

The car thief who killed Pastor Joe

Benjamin Bleinis was a dope-sick crook when he slammed a stolen SUV into a car driven by pastor Joseph Chan. Susan Lazaruk tells of a young man who promises to clean up his life

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The Province
Tuesday, October 04, 2005*

A split-second and two lives collided at a Richmond intersection on the Easter long weekend.

The accident left a beloved church pastor dead and a car thief high on crack and heroin facing seven years in a federal jail.

And it shattered the lives of both men's parents, who agreed reluctantly to speak to The Province in the hope it can prevent similar tragedies.

The remorseful thief, who's made a vow to turn his life around, gave the same reason for speaking to RCMP Cpl. Tim Shields. The officer, who leads a car theft task force, interviewed Benjamin Bleinis in prison. That interview, recounted in part for this story, is being made public here for the first time.

"I don't know if what I said will help somebody," says Bleinis. "But I hope it does, you know what I mean, I really do."

March 28, Easter Monday, capped a busy, happy, hopeful time for Joseph Chan.

Pastor Joe, as he was known to the youth group he had been leading for a year at North Vancouver's North West Vancouver Alliance Church, had just celebrated the most spiritually significant day on the Christian calendar, Easter Sunday.

It was a more auspicious occasion than usual. Joseph had that day been installed as a part-time assistant pastor, the first permanent position of his career as a minister for the evangelical denomination since he decided to devote his life to helping others a decade earlier. He had gone for a hike the day before, around which he fit in time to write the sermon he delivered Easter Sunday as guest pastor at a sister church. Joseph, a single 32-year-old, spent Sunday evening at the home of friends from Winnipeg, the hometown he'd left two years earlier.

With Easter over, Joseph was gearing up for another busy period -- exams for university student musicians. Accompanying them allowed Joseph to indulge his other love and calling -- playing the piano, which supplemented his modest part-time pastor's income.

"He was in a good mood and was very excited about what was going on on the weekend," says his older brother, Joshua Chan. "He had a lot on the go at the time."

Lightening his mood even more was the good news from his mother in Winnipeg on the Thursday before Good Friday about the lymphoma cancer that had nearly killed his father, Stephen Chan, only three months earlier.

"He's happy because I phone him (and tell him), 'Daddy don't have to do chemo anymore,'" says his mother, Christina Chan. "It was the last time I talked to him."

Joseph had driven that Easter Monday, his day off, from his North Vancouver apartment to his old neighbourhood of Richmond, perhaps to visit friends or run errands for the spring break barbecue for church youth the next day.

Joseph stopped for his last meal, a Double Whopper Combo, at the Burger King and headed his Mazda Protege north on Garden City Road. He had the right of way crossing Bennett Road, which has stop signs for east-west traffic.

Pastor Joe wouldn't have known what hit him when his car was T-boned and flipped into the front yard of a condo by the SUV driven by Benjamin Bleinis.

After spending Easter Sunday high on heroin, Benjamin Bleinis woke up Monday "sometime after 12," dope-sick and broke.

All the 23-year-old was thinking about was how he was going to get that next hit to ease the jitters, panic, nausea, chills and sweating that plague junkies when they come down.

Bleinis hopped into the 2003 Land Rover Freelander SUV he had stolen from a kindly shop owner. He had posed as an interested customer, asked to use her washroom and then took a detour into a back room to rifle through her jacket until he found her car keys.

"I came back to her, continued on with the conversation, you know, pretended I was interested, then I left and the key chain had a remote alarm on it and so I just walked along the parking lot, pushing the button until beep-beep, you know, there it is and there I was. I went in."

He had been treating the luxury vehicle as his own for a week before the crash and early that afternoon he was using it for one thing.

"I drove around looking for ways to make some money so I could get some dope."

Bleinis spotted some cigarettes, 36 cartons in all, outside a store and managed to lift them without incident, fencing them for cash before calling up the dope man. "I bought some heroin, some crack, smoked that. In the car. Then I drove away after I smoked it."

It wasn't long before he spotted an unmarked police car in the rear-view mirror.

Bleinis, who has been in trouble with police over several years, panicked.

