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IN SPORTS, C1 PICKELL, BAIER ARE STATE WRESTLING CHAMPS

IN CURRENTS, E1 **LOVING HER** NATURAL HAIR

IN SPORTS, C1 **MAVS WIN MACNAUGTON CUP**

Today's BITUARIES

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

HAVE YOU HEARD?

Boris Johnson's fiancee 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 vear.

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

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Cloudy





Mankato, Minnesota

JOY & PAIN



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.

ormally, 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The photos sat unpublished for several years.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 door-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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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

Tith 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.

breath. Fifteen seconds later he took

"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



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

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article contains

mature subject matter

included to fully tell the

and language. It is

subject's story with

appropriate context

and honesty.

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 he'd 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.

Continued on Page D2

"I sat in a fetal position for three hours, couldn't move, couldn't do anything. I was totally lost. Nothing in my soul. I was like an empty shell."

Continued from Page D1

Gaslit and on the run

Kris Bonander was born in Minneapolis the son of a restaurant owner. He doesn't remember much about the place, called The Gaslight, but he remembers his parents were happy. He also remembers how urban progress triggered The Gaslight's demise.

When Interstate 35 was built, its route cut right through the restaurant's parking lot, and that hurt business. Facing bankruptcy and fearing bill collectors, the family pulled Kris out of elementary school — where he struggled with language but excelled in math — and fled.

Their first stop was a spot on the Wisconsin side of the St. Croix River near St. Croix Falls. That's where they'd parked their 14-foot camper for the summer. Come fall they opted to return to the Twin Cities area so Kris, an only child, could attend school. After just a few months in the metro area, however, the family hauled its mobile home to Montrose, a small town west of Minneapolis. It's where Kris got his first taste of bullying.

"I was constantly hiding," he said. "I was little. New. I wasn't into watching TV. I was either playing with Legos or outside. I was always outside, either with a friend or by myself. And I felt safer hanging out with girls."

He remembers getting off the school in the afternoon and immediately sprinting. He had to. Not running meant a certain beating by kids who spotted a new — and oddly different — kid who made a perfect

In a fight-or-flight situation where he was badly outnumbered, Kris wisely chose flight.

Pain

When Kris was 9, he'd agreed to do babysitting for a young neighbor couple. It went fine at first, but eventually things got ... weird. And dangerous. And illegal. Kris says the couple started engaging in sexual behavior in front of him and gave him food and alcohol to coax him into joining them.

"They'd say, 'Doesn't this feel good? Life is all about pleasuring and being pleasured.' They taught me that my body is beautiful and that I should never be ashamed of my body," he recalled. "I look back now and I know I was being groomed for child pornography."

Kris never told anyone about this. He said his mind struggled privately to make some sense of it. And he believes that inner struggle triggered a cycle of self-abuse.

"When I was 10 years old, there was a storm window on the floor and it'd broken," he said. "I picked up the glass and I accidentally sliced myself with it, and it gave me a euphoric feeling of release from all the lear and trustration and pain I was going through. ... I just focused on that blood and that pain, such a great pain and sense of relief from inner tension. That was when I began to cut and became a cutter. It just took all the other pain away. It was like a drug high. That was probably the first incident. There should have been an 'aha' moment that there's something else going on with me than just the normal kid that wants to kick the ball around the park."

He pulls his shirt sleeve up to reveal his forearm.

"This scar right here had 27 stitches in it." He then points to others. "This one was with a dull scissors. This one was with a razor blade. I went all the way up the arm and I didn't hit a single vein."

Kris eventually got out of Montrose when his family moved to Buffalo and then to Watertown. And when he finally graduated from high school in 1979, he enrolled at St. Cloud Business College. He was just

He saw one semester of success but crashed during the second.

"I flunked out," he said. "One night I realized I was going to go through this 2½-year program and then I'd be carrying a briefcase for the rest of my life by the age of 20. I totally freaked out and that was my first breakdown where I wanted to die."

So one night, while drinking too many glasses of whisky and thinking too hard about what he'd seen and done, Kris ingested a fist full of pills, walked out into the winter night and fell into a snowbank. He stayed there, silent and still, wet tears cold on his face, hoping no one would find him until it was too late.

But that wouldn't happen.

A friend walked outside, saw Kris in the snow and pulled him inside the apartment they shared.

