and piling on doesn't. Piling onto the pain of addiction just hurts everybody. It doesn't mean you're a doormat. It's really hard – that 's one thing that I want to communicate. That was my confusion at the end: I didn't know what to do. I knew nothing was right, but I didn't know what to do. It's really, really hard.

**One of the things that I really appreciated about *Elisif's Story* was that it truly provided the space to authentically appreciate the story that is laid out in front of you. Often, especially in school, stories and videos about addiction are hyper dramatized and a lot of that authenticity is lost. The peacefulness of the gallery space made the experience of the exhibit so much more poignant than conventional ways of telling similar stories.**

This gets to something in ways that other things that try to get to things don't. I had a call the other day from someone I didn't know. It was a voicemail I had gotten at 1 o'clock in the morning on my cellphone. It was "Hi, my name is so-and-so, I saw your exhibition to your daughter at Stevenson, I just want to tell you I was really effected by it. I live in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and you can imagine we have a lot of overdoses there and it's really hard not to distance yourself from it, but your daughter and your story – I'm going to be thinking about her." It was such a strange finish to the message: "I'm going to be thinking about her."

Basically, he was realizing that, god, these are *people*. I figured out, because he had also signed the book, that he is an EMT who drives to overdoses. If you do that, you become desensitized. This got through to him, which is why he said "I'll be thinking about your daughter." It became real to him in a way that his job kept it from being real to him. When It's your job to make a video to teach people about overdose, it creates a screen. My intention is to have people walk out saying "What a beautiful person, what a terrible thing. Something must be done." That's my intention but that's not why I made it; I made it because I had to. That's why it gets to you in a way that videos and productions don't.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/Screen-Shot-2015-11-27-at-11.20.11-AM.png)



Portrait of Elisif

**In this exhibition, *Touched With Fire: Kristin and Elisif* at the McDonogh School, the stories behind each of the works really reveal their therapeutic role in both Kristin and Elisif's lives. How have you seen art as serving a therapeutic role for Kristin, Elisif, and yourself?**

Let me start by telling you how I made the drawings that are up at Stevenson. I had a studio where I would go. Elisif loved Johnny Cash, so I had two of his CDs. I had his last one, *Unchained*, and then a CD of gospel songs. *Unchained* was Johnny Cash's last album, and *Unchained* the song is about letting go of life and being unchained. I would put on my iPod with those albums as the playlist, and they were the only things I listened to the entire time I did all of those drawings. Each took three, four, or five hours. I couldn't do more than one per day, and a couple days would go by and I'd do another. Almost the entire time I was drawing, I was crying and feeling everything. I was safe enough and had a place to channel feeling everything in the course of making those drawings. That was totally therapy for me. My brother says, "Why don't you see a therapist?" I don't *need* to see a therapist because the New Day Campaign is my therapy. I don't cry as much now, but it's still my therapy. The interviews were my therapy. Editing the audio was impossible just like getting on a couch with a therapist is impossible. I just cried so much when I was working on that audio. How can you say art is not therapy.

That was fairly intense, but I have long believed that art is always therapeutic. That's why we do it! I think for Kristin and Elisif art was therapeutic, but it wasn't enough. For some people it's enough. Art really saves lives. I'm so lucky because as an artist I had a place to evacuate to during that gurgling spring of grief that wasn't stopping. Other people don't have that. I don't know what they do with those feelings.

**What are your visions for the campaign in the future, following the 2015 marathon of exhibitions?**

The New Day Campaign is a 2015 initiative to challenge stigma and discrimination associated with mental health and addiction. Our goal is to make the world a more healing place. The best part of the campaign for me has been the people I've met who have opened up with their stories and are filled with such gratitude that we're talking about it, that we're making safe spaces to talk about it that aren't behind the doors of an NA room, AA room, or a schizophrenia support group room. It's in the world. We're making safe places to talk about it in the world. We're finding the beauty and redemption and the gratitude and the light in all of this pain. We're shedding a light on understanding all of that.

What I say about 2015 is that we're throwing a lot against the wall, and we'll see what sticks. I do not know what will happen. I know that I'm not done, and I know that those who have jumped on board will not be done. I know that I'll be tired; I already am tired. In January 2016 I'm going to pause and go inward for a while, but there are people already talking to me about what to do in January 2016. These are big fish, the kind of fish I would have wanted to be talking to me about what to do.

(./Touched with Fire\_ New Day Campaign - BmoreArt\_files/Screen-Shot-2015-11-27-at-11.21.43-AM.png)

Screen Shot 2015-11-27 at 11.21.43 AM



**Author Nicole Ringel was raised in Frederick, Maryland and is currently pursuing a BFA in Studio Art and Art History at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. She is an artist and reader, and is especially interested in community and socially engaged art.**

Upcoming New Day Campaign Events:

Mental Illness, Addiction, and Choice: An Exploration

(<http://www.newdaycampaign.org/events/mental-illness-addiction-and-choice-an-exploration/>)

Inscape Theatre, Stevenson University 1525 Greenspring Valley Rd, Stevenson MD, 21153 December 5, 1:00 – 5:30pm

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Words: Nicole Ringel (<https://Bmoreart.com/Contributor/Nicole-Ringel>)



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Constantly pursuing the feeling of learning something new, Bathgate finds himself experimenting on the edge of the technologies he employs

It's important to Bathgate that his works be makeable, at least by someone with his extremely specific skill set, which he admits only a few people in the world possess.

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For every experience lost during this year of quiet, do we gain something else?

I tend to pair images together to complicate things, to show that my life is not one thing or another, that there is always a subtext or a tangent or a side and nothing is simple.

CARA OBER

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