

# **Touched With Fire: Kristin and Elisif**

Mental Health America  
National Conference  
June 2016

*Sharon Strouse, MA, ATR-BC, LCPAT*  
*The Kristin Rita Strouse Foundation*

*Peter Bruun*  
*New Day Campaign*

**Part I**  
**Kristin's Story**

# Kristin Rita Strouse

October 27, 1983 to  
October 11, 2001

*This is the face of  
mental illness*



# Touched With Fire: Kristin and Elisif

**My Story:** On October 11, 2001, I received a phone call in the middle of the night from the New York City Police Department telling me that my seventeen year old daughter Kristin, had “fallen” from the roof of her college dormitory. So began my journey into the labyrinth of unspeakable grief. My journey is ultimately one of transformation and healing which makes it possible for me to speak to you today, in the hope that what I share will make a difference.

Strouse, S. (2013) *Artful Grief: A Diary of Healing*. Bloomington: Balboa Press

# Who was Kristin...

She was a talented artist but friends had no idea how talented.



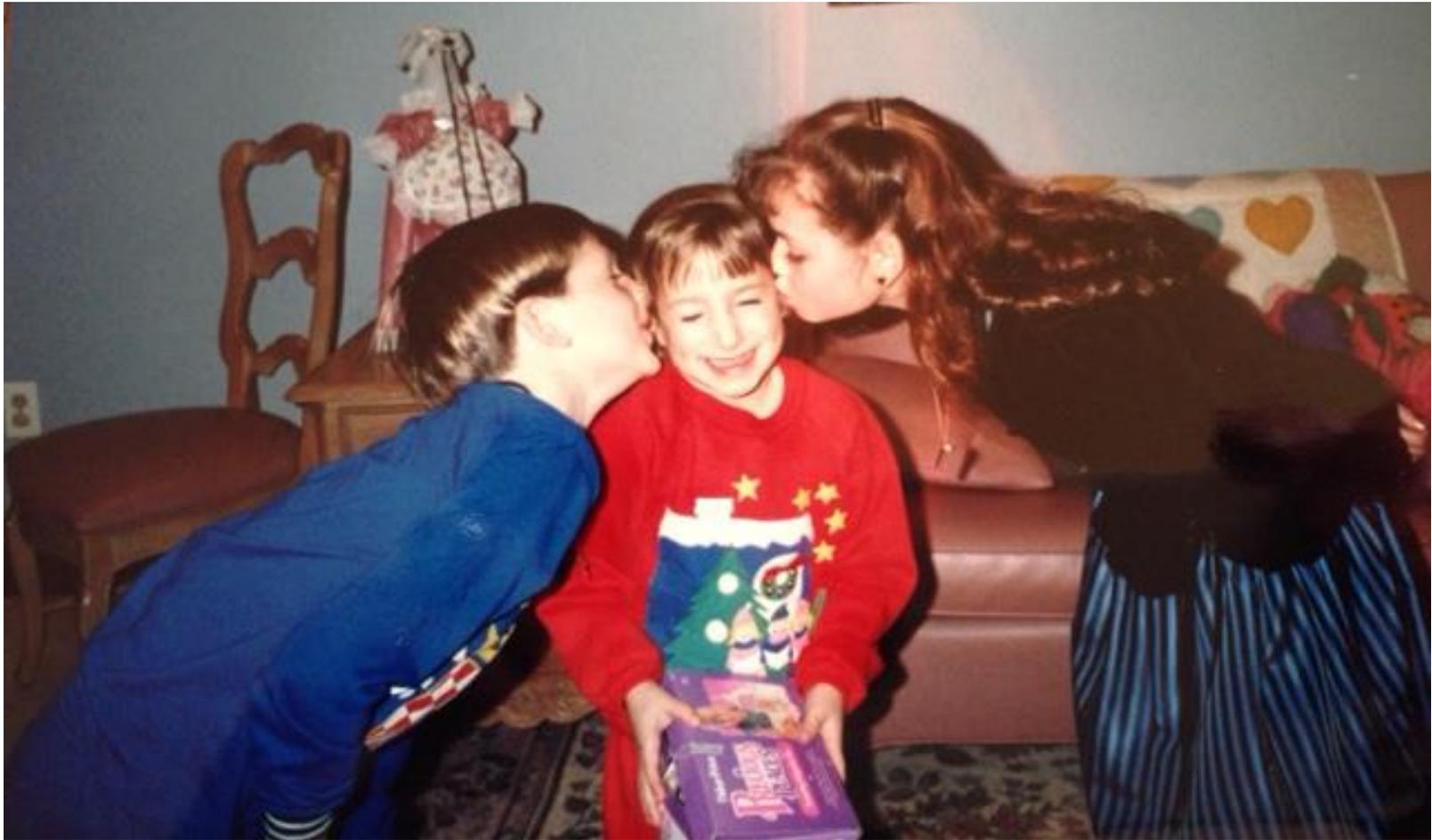
She played varsity tennis for NDP and took ballet lessons... exercise was important.