"That was the last day I went to school there," he said. "I went back the next day to get my stuff and I told them I was quitting this f- — school. ... I flunked out of filing, which I think is the best humor for me. I flunked out of filing. The class met at 7:15 on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I was never there and I was going to miss a midterm and I was freaking out and I was just like, 'I want this over with, I just want to die."

With more time on his hands, he focused on work but struggled to hold down a realworld, full-time job. (During the course of his life, Kris says his mental illness has prevented him from being able to hold a full-time job for more than a few months.



In this photo, taken just days before Scott died, Kris helps him get out of his chair to go to the bathroom. Scott weighed just 93 pounds when he died June 29, 2013. They'd planned an Aug. 1 wedding in their backyard.



Scott died shortly after 2 p.m. June 26, 2013. Kris places his hand on Scott's body, saying his final goodbye before the body was wheeled into the hearse.



Diane Dulas comforts Kris.

He estimates that, between 1977 and 1996, he had more than 30 jobs. "I discovered eventually that I couldn't work a 9-5 job or a full-time job. Way too difficult for myself mentally. Way too much pressure for me to wake up to," he said. "I've thought about this a lot ... but I haven't really talked about it.")

In the fall of 1980 Kris next tried cooking school. He's always had a knack for the culinary arts. Loves working in a kitchen. But he'd failed to fully vanquish the demons of self-loathing he'd been wrestling, and they came for him.

Feeling he'd soon be ready to take his

own life again, Kris began stockpiling pills. Pain meds, speed — whatever he could get his hands on. When he'd amassed a collection he thought was potent enough to kill him, he waited for the right moment. Finally with friends at a bar one night, his nerve — marinated in alcohol — steeled

enough for him to attempt suicide. He told his friends he was "just going outside to chill," but what he really did was get into his car and swallow 20-30 pills. It was his second attempt at taking his own life in six months. His friends inside the bar, worried and wondering why he'd been gone so long, checked on him

and found him unconscious inside his car. Kris woke up in a hospital bed, and he'd remain in a hospital for several months while his mental state stabilized. Eventually it did. Feeling better, Kris left the hospital and tried to start fresh. He moved to Minneapolis and started dating a woman. Things went OK with her ... until they

didn't. "She broke up with me and told me I was gay," he said. "And, well, I was. She said she knew I was gay because I wasn't sexually interested in her. I wasn't comfortable feeling intimate with anybody. Ever since (the babysitting situation) kind of freaked me out, I never got that intimate with

anybody. He'd had a few low-level romantic encounters with women in his life but said they failed to elicit any true feelings. In fact, he said his friendships with men had always felt stronger. So while this moment with her ended their relationship, it was the kick-start he needed to start being true to who he was.

In the fall of 1984 Kris enrolled at St. Cloud State University and began exploring. And it didn't take him long to find someone willing to be his first boyfriend. But while Kris was finally being honest about his sexuality, his mental illness refused to stop torturing him.

Feeling suicidal again, he called friends for help and they drove him to the Willmar State Hospital where he checked himself in for another two-month mental health commitment. By the time he checked in,

he said he was near a mental breakdown. "I sat in a fetal position for three hours,



Scott hated hospital beds. But the threat of needing a catheter convinced him to use it. He only slept in it for two days before he died.

couldn't move, couldn't do anything," he said. "I was totally lost. Nothing in my soul. I was like an empty shell. I just wanted this whole f- — life to be over."

Kris left Willmar in better spirits and moved back to Minneapolis. And while he still struggled to hold a steady job and his depression didn't disappear, his suicidal thoughts subsided slightly. He was getting by, getting involved in a few casual romantic relationships and enjoying the city culture.

Then, in April 1995, while sitting at the Gay 90's bar pondering what movie he'd see that day, Scott Radtke walked through the door. And Kris' life would never be the

Scott, then not

"I remember I met him on the second Monday of April," Kris says, eyes bright. He was paging through City Pages and sipping a bloody mary when their eyes met. Scott was having a drink after work with friends. Kris was on his day off from his job as a waiter.

"After a couple bloody marys, he sent me a drink," Kris recalled. "We chatted a little bit by the jukebox."

Kris never made it to that movie. "We ended up that night together," he said. "I thought it was going to be a onenight stand. Ended up being 18 years." Sort of.

Their first actual date was, appropriately, a movie. They took in the midnight showing of "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" at the Uptown Theatre. Afterward they hit up a Mexican restaurant that stayed open until 3 a.m.

"We ate tacos and had a little romance going on," he said.

