

IN SPORTS, C1
PICKELL, BAIER ARE STATE WRESTLING CHAMPS

IN CURRENTS, E1
LOVING HER NATURAL HAIR

IN SPORTS, C1
MAVS WIN MACNAUGHTON CUP

TODAY'S OBITUARIES

- Julie Mettler
- Robert Peterson
- Connie Selly
- Barbara Lane Turpin

HAVE YOU HEARD?

Boris Johnson's fiancée is pregnant

LONDON — The patter of tiny feet is coming to Downing Street. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson revealed Saturday that he and his girlfriend, Carrie Symonds, are engaged to be married and expecting a baby in the early summer. A wedding date wasn't announced. Johnson, 55, and Symonds, 31, made history as the first unmarried couple to openly live together at the British prime minister's official London residence when they moved in last year. Johnson has four children with his second wife, Marina Wheeler, a lawyer he married in 1993. They announced their separation in September 2018 and said they planned to divorce. Johnson has fathered at least one other child.

The Associated Press

LOTTERY

- Saturday's Daily 3 9-3-7
- Friday's Gopher 5 14-19-27-35-42
- Saturday's Powerball 24-44-46-50-51 and 13
- Saturday's Lotto America 19-30-32-35-36 and 2
- Saturday's Northstar Cash 2-11-19-21-25
- Friday's Mega Millions 2-3-14-41-64 and 17

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WEATHER, PAGE B4

Cloudy
 High in low 40s.
 Low in mid 20s



Mankato, Minnesota

JOY & PAIN



Jackson Forderer/

A handkerchief that belonged to Scott's mother — and scented with her perfume — soothed his fears about death. "How did you find her?" Scott asked Kris, after smelling the perfume.

Normally, the local articles and columns you read in The Free Press exist because they are new, timely or address current events on the minds of local residents. The term "news," after all, developed as a plural form of the word "new."

Today, however, we're bringing you a story that is none of those things; everything of consequence happened years ago. But it's a compelling story. And in this case, we think that's enough. Sharing the humanity of the people who live here is often what local newspapers do best.

In 2013, photographer Jackson Forderer (who was not yet employed by The Free Press) befriended Kris Bonander and Scott Radtke, a gay couple living in his hometown of Wells. When Scott was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer, Jackson asked the men for permission to photographically document Scott's illness and death. They agreed, and Jackson produced a series of haunting and beautiful photographs.

The photos sat unpublished for several years. About a year ago, now working for The Free Press, Jackson asked his editors whether



Jackson Forderer/

Kris (right) holds Scott's hand and helps him walk as the two took take a final look at the garden outside their Wells home.

Additional photos accompany the online story at mankatofreepress.com.

there was any way this collection could be published. So after mulling it over, we sent a writer to meet with Kris to explore his history, his relationship with Scott, and find out how his life has changed since his partner's death.

After listening to Kris' incredible and painful life story, and hearing

him talk about losing Scott, we decided our readers would want us to share it with them.

So in the D section of today's Free Press, known as Sunday Extra, you'll find a story that, while it has no "traditional" news value, is certainly worth your time. We hope you enjoy it.

Biden scores big win in S. Carolina

Strong support from black voters

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — Joe Biden scored a thundering victory in South Carolina's Democratic primary on Saturday, riding a wave of African American support and ending progressive rival Bernie Sanders' winning streak.

Biden's win came at a do-or-die moment in his 2020 bid as the moderate Democrat bounced back from underwhelming performances in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. The race now



The Associated Press

Former Vice President Joe Biden, accompanied by his wife Jill, speaks Saturday night in Columbia, S.C.

pivots immediately to a new phase when 14 "Super

Tuesday" states take the campaign nationwide early

next week.

"We are very much alive," Biden declared at an exuberant post-election rally. "For all of you who have been knocked down, counted out, left behind — this is your campaign."

Sanders claimed second place, though his loss gave a momentary respite to anxious establishment Democrats who feared that the self-described democratic socialist would finish February with four consecutive top finishes. Billionaire activist Tom Steyer, who was in a battle

Please see PRIMARY, Page A5

Medical facilities prepare for virus

State officials warn COVID-19 likely to arrive

By Brian Arola
 barola@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — The continued spread of a novel coronavirus has area hospitals, clinics, schools and public health departments preparing for potential cases in southern Minnesota.

