

"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.



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]

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

"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.

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

[Times photo: V. Jane Windsor]

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.

*Originally Published on June 15, 1999 in the St. Petersburg Times
Posted at www.WhyQuit.com on July 15, 1999*

Save Bryan's story or share it with others.



[PDF copy for saving or printing.](#)

[Need Help Quitting?](#)

[Youth Smoking Prevention](#)

Bryan's Story Updates



January 23, 2001 - "It's almost been 2 years now. We sit and watch home movies of us. His son is missing him too. Christmas was the worst. He had to go outside and show his dad what he got for Christmas. That really tore me up." *Bobbie Jo Curtis*

February 28, 2002 - Bobbie indicates that Bryan's mother was able to quit smoking following her son's death. Bryan Jr. will turn six on August 23, 2002, at which time he will have been fatherless for more than half his life.



May 24, 2005 - Bobbie Curtis and Bryan Jr. made an appearance on PAX TV's Cold Turkey II. Cold Turkey II was a U.S. smoking cessation reality show about 10 smokers quitting cold turkey. Bobbie shared Bryan's story with the group in the living room of the house in which they were staying. In this picture, Bryan Jr. was asked about his dad being gone. Members of the group were interviewed after Bobbie and Bryan Jr. departed and it was obvious that Bryan's story had had a profound impact upon them.

August 21, 2005 - Bryan, Jr.'s birthday is in two days, on August 23rd. He'll be nine. Bobbie wishes to thank all who, over the years, have taken the time to e-mail over 1,400 thank you letters. Although a bit too much for Bryan Jr. to absorb right now, she wants you to know that she has kept each of them.

January 26, 2007 - Bryan Jr. will be 11 years-old this year, 8 1/2 years without his dad. He is doing real good in school. Last semester he was honor roll. This semester he got 2 A's 2 B's and 2 C's. I think he's doing great in school. He goes back for try-outs for baseball again this year. His team won the championship last year.

July 28, 2009 - On March 19, 2008 a tree fell through the middle of the house and we lost everything, our home for the past 13 years. Without Bryan we're strugglin to make ends meet. Bryan Jr. will be 13 on August 23rd. He's going into the 7th grade and is an honor roll student. He wants me to put him into football. He's 5'2", weights 135lbs and looks just like his dad!



November 19, 2011 - Now in the 9th grade with dreams of going to medical school, Bryan Jr. and family are doing well. Bobbie having found Jim, Bryan, Jr. once again has a male role model in his, with no actual remaining memory of dad. As can be seen by the above family photos (click each to enlarge), Bryan, Jr. has taken up archery, Bobbie has found happiness, and her son delights in catching giant Florida fish.

[*E-mail Bobbie and Bryan Jr.*](#)

*Write: Bobbie & Bryan Lee Curtis, Jr.
8143 Penwood Drive
Port Richey, Florida 34668*

Empowering Links

[Meet Bryan's killer](#)

[Meet Noni, age 33](#)

[Meet Sean, age 19](#)

[Why was Kim's lung removed?](#)

[Watch our 64 free video quitting lessons](#)



Read John and Joel's free PDF quitting books

WhyQuit.Com



Motivation, Education and
Support for Cold Turkey
Nicotine Cessation

[WhyQuit.Com](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Link to Us](#) | [What's New?](#)

Last updated November 21, 2011 by John R. Polito