Nine months later, almost as quickly as it began, Kris ended it — temporarily when he ran away to Alaska. (In retrospect, he said, this wasn't all that surprising. While he was happy with Scott, he also was entering another mental spiral.) A friend invited Kris to join him on a temporary work trip to "the last frontier."

"Mania, bipolar, depression. It all played into this," he said.

Kris convinced himself he needed this trip to save his life. He told his mother he was on the verge of another breakdown. and that he either needed to go to Alaska or check himself back into a mental hospital. And even though that friend backed out, Kris decided to go.

Yet instead of buying a round-trip bus ticket (which was the original plan), he bought something else.

"One-way ticket from Minneapolis to Seattle. Big suicide fantasy," he said. "Was just going to hop off the Greyhound in some nice little town, have lunch. I had my camera, I was taking photos. I'd hop off at some little Idaho cafe and not get back on the bus. I would wander out into the middle of nowhere, maybe get like a little bottle of booze. Just pop pills and watch the sunset and let the coyotes eat me. That was my fantasy going to Alaska when I left ... Things took a different turn."

He never got off the bus in any Idaho town, never stopped at any cafe, never let the coyotes eat him. He stayed on the bus until Seattle, where he met a 23-year-old drag queen who introduced him to a wide circle of people who made Kris feel like he belonged. He couch-hopped for a few days, partied, made some lifelong friends. But eventually Kris decided he needed to stick to the original plan of finding work on a fishing boat in Alaska — the kind of work that is dangerous but nets a tidy paycheck. On a ferry boat to Ketchikan, however, he met a young man who warned him against fishing boats.

"This guy said, 'Don't work on the fishing boats, man. They've got a sordid history of taking on young men, abusing them at sea and dumping them overboard," Kris said. "He said 'Just go to the hotel. You've got a resume. They'll hire you."

That young man was right. Kris parlayed his resume, which featured waiter experience from the Marquette Hotel and Jolliet House in Minneapolis, into a job as the banquet captain in one of the hotels. And



some of his misery.

the new challenge gave him something to

"I showed them how to fold napkins, how to do fan folds, things like that. I upscaled how they did the banquets. The wait staff hated me for the first month, but then loved it. I left a little mark, but it took

He stayed roughly three months and was ready to come home. Having squirreled away a little money, he bought an old pickup, drove it onto a ferry boat in Ketchikan and off again a few hours later in British Columbia. He had no idea how to get home and didn't have a map. He simply started driving, taking any back road heading east or south.

It took him nine days. He budgeted a spartan \$1.25 for food each day and slept in the truck cab. When he finally arrived at his mom's house in north Minneapolis, he weighed 134 pounds. Before he'd left for Alaska, he'd weighed 171.

"My friends thought I went to Alaska to die of AIDS because I'd lost so much

Back in Minnesota, he started thinking about Scott again, and lamented they'd lost contact. He'd heard through mutual friends Scott's mom had died, and that Scott's own struggles with drug and alcohol addiction led him to a residential rehabilitation program. But not being able to reconnect with Scott right away may have been for the best. Because unlike when the two had first met, Kris was not in a good place mentally.

Spiraling again, Kris did what he knew was the best thing for him: He called Hennepin County Medical Center and asked to commit himself. "I packed a bag, grabbed my favorite sweatshirt and toothbrush, then walked to the hospital. Probably a 25-block walk. Checked myself in. I

He stayed 10 days before being transferred to a facility run by Catholic Charities in downtown Minneapolis where he lived with, in his words, "another crazy person." And then, like he'd done many times, he began group therapy and started down the long road to building something close to a normal life. He spent seven months there establishing routines, hold-

ing down jobs, taking one day at a time. And then one Sunday morning at All God's Children Community Church in Minneapolis — after he'd picked up a new outfit at a charity that provides free clothing to the indigent — he saw him.

Scott, again

"I was on the steps having a cigarette," Kris recalled, the corners of his mouth curling upward. "He was up the steps. I looked up and I saw him. Our eyes met ... After being lost, me in the mental hospital, him being sober and getting back on his feet, of all places, we found each other again at church. He's a recovering Catholic, and I was raised with no religion at all. But it was the gay church, and it was kind of like Christian cruising, you know who's going to hook up with who."

On the church steps that day they made plans to meet at a coffee shop a week later. And after one meeting, they were a couple

Soon, they were making plans to move to Wells where Scott and his sister shared a farm site. Scott and Kris, after living together in Minneapolis for a while, decided to start spending more and more time at the Wells residence, and eventually they moved there. Scott continued to work as a nurse in Minneapolis while Kris stayed in Wells, tending to the garden and teaching himself to restore furniture.