Known as COVID-19, the disease has caused 84,124 confirmed cases and 2,867 deaths worldwide as of Friday. Minnesota hasn't had any confirmed cases yet, but state health officials on Thursday indicated COVID-19 is likely to hit the state.

Mankato-area health officials say they're on alert for COVID-19, while holding regular discussions on preparedness.

"What you're seeing across the country is people looking at their preparedness plans," said Eric Weller, coordinator of the South Central Healthcare Coalition. "This preparation is nothing new; it's something we've

Please see LOCAL, Page A5

U.S. has first death from virus

The Associated Press

The governor of Washington declared a state of emergency Saturday after a man died there of COVID-19, the first such reported death in the United States. More than 50 people in a nursing facility are sick and being tested for the virus.

Gov. Jay Inslee directed state agencies to use "all resources necessary" to prepare for and respond to the coronavirus outbreak. The declaration also allows the use of the Washington National Guard, if necessary. "We will continue to work toward a day where no one dies from this virus," the governor vowed.

Health officials in California, Oregon and Washington state are worried about

Please see NATIONAL, Page A5

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EBENEZER

The painful life of Kris Bonander

Photos by Jackson Forderer • Story by Robb Murray



Kris smokes a cigarette as a hospice worker tends to Scott. Friends would often come by to care for Scott, which allowed Kris to buy groceries or run errands.

A saga of heartbreak, survival and perseverance in small-town Minnesota

With his dogs by his side, Kris Bonander took three weary steps outside the front door of his humble home in Wells and lit a cigarette.

Inhale.

Exhale.

On the other side of that door his partner, Scott Radtke, lay curled up on a hospital bed clinging to life. After a seven-month war with cancer, he would be dead soon. And Kris knew, as he puffed on a cigarette in his corner of this quiet southern Minnesota town, that Scott most likely wouldn't live to see tomorrow.

As he stood outside for a brief respite, a hospice nurse stayed inside keeping Scott comfortable with morphine.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Kris was too tired to think. Too tired to do anything, really. For seven months he'd poured every ounce of energy into caring for Scott: cleaning up after him, cooking his favorite meals, fetching liquor from the store, acquiring cannabis to quell some of Scott's misery. It was nearly impossible for him to process the fact that, though he'd witnessed cancer destroy his partner with a slow and painful execution, the final moment soon would be upon him.

"I was out there for, like, 10 minutes," Kris recalled. "Then the nurse came back out and said, 'Kris, if you want to be with Scott, you better come back in right now because he's going.'"

Kris hurried in.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Scott weighed less than 100 pounds. His face was gaunt. Skin pale. Eyes closed. The nurse fluffed Scott's pillow and checked his pulse a final time. Then she left, leaving the two men alone.

Kris climbed into the hospital bed and just held him.

"He opened his eyes for just, like, five seconds," Kris recalled through tears. "They were just the saddest eyes. He closed them. He took a breath. Fifteen seconds later he took



Scott Radtke was born in Minnesota Lake. In the weeks and months leading up to his death, he spent much of his time in this chair.

another breath. He took another 15 seconds later. And then ... there was no more breath. And I just held him and said, 'Oh, honey, oh I'm gonna miss you.' I just laid on top of him and tears ran down my face. I just sobbed and held him."

For the final 20 minutes of his life, Scott Radtke lay in the warm embrace of the man he'd met in a gay bar 18 years before, the man he'd found and lost, the man he'd built a life and started a business

with in a rural town of 2,300 people, the man who'd taken care of him when he could no longer take care of himself. Scott ultimately left this world, in other words, the way any of us would want to: enveloped by the love of the person closest to him.

When Kris didn't know what else to do, he climbed out of Scott's bed and notified the nurse said his goodbyes. He stepped outside again.

Cracked a beer. Lit a joint.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Between sips of Budweiser and puffs of pot, Kris pondered the latest — and perhaps most devastating — setback of his life. Over the course of his 40-plus years, he has tried to kill himself multiple times. He was molested as a child and sexually assaulted as an adult. He's fled the clutches of trailer park bullies. He's been called faggot and homo more times than he can count. He started and quit college three times, drove to Alaska on a whim to try to forget about his life, and has been hospitalized several times with severe mental health issues. He's gotten so drunk and depressed that he stumbled outside on a cold winter night and landed in a snowbank — and laid there hoping no one would notice, that no one would save him, and that he'd die and finally escape his mental pain.

