

"He Wanted You to Know"



On the day of Bryan's death, June 3, wife Bobbie and son Bryan keep a bedside vigil. The recent photo of father and son is on the bed. [Times photo: V. Jane Windsor]

by Sue Landry

Bryan Curtis started smoking at 13, never thinking that 20 years later it would kill him and leave a wife and children alone. In his last weeks, he set out with a message for young people.

ST. PETERSBURG -- Cigarette smoke hangs in the air in the room where Bryan Lee Curtis lies dying of lung cancer.

His head, bald from chemotherapy, lolls on a pillow. The bones of his cheeks and shoulders protrude under taut skin. His eyes are open, but he can no longer respond to his mother or his wife, Bobbie, who married him in a makeshift ceremony in this room three weeks ago after doctors said there was no hope.

In Bryan's emaciated hands, Bobbie has propped a photograph taken just two months ago. It shows a muscular and seemingly healthy Bryan holding his 2-year-old son, Bryan Jr. In the picture, he is 33. He turned 34 on May 10.

A pack of cigarettes and a lighter sit on a table near Bryan's bed in his mother's living room. Even though tobacco caused the cancer now eating through his lungs and liver, Bryan smoked until a week ago, when it became impossible.

Across the room, a 20-year-old nephew crushes out a cigarette in a large glass ashtray where the butt joins a dozen others. Bobbie Curtis says she'll try to stop after the funeral, but right now, it's just too difficult. Same for Bryan's mother, Louise Curtis.



Bryan Lee Curtis, then 33, holds son Bryan Jr., 2, in this March 29 photo. Curtis would die about two months later.

[Photo: Curtis Family]

"I just can't do it now," she says, although she hopes maybe she can after the funeral.

Bryan knew how hard it is to quit. But when he learned he would die because of his habit, he thought maybe he could persuade at least a few kids not to pick up that first cigarette. Maybe if they could see his sunken cheeks, how hard it was becoming to breathe, his shriveled body, it might scare them enough.

So a man whose life was otherwise unremarkable set out in the last few weeks of his life with a mission.

* * *

Bryan started when he was just 13, building up to more than two packs a day. He talked about quitting from time to time, but never seriously tried.

Plenty of time for that, he figured. Older people got cancer. Not people in their 30s, not people who worked in construction, as a roofer, as a mechanic.

He had no health insurance. But he was more worried about his mother, 57, who had smoked since she was 25.

"He would say, "Mom, don't worry about me. Worry about yourself. I'm healthy," " Louise Curtis remembers. "You think this would happen later, when you're 60 or 70 years old, not when you're his age."

He knew, only a few days after he went to the hospital on April 2 with severe abdominal pain, how wrong he had been. He had oat cell lung cancer that had spread to his liver. He probably had not had it long. Also called small cell lung cancer, it's an aggressive killer that usually claims the lives of its victims within a few months.



While it seems unusual to the Curtis family, Dr. Jeffrey Paonessa, Bryan's oncologist, said he is seeing more lung cancer in young adults.

Louise Curtis grieves for a son who told her, a smoker for 32 years, to worry about herself, not him.

[Times photo: V. Jane Windsor]

"We've seen lung cancer earlier and earlier because people are starting to smoke earlier and earlier," Paonessa said. Chemotherapy sometimes slows the process, but had little effect in Bryan's case, he said.

Bryan also knew, a few days after the diagnosis, that he wanted somehow to try to save at least one kid from the same fate. He sat down and talked with Bryan Jr. and his 9-year-old daughter, Amber, who already had been caught once with a cigarette. But he wanted to do more. Somehow, he had to get his story out.

When he still had some strength to leave the house, kids would stare.

"They'd come up and look at him because he looked so strange," Louise Curtis said. "He'd look at them and say, "This is what happens to you when you smoke.'"

"The kids would say, "Oh, man. I can't believe it,' " Louise Curtis said.

In the last few weeks, Bryan's mother has been the agent for his mission to accomplish some good with the tragedy. She has called newspapers and radio and television stations, seeking someone willing to tell her son's story, willing to help give him the one thing he wanted before he died. Bryan never got to tell his story to the public. He spoke for the last time an hour before a visit from a Times reporter and photographer.

"I'm too skinny. I can't fight anymore," he whispered to his mother at 9 a.m. June 3. He died that day at 11:56 a.m., just nine weeks after the diagnosis.

Bryan Lee Curtis Sr. was buried at Memorial Park Cemetery in St. Petersburg on June 8, a rare cloudy day that threatened rain.

At the funeral service at nearby Blount, Curry and Roel Funeral Home, Bryan's casket was open and 50 friends and relatives could see the devastating effects of the cancer.

Addiction is more powerful.

As the graveside ritual ended, a handful of relatives backed away from the gathering, pulled out packs of cigarettes and lit up.



After the graveside service June 8, this friend and a handful of relatives light up.

[Times photo: V. Jane Windsor]

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December 22, 2011 - The Australian government signed into law [an Act](#) requiring that after January 1, 2012 that the above photo of Bryan appear as a warning on both the front and rear of random cigarette packs. The warning reads: "SMOKING CAUSES LUNG CANCER." The warning also requires that smokers be told that, "Bryan was a teenager when he started smoking. Like many others he never thought it would kill him. He died aged 34, just 47 days after he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He wanted others to know - 'this is what happens to you when you smoke'."

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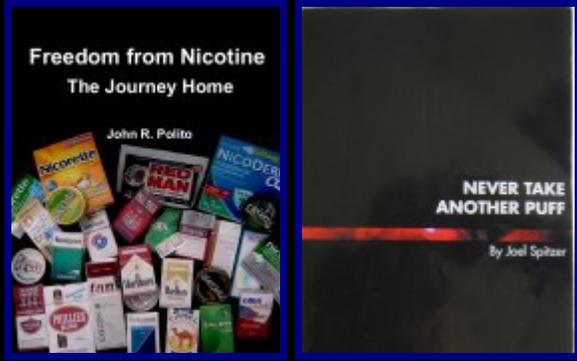
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