

# When Love Leads and Art Heals

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— by Deborah Kevin

Peter Bruun arrived in Baltimore in 1987, a recent art history graduate of Williams College. He enrolled in graduate school at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), where he earned a master's degree at MICA's Mt. Royal School of Art. He's been a fixture in the Baltimore cultural scene since and is recognized as a community activist, educator, and curator. For example, Bruun worked in 2011 with Marian House (<http://www.marianhouse.org/stories>) to create 30 Women, 30 Stories, an art project highlighting the success stories of 30 women whose lives had been transformed by Marian House, overcoming addiction, trauma, incarceration, homelessness, mental illness and poverty to build independent, productive lives. Perhaps this project planted seeds of deep empathy within Peter which he would need.

In February 2014, Peter received a call every parent secretly fears. His oldest daughter Elisif was dead. Heroin addiction plagued his beautiful and talented 24-year old and proved too strong, despite her best efforts to heal. He channeled his grief into a blog post on Bruun Studio's (<http://bruunstudios.com/>) website called A New Day (<http://bruunstudios.com/blog/a-new-day>). From this outpouring, Peter grew a 2015 movement called A New Day Campaign (<http://newdaycampaign.org/>), featuring 16 exhibits and 63 events over 92 days. It's an initiative using art to challenge stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness and addiction, making the world a more healing place.

Extraordinary circumstances often lead individuals to create sacred spaces and change the conversations we've been having. Such was the case when Peter took action, as he has before many times before, to create A New Day Campaign. He is showing an entire community how to shine light in our darkest corners, ferret out shame, talk openly, and love one another, unconditionally. *Little Patuxent Review* is deeply grateful for Peter taking time amidst the An New Day Campaign activities to share his thoughts with us.

**Little Patuxent Review: You organized A New Day Campaign, pulling together artists, writers, poets and thought leaders, with the mission to make the world a more healing place. What kinds of conversations do you hope will be happening 95 days from now?**

Peter Bruun: What do I hope to happen after the Campaign? Well, the main thing is I hope there *is* still a conversation, for that's the key: *talking about it*. So long as we're talking about mental illness and addiction, and recognizing that those who suffer are not choosing their pain or behaviors, and then we're on the way to the culture shift I hope to see. The new day.

**LPR: Will you share with us the types of events falling under New Day Campaign's umbrella?**

(<http://newdaycampaign.org/>)PB: The overall purpose of the Campaign is to challenge stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness and addiction, making the world a more healing place. This calls for a diverse range of experiences. We have events that are about bringing people together to connect with one another, to gain some new understanding, to support advocacy, and to provide opportunities for healing. We have everything from book conversations, where those who have written books that shed light on mental illness or addiction engage in conversation with a small audience, to opening receptions celebrating art exhibitions, with hundreds in attendance, to a film series with conversation, to a variety of theme-based gatherings where those who either are experts by training or experts of their own experience come together to dig into an issue. Some of our events are elaborate half day affairs with multiple presentations that include information, performance, sharing, and conversation. We also have a number of what we call "healing experiences," where folks come together and actually engage in some sort of healing activity. So there is great diversity. If there is one common denominator to what we do, it's that we create a space of safety and acceptance out in the public realm, where more often than not shame, blame, fear, and judgment prevent those who hurt from speaking of their hurt and vulnerabilities. But time and time again, we have had events where people speak without fear and with confidence that those in the room bring compassion and care. That's been the most beautiful thing about the Campaign: the public intimacies. The sense of fellowship. I believe we are modeling a kind of new day.