But this was different.

Even the most painful moments of his life didn't hurt the way this did.

In some ways, the journey Kris took before meeting Scott prepared him for getting his heart broken in a way that can never really be repaired. And make no mistake, Kris was and remains a broken man.

But this is a man who has endured more pain, it seems, than most people. And yet he smiles at and is friendly with everyone he meets. An openly gay man in a small, conservative Faribault County town, Kris has dozens of friends of all ages and, he says, almost no enemies. He's a former business owner, counsels friends with relationship problems and advises young people on dealing with life's big questions.

He's an unlikely character in a rural Minnesota town. And his story is anything but ordinary.

Inhale.

Exhale.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article contains mature subject matter and language. It is included to fully tell the subject's story with appropriate context and honesty.



Kris spent the night before the funeral making a floral topiary and forgot to write a eulogy. When the time came, he simply "spoke from the heart."

"The pain will be easier as time goes by, even though it sounds cliché."

Continued from Page D3

parade we did and that's when we closed the store. We just said this is it.

"It was a bigot asshole that Scott knew all his life and went to school with. But it took us back to years before that and we thought, 'Oh my god, the town really hasn't changed.' We were accepted at the end, but the first years we were just referred to as the faggots or the queers. I'd hear that a lot. Especially in the liquor store. Then there were the good church-going people who said they were praying for us because we were going to burn in hell because we were homosexuals unless we repent and save our souls. And some people would say, 'Don't touch me, I'll get AIDS.'"

Kris said he was sexually assaulted three times in Wells. He reported none of the assaults to the police.

Around 2003 Kris said a man started following him into tavern restrooms saying things such as, "Your ass is gonna be mine."

"I was outside having a cigarette, near the VFW, I had my back turned and he came up behind me, slammed me against the wall, grabbed my crotch and said 'It's not gonna happen this time, but next time this is mine.'"

Kris said another man did "pretty much the same thing." He'd follow Kris to the gas station and other places, and constantly walk by and "imply he'd get me someday."

But the worst incident came later when another guy attacked him.

"He'd always talk sexually with me," Kris recalled. "He came down, was buying me shots, being nice, his girlfriend had just left him. The bar closed and I was walking home. Well, he was waiting for me. He pulled me into the dark."

Kris said the man forced him to perform sex acts until he fought back and escaped. Like he did years earlier at his bus stop, Kris ran like the wind to get home. The guy didn't follow him.

The end

Scott's health began to decline when he started having seizures and night terrors. He sought medical attention and even collapsed at a clinic in Mankato. But after an exam, doctors sent him home with a diagnosis of a bleeding ulcer. In hindsight, Kris said he believes Scott was in the early stages of the pancreatic cancer that would, seven months later, take his life.

When he didn't get better, they sought the advice of a different medical team. And after seven trips and a battery of tests, Scott got the grim news: He had a tumor on his pancreas. Stage 4. And the prognosis was bleak.

Ideally, they'd have pursued an aggressive treatment regimen that included chemotherapy



Kris walks through downtown Wells on his way to the VFW to see his friends on meat raffle night.



Kris Bonander talks to close friend Erin Eckwright while smoking behind the VFW in Wells.



Kris lounges with his dogs Gracie (right) and Lyla on the front steps of his house.

and radiation. But they couldn't. Kris said the original abdominal pain Scott was having wasn't an ulcer at all; it was a pancreatic tumor blood vessel bursting. And when it healed, the web-like way in which it covered the tumor meant any attempt at radiation would likely burst a vessel again, which would mean excruciating pain for Scott, and no progress would be made on shrinking the tumor.

Having no other options, Kris and Scott decided to go home and start Scott on hospice care.

If they'd been able to do chemotherapy and radiation, Kris said, doctors estimated Scott's life expectancy at six months. Without it, three months.

"Hospice came in, we took out the couch and set

up a hospice bed," Kris said. "We had friends to make sure we never ran out of pot and liquor. Scott was on morphine, so we kept him comfortably numb. We got a Bullet and made him all these energy fruit drinks, sometimes with a shot of Baileys. I kept him alive for seven months at home smoking pot, making his cocktails and his smoothies, and making whatever extravagant meal that he'd take three bites out of. He ran me ragged. It was a journey."

Two days before Scott died, he was shutting down rapidly. A hospice nurse had been coming over a couple of times a day to check on him.