She loved her toy poodle, Sienna and hamsters, Lilac, Belle, Sebastian and Gaston.



She was loved by her sister, Kimberly  
and brother, Kevin.



Kristin had stormy relationships with friends, and was deeply hurt by those who could be “naughty or nice.”



Kristin also had long lasting best friends.



Our family December 1999,  
two years before Kristin committed suicide.



## **So what happened... to this “normal” adolescent...**

- In December of 2000 Kristin was arrested for shoplifting. She saw a Psychiatrist.
- In January of 2001 Kristin started purging, she missed school, couldn't concentrate or sleep and felt “nervous.” She was given anti-depressants.
- In February she was verbally aggressive and dysfunctional for one week out of the month.
- In March the pattern continued, the aggression escalated – 1 bad week – 3 good weeks.
- In April the aggression heightened and she went to the “Day Hospital for a several days.”

## So what happened... continued...

- In May, Kristin was admitted to a Psychiatric Inpatient Unit, as the pattern continued, 1 week “crazy” the other 3 weeks “normal.” She had been destructive.
- In June, July and August, Kristin returned to her “normal” self. She went to prom, graduated from NDP and spent the summer getting ready for college.
- Kristin realized her dream and went to Parsons School of Design in New York City.
- On September 11, 2001, the World Trade Centers fell.
- On October 11, 2001 Kristin went to the 15<sup>th</sup> story of her dorm and fell.

# Our family

1984, at the beginning..... and at the end, 2002



## What was hidden...

- A history of mental illness within the extended family, was kept secret until after Kristin's death.
- Kristin kept serious feelings to herself.
- Kristin isolated herself from friends during the last 10 months of her life.
- Kristin's miss-diagnosis, erroneously shaped our understanding of what was happening to her.
- The issue of suicide was downplayed by health care professionals who counseled our family.

# Depression is a common and treatable illness

The Adolescent Depression Awareness Program

Johns Hopkins Medicine

- Depressed or irritable mood
- Decreased interest or pleasure in activities
- Change in appetite or weight
- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Feeling restless or slowed down
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Decreased concentration
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Sense of hopelessness
- Recurrent thoughts of death or suicide

**“With an estimated 5% of adolescents having depression, this is one of the most common illnesses teenagers face. The high rate of suicide in depressed teenagers underscores the importance of all high school students receiving quality education about depression and learning that **depression is a treatable medical illness.**” ADAP**

**Ask for help.....for** “to lose someone to suicide is to comprehend its aftermath — its endless, agonizing and messy emotional aftereffects — from the inside out, and to understand, from the first shattering moment you hear the news, that everything you thought you understood about living and loving has been irreparably altered. The result is a profound loss of innocence. There is no going back.”

# Part II

## Elisif's Story

# Our *two* families...





Prior to Elisif's passing, I had been an artist, curator, and organizer.