"I got scared and I pushed on the gas and I was trying to get away and they followed me."

(An internal RCMP review concluded that the unmarked police car "did not engage in a hazardous pursuit and was not a contributing factor to the crash," says Richmond Cpl. Peter Thiessen.)

"My mind was racing at the time. I was so high, all I was thinking about was how was I going to get away from this guy, right.

"I wasn't thinking properly, my mind was just clouded up in dope, the crack just made my mind race, right. And I, uh, I, uh, ran a stop sign and, uh, I hit another car." He squeezes his eyes shut at the memory.

"I didn't even see the stop sign I was so high on drugs that I didn't see the stop sign. Or remember seeing it, right. I just remember wanting to cross that street and get to the other side, right. And, unfortunately, I hit another vehicle and somebody ended up dying.

"I remember a big hit. It was so fast. I didn't even know what I hit. And I remember the airbags coming out and I think the airbags saved my life."

Bleinis fled on foot, and police found him a half-hour later, hiding behind a townhouse.

"That's the messed-up part again, right. I was so high all I wanted to do was keep getting away. I didn't think, oh, what about this person or that person until I got arrested and the police told me, 'You're under arrest and somebody died,' and I was like, 'No, no, I can't believe this is happening, I can't believe this is happening to me. Is he OK?' Like I didn't believe it at first, you know."

Around the time of the accident, Benjamin's father, Roman Bleinis, was returning from a trip to the U.S. with Benjamin's stepmother and half-sister. He heard about the fatal crash in Richmond on the car radio. "I felt, in my heart, it was Ben," says Roman, who separated from Benjamin's mother, Galena, when Benjamin was eight. As a pre-teen, he ended up in foster homes after his acting out got too much for his mom. When Benjamin was 14, Roman married his second wife. Ben and his new stepmom never got along.

"I think it (the divorce) affected him very badly. I didn't realize it at the time," says Roman.

He called Galena from the car to see if she had heard from Benjamin that day. She hadn't.

An hour later Galena called back, sobbing, with the news they had been dreading for a long time.

Benjamin Bleinis, clean-cut and wearing prison-issue garb at his final court appearance, choked out an apology to the Chans when he pleaded guilty to criminal negligence causing Joseph Chan's death: "There's nothing I can say to take away their pain and loss. I'm responsible for the choices I made."

The judge dealt him the high end of the sentence the Crown asked for, seven years in a federal penitentiary and a lifetime driving ban. He wanted the stiff sentence for the "absolutely needless" death to send a message to others.

After two months in jail, Bleinis says again: "I'm truly sorry, with all my heart. I know that he was a good person. There's nothing I can say, like I said before, that could heal their hearts. But I really do wish that I could take it back."

And to his own family, he knows how hollow his apologies sound over years of repeated drug- and alcohol-fueled petty crimes, ranging from assault with a weapon to driving while prohibited to several counts of theft under \$5,000.

Bleinis had received light sentences for the crimes and had been out of provincial jail about a month and was finishing off a conditional sentence when he rammed Chan's car.

"I called (my family) on the phone every time when I got arrested, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Sorry doesn't mean anything anymore after all, you know, they're just so sick of hearing it. They're like, 'Just show me.'

"I stopped saying sorry to them and I'm just going to show them. I really want to show them how sorry I am and how I really want to make things right."

Bleinis knows that means kicking a crack and heroin drug habit that began with a curious snorting of a line when he had just turned 15 with a group he wanted to be a part of at a house party. It progressed to an addiction so strong that he described it as a magnetic pull.

And he knows it means doing things differently this time.

"When I was released I was thinking this time I would stay clean but it wouldn't happen because I hooked up with the same people, right. You've got to change who you hang out with and where you hang out." No mean feat when, according to his father, Bleinis has already been offered drugs in jail. His son told him he had turned them down.

Benjamin Bleinis is a typical federal inmate: 80 per cent of them land in the system with a substance abuse problem.

He has been assessed for placement in treatment and may be eligible for either six-week or five-month drug treatment, followed by weekly maintenance sessions until release.

"If you take the programs, you are 20 to 30 per cent less likely to commit another crime than those who don't," says John Eno of Corrections Service Canada.

And they're more likely to be released early.

By law, Bleinis will be eligible for full parole in December 2007 -- one-third of the way through his seven-year sentence -- and day parole six months before that.

The jail's drug programs teach inmates how to think and react differently, instead of turning to drugs or alcohol to deal with emotions. Bleinis will also have access to priests, rabbis and other spiritual advisers, as well as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

"I'm going to be taking all the programs that they have to offer me inside," he says. "I'm going to really work on myself and learn more about myself. I really have to focus on myself and my addiction. I really want to change, for real."

It's not the first time he's tried. Bleinis made it through two months of a three-month-minimum residential abuse treatment program and has also been to a Christian-based recovery house, as well as detox more than once.

His parents hope this tragedy was his son's "bottom" that some experts say is necessary for change. But experts say there are too many variables to predict successful recovery.

"The longer someone stays in treatment, the better chance they have," says Lorne Hildebrand, of Nanaimo's Edgewood clinic. "Being a criminal isn't a predictor (for failure). We've seen people who have done some bad and illegal things and turned those things around."

"What seems to predict who does well with treatment is the hope for a reasonable life on the other side," says SFU Prof. Barry Beyerstein.

And both say it's common for many who eventually stay clean and sober to have gone through treatment a number of times.

'At first, myself, I don't understand much about addiction," says Roman Bleinis. "Galena told me it's a disease. I was smoking once upon a time and I quit. I believe human will power will help you."

But the painful years of trying to help his son, by having him live with his family and getting him an apartment, staying with him for three months and watching him slip again and again, has convinced Roman his son needs help.

"He should go to a treatment centre and he shouldn't be released on his own will. Even if he needs to be locked up.

"At least I know he can sleep, I know where he is, he eats," he says. "But if he decided to use drugs, he could, nothing could stop him."

Adds Roman: "If you give me a couple of years, I'll tell you then" whether or not he's hopeful his son can beat his addiction.

He does hope Benjamin can learn a trade in prison and settle down one day with a family.

"I can't wait for the one day when he'll call and take me for breakfast," he says, breaking down in tears and hiding his head in his hands.

The tears start flowing when Christina Chan explains how her trust in God helps her through her pain of burying a child.

She recalls how a reporter at the time pointed out to Joshua that if his brother had been at that fateful intersection a minute sooner or later last Easter Monday, he might still be alive.

"God time is the perfect time," she says through her tears. "On my spiritual side, I believe and trust in God because Joseph is his servant and God uses him to save other lives. But on the human side, it still hurt, it very hurt. It's almost six months and I cry every day."

Christina says her son's death, which made national headlines, had an impact even in their hometown of Hong Kong. "If it was just a normal accident, the impact won't be that bad: 'So and so die in some kind of situation,'" she says. "But I know God is using Joe in this world."

Christina says she's heard of two people rededicating their life to God and of two new believers becoming Christians after they were inspired by Joseph's story. She believes that's evidence of God at work saving others.

And she hopes their son's death will help even the man responsible for his death.

"I don't have any ill feeling toward Ben because I know God uses life in this way. If Ben didn't cause this accident, then someone else would have, it doesn't matter who. I feel bad for Ben because he has to go to jail but I hope he will be a better man and I hope he will have the same opportunity to believe in God as I do."

Adds Stephen Chan: "That's why we believe he can turn his life around if he believes in God."

Joshua, whose wife, Sharon, gave birth a week ago to their first child, Gloria, says being Christian doesn't make them immune to strong feelings against those who cause harm, but it helps them to understand and be compassionate.

"God made us for a relationship with him and he (Bleinis) may have filled that need with drugs and hopefully he'll fill that need with something more appropriate," he says. "It would be a waste if he comes out exactly the same."

Joshua has sent a letter requesting a visit with Bleinis in prison, but he's not sure when or if that visit will happen.

As for his parents, who are returning this week to their home in Winnipeg, a meeting isn't as easy to arrange and Christina isn't ready. "Not now," she says.

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