The night before he died, Kris refused to leave his side.

"I slept on a sleeping bag

on the floor next to him," he said, "very intentionally uncomfortable so I'd wake up if he needed me."

Scott Edward Radtke died June 29, 2013, in his home. He was 54.

Irish wake

Kris knew a lot of people were following and paying attention to Scott's health. Many knew the end was near, and Kris knew he had to tell people.

He called a few of his friends and asked them to spread the news. He called the bar and told them what had happened.

And soon, within an hour, Kris' home was flooded with people all wanting to say goodbye to Scott and give Kris a hug.

"Everyone was in the house," he said. "It was like an Irish wake. People were freaking out. It was such an insanely bizarre moment."

Scott's body, of course, was still there. The directors of the Wells funeral home they'd arranged with were busy and couldn't make it to Kris' home until after dark. But when they did, Kris had to say his final goodbye.

"I held him until I had to step back when they closed the door," he said. "And I just stood there. And really, for the first time, I just felt so, so alone and lost. But I

of weird and prejudiced. And then after they got to know him, everything was just fine. ... I think (Kris' personality) helped considerably. All they had to do was get to know him a little bit, and then it seems like everything got a lot better."

That's Kris. His laugh, his kindness and his willingness to listen and share make him the kind of person who is hard to dislike.

"I don't think he has a mean bone in his body," said Erin Eckwright, another of his many friends. "I've never heard him say a negative thing about anybody."

Erin echoed Marcia's sentiment about Wells and how it has embraced Kris.

"There's still a few that aren't comfortable around him but, generally, most people like him," she said. "The town is getting better with the whole idea. They're doing much better. It's an accepting, welcoming community."

Despite the name-calling and back-alley sexual assaults of years ago, Kris agreed the climate in Wells has gotten better, especially among the younger folks. He said a lot of younger people in town buy him beers, talk to him about their problems and aren't afraid they'll contract AIDS if they touch him.

He feels a special connection with members of that generation who are struggling with mental health issues.

"They know I can understand what they're going through," he said. "I understand depression. I help them talk through their problems. Mental health is a huge issue down here that a lot of people aren't aware of. There have been times where I've felt like I don't want to go on, so I understand when they tell me they're struggling. The pain will be easier as time goes by, even though it sounds cliché. As days go by, weeks go by — and don't ever forget them — but holding on to the good times instead of the tragic way that it may have happened, that's the healing process, to be able to continue on with life. I try to share that, and I think that's one of my proudest things. That and being open about my experience about being gay and how it was back in the '80s."

"It gives me the strength not to want to kill myself because I know there's a reason why I'm here and that I've survived so many attempts," he said.

"I know that is why I have survived my journey. That's why I feel I'm still here. My time hasn't been up. It wasn't up when I was 10 years old and being cut by a shard of glass, or going to freeze to death in a snowbank, or hoping that this is 10 more pills than I need to end this hell, and surviving through every-

thing."

also had a sense of peace. They slid him in the back of the hearse and I said, 'Bye, I love you, I miss you.'"

Kris' friends had started a bonfire. They smoked pot. Drank punch.

"And we all just kind of looked at each other and cried," he said.

Evening turned into morning. Kris hadn't slept all night. The sun came up and the only people left were Kris and his friend Tracy. They went to Wildcats for breakfast, chain smoked cigarettes and drove to the cemetery.

Why?

"We didn't know what else to do," he said. "I was so physically exhausted, I was delirious. I was seeing things. I was so drained and so tired. I wandered around and read tombstones."

Tracy dropped him off and, for the first time, Kris was alone in the house he'd shared with Scott.

Standing in his front doorway, he stared across the room to the hospice bed where Scott's body drew its final breath. There would be no more meals to make for him. No more changing dirty sheets. No more conversations. No more feeling Scott's body in his arms.

In the silence, Kris walked over and climbed into that bed. He wept. Then he fell asleep for an eternity.

Epilogue

These days, Kris works as a cook at the American Legion in Wells. Talking about Scott's death is still hard for him, but he's managed to move on and carve out a corner of happiness in a town that, at one time, he had every reason to walk away from.

Marcia Schroeder, a friend of Kris' since he arrived in town, said people are aware of Kris' struggles. They're also aware how much he's had to deal with in Wells.

"At first it wasn't so great here," Marcia said. "Some people were being kind