

News



South Philly man meets the father of the woman his package of coke and heroin killed

02/09/17 -- Baltimore, MD -- Sean Harrington speaks about his relationship with the late Elisif Brunn at the New Day ... [Read more](#)
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by Jason Nark

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BALTIMORE – Inside an old broom factory Thursday night, Sean Harrington hobbled from easel to easel on a crutch, pausing to peer into each abstract rich with color.

One pastel resembled a lake in autumn, blurred as if you'd been crying. Jagged light shot through the artist's darker strokes, turquoise lightning in clouds of plum and crimson.

A seventh painting by the artist sat off on its own, a self-portrait of Elisif Bruun, and when Harrington shuffled up to it, he recognized the subject and looked down. Over the course of the night, he'd glance back at it several times.

The South Philly man sat across from the oils in his black suit at the Institute for Integrative Health in the Fells Point neighborhood here, beside his parents, Michael and Michele. He sat up straighter when the artist's father walked to a podium beside the self-

portrait.

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Harrington, who is 27, and a graduate of Central High, knew what Peter Bruun might say, but he also knew it would still surprise him, still feel surreal. They were meeting for the first time.

"Two days from today, I recognize the third anniversary of my daughter Elisif's death," Bruun told the people gathered there. "I've shared that story in public many times, but for reasons to become clear, I'm sharing it again tonight."

Bruun talked about how well his daughter had been doing in a rural North Carolina recovery center in 2014 when a friend in Philadelphia had sent her a greeting card that contained heroin and cocaine.

Harrington rubbed a hand against his face. Bruun continued. Harrington's father, Michael, put an arm around his son.

Sean Harrington met Elisif Bruun in Bar Harbor, Maine, where both had worked in the summer of 2013. He was a guitarist, she an artist. They spent hours together in coffee shops talking about books and music.

Addiction also tied them together. One phone call from a dealer always ended those long, wonderful talks.

When summer ended, the woman, then 24, went to the Cooper Riis Healing Community, deep in the mountains of Polk County, N.C. She sent Sean a \$140 money order, and although he had been sleeping under I-95 in Philly and ripping off Home Depots with receipt scams, he kept his word and sent her the drugs.

"She was found on the floor of her room on the morning of Feb. 11, 2014," her father told the crowd.

Investigators in North Carolina tracked the fatal dose back to Harrington. He was extradited from Philadelphia in September 2014, charged with second-degree murder. He faced up to 50 years in prison.

The Bruuns were asked to cooperate with the prosecution, but all the talk of punishment fell flat. Instead, they told investigators that they would help with the young man's defense if the case came to trial.

"Sean was not a criminal," Bruun said. "He was unwell,

and we knew Elisif, were she on this Earth, would feel exactly the same way we felt.”

On a blustery March day last year in Polk County, the prosecution relented. The high-profile case against Harrington had been thwarted by forgiveness. After 22 months in prison, he was released.

“The father of the victim contacted me and was not supportive of the prosecution in this case,” Polk County District Attorney Greg Newman told the judge.

Harrington now lives with his grandmother in Southport, N.C., working as a cook and living the dull life he needs while he learns to hang on to sobriety.

Peter Bruun started the New Day Campaign, a nonprofit aimed at challenging stigmas associated with mental illness and substance abuse. The purpose of Thursday’s event was to welcome New Day’s new executive director and also to thank Bruun, who is dialing back to focus on his own art.

Harrington and Peter Bruun traded letters from prison, but the two had never met until 4:30 p.m. Thursday, when Harrington limped through the front door. Mostly, they made small talk about his job and his broken foot.

Bruun saved his most important words for the podium, telling the hundred or so people that Harrington, the man who law enforcement said was responsible for his daughter's death, was a living example that compassion and understanding could change someone's life for the better.

Then Bruun told the crowd that Harrington was in the room.

"Please welcome my friend, and my daughter Elisif's dear friend, Sean Harrington."

After a gasp and then applause from the crowd, Harrington thanked the audience, unfolded some papers, and read to them something he wrote about how he missed Elisif. The evening, he said, felt like a gallery opening, and he wished she had been there for the clapping, not him.

The young man said he often wished he'd blown Elisif's money. Then maybe she'd still be alive. His parents watched, their eyes watering.

"I have to live with knowing that I played a part in the death of a person I genuinely cared about," Harrington said.

He said he couldn't comprehend the Bruun family's grace while he kicked heroin in prison.

"They gave me a second chance at a point where I didn't think I deserved one," he said. "This has given

me a purpose.”

The crowd rose and cheered Harrington again when he said that he had been sober for almost three years now.

He and Bruun embraced once again and talked about their futures. Bruun is embarking on an art project about love letters. Harrington wants to get back to Bar Harbor. He might get a tattoo of Maine’s Mount Desert Island, an abstract outline that’s also a reminder of someone he loved. The crowd thinned, and Harrington looked at her artworks some more. He had never seen any of them that summer in Maine.

“It’s kind of like I’m getting to know her a little more by looking at them,” he said.

Her self-portrait, the blues and purples in her hair, was so familiar to him, though. Her father said it was her final piece of art.

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