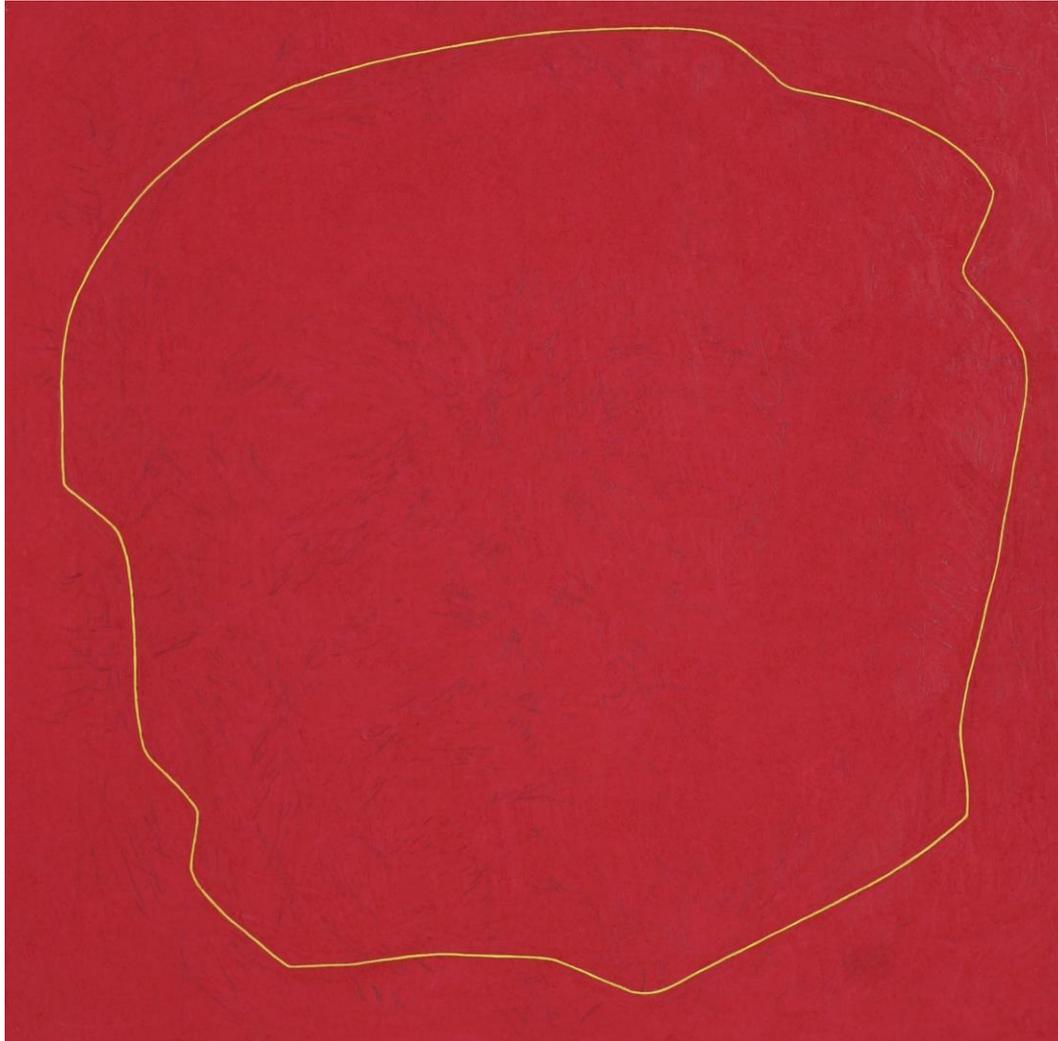
BRUUN STUDIOS

Multi-tiered art experiences for all.

**Art on Purpose**

When Elisif died, I knew why.

The day she died, I had drawings in my head. It took me two months to get started, but once I did, they flowed like tears.



This became *Elisif's Story*, the seed of the New Day Campaign.



## **Part III**

# The New Day Campaign





**NEW DAY  
CAMPAIGN**

Where Stigma Ends, Healing Begins.

**Over 92 days, 16 art exhibitions & 63 events**



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**Nearly 3,000 people attended events (45 per event average)**



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The logo for the New Day Campaign features a grid of colored squares to the left of the text. The top row has a yellow square above a black square and a blue square. The bottom row has a green square, a black square, and another black square. The text "NEW DAY" is in a large, bold, black sans-serif font, and "CAMPAIGN" is in a slightly larger, bold, black sans-serif font below it. The tagline "Where Stigma Ends, Healing Begins." is centered below the main text in a smaller, black sans-serif font.

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**CAMPAIGN**  
Where Stigma Ends, Healing Begins.

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**91 organizations or programs partnered, 52 of these with behavioral health focus**

## **Part IV**

**Kristin and Elisif: Touched with Fire**

As I made the selections for this exhibit, I wondered...  
**“Could the end be seen in the beginning?”**



# Kristin's self concept



# In Van Gogh's Likeness

## Self Portrait 1998

### Oil

I do not remember when Kristin's interest settled on Van Gogh. He was one of many fascinations along with Cassatt, Monet, Degas and Klimt. She copied the masters and applied what she learned in her drawings and paintings. This was one of several self portraits and paintings in Van Gogh's style. I remember the day we spent at the National Gallery in DC, visiting the Van Gogh exhibition. His mental illness and eventual suicide seemed less important to her than her experience of his brushstrokes and use of color. It stood out as a special day. