

# As new chair of Ontario's family council, Betty-Lou Kristy draws on her own story of mental health and addiction

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Laura Stone, Queen's Park Reporter July 6 2020



Betty-Lou Kristy, the Ontario government's new chair of the Patient and Family Advisory Council, in her home on June 30, 2020. (Photos-Kate Dockeray/The Globe and Mail)

In the basement of her home in Georgetown, Ont., Betty-Lou Kristy has created a collage to honour the memory of her son. She calls it her grieving wall.

It has been 19 years since her son, Peter Beattie Kristy, died of an opioid overdose in a hospital psychiatric ward. Even two decades later, Ms. Kristy – who herself has struggled with mental health issues and addiction – says the wall helps her work out the trauma left by his loss.

“He was my whole reason for living,” Ms. Kristy said. “I was really trying so hard to get Pete the help he needed ... and couldn’t.”

Since his death, Ms. Kristy, 64, has dedicated her life to helping others in similar situations. Now, she plans to draw on her experiences as the new chair of Ontario's patient and family advisory council. Recently appointed to a three-year term, Ms. Kristy and the other council members, yet to be named, will provide advice to Health Minister Christine Elliott about a myriad of issues that centre on improving patient care in the province.

Ms. Kristy experienced frustration as a parent when dealing with her son's addiction. Little was known about opioids at the time, and she said her concerns were not adequately addressed by the health care system, including on the day he died.

"We were stigmatized and dismissed with the label of addiction. Our voices were not heard as mother and child."

Her son was struggling with serious mental health issues by age 20, she said. He was prescribed OxyContin for stomach problems and became addicted. In 2001, he was admitted to hospital after a suicide attempt. It was there where her son was given OxyContin by a roommate, Ms. Kristy said; he overdosed two days before Christmas, after he lay dying for six hours. He was 25.

"He was the absolute love of my life."



Ms. Kristy, pictured here in her home, says she has been surrounded by addiction since she was a child growing up in Mississauga, Ont.

Ms. Kristy has been surrounded by addiction since childhood. She grew up in Mississauga, Ont., to parents who also struggled with alcoholism and mental health problems, and describes her upbringing as chaotic and violent. She became caught up in the youth criminal justice system, lived in group homes, and eventually fell into her own addiction to drugs and alcohol.

It took four stints in rehab and a 20-year-battle to reach what Ms. Kristy calls her “substance-free wellness.” Eventually she found her way to her current job as director of the Centre for Innovation in Peer Support, Support and Housing in Halton, west of Toronto. She has forgone the Ministry’s per diem that comes with the council chair, and will keep her job.

Ms. Kristy is a proponent of peer support in overcoming addiction. She believes prevention, awareness and early intervention are crucial, as well as resources to help empower parents.

“There is still not a lot of strengthening of the family unit and helping parents cope when their children are struggling.”



Ms. Kristy says she is driven by a belief in the ability of people to tap into their inner resilience.

She has previously spoken out about the need to increase the availability of Naloxone, used to reverse opioid overdoses, which she said could have saved her son. It is now more widely available.

She also supports supervised consumption sites, which the Ontario government has capped at 21 locations across the province.

“We need to be able to keep people from harm, and we need to be able to keep people alive, so I think there’s lots of evidence that shows that these sites do exactly that,” she said, adding they should also be able to assist people who are ready in getting treatment.

Mostly, she believes in the “ability of the human spirit” to tap into people’s inner resilience.

“The strength of my experience comes from being an addict and an alcoholic,” she said.

“The fact that somebody like me can take that, and the loss of her child ... is quite astounding to me. It actually speaks volumes.”