They also became avid antique collectors, which led to them opening a business in downtown Wells

"One day I drove down, I was in town, saw that the food co-op building was closed and was for sale," he recalled. "I thought the building was cool and thought maybe we could open an antique store."

They'd been selling antiques already via consignment at a Minneapolis shop. But this was a chance for the two of them to

take a life adventure together. The property was listed at \$27,000. Kris and Scott offered \$22,000 and were soon the owners of a business called Antiques on Broadway.

Kris got to work right away. "I tore down the plastic walls and the false ceiling. I was down here renovating it by myself pretty much because Scott was working overtime to make extra money for the store.

Business was good that first year and things looked like maybe they'd be able to make a go of it. And then ...

"9/11 happened," Kris said. "And everything changed." He doesn't have any market research or analysis to back up his theory, but Kris said the 9/11 terror attacks put every-

one on edge to a degree that purchasing

antiques wasn't on anyone's radar. Global

uncertainty, higher gas prices — it all produced a situation not conducive to folks traveling to a southern Minnesota town to browse Depression glass and dry sinks. "People were buying guns now, buying generators," he said. And they stopped

buying antiques. At least in Wells. The store stayed open until 2007, but Kris said it only lasted for as long as it did

because Scott was taking on extra hours to subsidize it. "I still had my regulars, people who are always looking for lamps or looking for other certain things," he said. "But busi-

ness really went down.' The fact Scott worked extra hours to keep the lights on at Antiques on Broadway is no surprise. In fact, if you want to know what kind of guy Scott was, look at the bookshelf in Kris' home. There's an urn there with the ashes of a man Kris has never met. It's there because of an act of

humanity by Scott. Scott, who worked as a hospice nurse, got a call one day from the coroner's office.

"A friend he'd cared for died of AIDS. No one in his family would claim him," Kris said. "Scott was the only person the coroner could get ahold of to pick up the ashes. Scott knew his family had rejected him."

Kris said Scott was the kind of person who couldn't look away or reject someone who was being true to themselves. And he wasn't going to simply let a man's remains go unclaimed. They'd witnessed enough "morality-based" rejection handed down to people they cared about. Scott made sure this man didn't have to endure the final indignity of having no one claim his cremains.

Fags and homos

Kris is sometimes asked when he "de-

cided" to be gay. "I think that's the stupidest thing

anybody asks me," he said, exasperated. "There's never a time that I thought I was straight. I've never wanted to pick up a gun and go kill a deer. Never wanted to go stomp on frogs to see the blood squirt. I felt safe hanging out with the girls."

As a kid, he couldn't really explain what he felt. He just knew he was different. As an adult, though, living as a gay man can be dangerous if you're surrounded by people who don't accept you. Kris said that when he first moved to

Wells and busied himself by remodeling the antique store, he'd sometimes go to a bar downtown for a beer after a long day of painting walls and refurbishing floors. He recalled one night it was 10 p.m. and he was eating a pizza and drinking a Budweiser when a girl approached him.

"She said, 'Oooh, fresh meat in town," Kris said. "She sent me a drink and came over. And she said, 'Got a girlfriend?' And I said, 'Not exactly, but I am with someone.' 'Oh, what's her name?' 'Scott.' 'What?!' 'I'm gay,' I said. I outed myself.

"I outed myself in front of 10 people at the bar and I didn't know anybody," he added. "I can't live in a town and be in the closet because that's not who I am."

He didn't realize it at the time, but outing himself in that way started a cascade of incidents in the Wells area. And they weren't pretty.

Walking to a restaurant, people driving past would call him "faggot" or "queer." A few times in a Wells tavern, the phrase "queers are here for beers" was uttered within their earshot. And then there was the parade incident.

"Scott and I did the (Festag) parade (in Minnesota Lake) with my mom where we threw Mardi Gras beads," he said. "One parade, there was this asshole guy and a couple of his drunk buddies yelling out, 'Faggots! Faggots!' That was the last

Continued on Page D4



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 cliche."

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.

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.

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

"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.

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

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

stones."
Tracy dropped him off and, for the first time, Kris was alone in the house he'd

around and read tomb-

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 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.

"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

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 cliche. 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

"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.

open about my experience

about being gay and how it

was back in the '80s.

"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 everything."