

over this,” she said. “That day a large part of me died with him.”

Roxy was at lunch when she heard. “I spent the rest of the afternoon crying,” she said. “On a professional level, life is tough enough ... Why would you set yourself up for that [by giving him a chance]?”

But all people struggle. Their ability to succeed often depends on others’ ability to accept. “You could ask me, ‘Would you do it again?’ You bet. Because you’re always hoping for that one chance that you’re going to make a difference,” Roxy said.

Brian was in Boston, about to head back to Maine after visiting his son, when he learned his friend was dead. He cried the whole bus ride back. That week he skipped work, and drank and drank.

“That was my best friend in the world. I didn’t know how to take it, deal with it. I’ll never have another friend in my life, not like Chicken,” he said.

I found out about Garrett’s death on Facebook. At the time, I was in the passenger seat on a long drive through Wyoming. The big sky above Route 90 was still light, but the sun had set enough to make all the fields, stretching to the horizon, dark. I cried for Garrett and his family, shocked by the news but not by the death, as my car hurtled through the pause before full night.

Traci held an open-casket memorial service, so Garrett’s friends could see what an overdose looked like. He likely had been dead about a day before he was found, and his face was puffy. She dressed him in the shirt he had worn to his job interview at Huttig.

Afterward, Traci cremated her son. She kept the brass box full of his ashes on her hope chest, while she had a special stand built, and placed Garrett’s picture on the loveseat in the living room. She had never seen her dog, Kanisha, looking at pictures before, but she caught her staring at the image of Garrett.

The toxicology report held no surprises. It found high levels of opiates — most likely heroin — in Garrett’s system. His death was accidental, and it occurred because of “acute and chronic abuse of opiates.”

Any anger Traci had was overridden by unbelievable sadness. “I’m still trying

to figure out how to live without him,” she said two weeks after his death. “Just one foot in front of the other. It’s not even day by day.”

I read back over all my interviews with Garrett, looking for clues as to what went wrong. What I found were missed connections, general unawareness, systems set to autopilot and a young man perpetually caught in tight spaces. Likely the only thing that could have saved Garrett was the right kind of treatment, that addressed all his needs, in an environment where he could heal.

He got locked rooms with no clock.

I wrestled with the fact that I, too, didn’t save him. It was a natural reaction, I think, to wonder whether I could have done more. Of course I — we — could have done more. It’s just we didn’t know until it was too late.

Days after Garrett’s funeral, I read Traci a quote from when her son was at Mountain View in 2013. I had asked him what he wanted to tell his mom, and he said, “I love you, Mom. Sorry for everything that I’ve done. I don’t know, I’m trying to change my life really for you. I mean, for me, obviously, but I just want you to finally have something to be proud of me for. I’m just sorry for everything.”

Traci exhaled. “I’m proud of him anyway. Not of his choices but of him as a person,” she said. “We were best friends.”



ERIN RHODA | BDN
Garrett Brown, then 20, pictured in downtown Augusta on the riverfront on Oct. 2, 2014.

The BDN would like to thank Garrett for entrusting his story to us, and his family for opening up their lives. To learn more about Garrett’s story, visit bdn.to/garrett.

The family is encouraging people to donate in Garrett Brown’s name to Day One, which serves youth with substance use disorders from across the state. It’s the only residential treatment center in Maine that exclusively serves people 18 and younger, and the only substance use treatment provider for those committed to the youth development center. Day One also provides outpatient services, homeless youth services and prevention programs to Maine adolescents and young adults. Donate by mailing a check to Day One, 525 Main St., South Portland, ME 04106.

Resources:

If you or a loved one is struggling with addiction, resources are available. Contact one of the following Maine resources for help:

Department of Health & Human Services

Statewide Crisis Hotline: 1-888-568-1112

2-1-1 Maine Inc.

1-877-463-6207 211 TTY: 211

Website: 211maine.org

National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) Maine

1-800-464-5767

Website: namimaine.org

Email: helpline@namimaine.org

Department of Health & Human Services

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services

1-800-499-0027 287-8900 TTY: Maine Relay 711

Website: maineosa.org

Email: osa.ircosa@maine.gov

Poison Control Center

1-800-222-1222 TTY: Maine Relay 711