**LPR: How did you determine what kinds of art, writers, poets and thought leaders would be included in New Day Campaign?**

PB: That itself is more art than science. There certainly is no single way. So much of it is about the opportunity: who wants to share something, who has something to share? It's definitely not simply about the art: it needs to have a story to it. As for writers and poets, pretty much whoever has come along has found a voice in the choir... literature is not my personal strength (visual art is), so I've not dug deep into that world, but where I have I've liked who and what I've come across, and found a place for them. As for artists themselves, some are more involved than others, because they are true stakeholders in the issues, and they are powerful, compassionate people themselves. As for what you call thought leaders, again I'm looking for a range of expertise, philosophy, and kinds of thinking or experiences. And I have to say, even though there are artists, poets, writers, performers, and thought leaders who are foregrounded in our programs, in the actual events the field is very flat: there is virtually always a community conversation component and all are welcome to speak up – we've had writers, poets, artists, performers, and thought leaders emerge from the crowd that way, and it's been lovely. This touches everyone, so everyone is welcome.

**LPR: What happens after this year's events have concluded?**

PB: I rest, we reflect, and we figure out what to do next. There are no current plans other than to get our breath and analyze what worked and what didn't. Then we'll see where opportunity, resources, and interest lie.

**LPR: Your daughter Elisif is the inspiration for A New Day Campaign. About her death last February to a heroin overdose, you wrote, “My daughter was neither weak nor morally flawed. She was beautiful and strong, and she succumbed to a tragic affliction.” Who was Elisif and what would you like people to remember or know about her?**

PB: I really don’t know what to say to this one. Elisif is so much to me, and whatever she means to someone else, I’m happy to have that be so. If her light is positive, I’m glad.

**LPR: What would Elisif’s reaction be to A New Day Campaign?**

PB: She would absolutely hate that it is about her. She would absolutely love that it exists. She’d be proud of me. She *is* proud of me.

**LPR: You’ve long been a community activist, catalyzing others via art. How do you envision the arts impact on challenging the stigma associated with mental health and addiction?**

PB: It’s what I do, but I know its real impact is small. “Intimacy” is a word included among our values in the Campaign. So it probably has an impact only on an intimate, small scale. But it’s what I do, and it’s a good, even if small. At best we can hope to be casting a bunch of seeds in the field, or pebbles in the pond. I’m doing that, and I think the arts do that.

**LPR: In your “A New Day” blog post (February 27, 2014), you wrote about Elisif having genetic testing done and the discovery of a predilection toward opiate addiction. “The play between genetics and environment in behavioral health is still a new field, but there is no question: substance abuse and its accompanying destructive behaviors is more sickness than choice.” Can you share more about these findings in general terms?**

PB: There’s nothing so dangerous as a little bit of knowledge. I know only a little about this, and as I’ve learned more, I’ve learned just how little we know, and how far we have to go. But no doubt: genetics and better understanding that can only help us move further away from a world filled with shame and blame.

**LPR: Share with us your thoughts on how support might look under a humane system.**

PB: You know how we treat people with cancer, or Alzheimer’s? That’s how.

**LPR: Is there anything else you’d like us to know?**

PB: Thank you for sharing. That’s all.

**LPR: Thank you for your courage and example.**

*Online Editor’s Note: A list of A New Day Campaign’s upcoming events can be found [here](http://newdaycampaign.org/events/#20151130) (<http://newdaycampaign.org/events/#20151130>). LPR’s Ann Bracken shares *The Altar of Innocence* (<http://www.annbrackenauthor.com>) at NDC’s *Book Club Series* (<http://newdaycampaign.org/events/book-club-series-the-altar-of-innocence-by-ann-bracken/>) on December 1. You can read an excellent interview with Peter*

called, "Good Grief (<http://www.baltimoremagazine.net/2015/11/9/peter-bruun-finds-purpose-after-death-of-daughter>)" in this month's Baltimore Magazine. Please consider visiting A New Day Campaign's website (<http://newdaycampaign.org/get-involved/>) to learn more and become involved.

Interview A New Day Campaign, Ann Bracken, Baltimore Magazine, Elisf Bruun, Little Patuxent Review, Peter Bruun Deborah Kevin Leave a comment

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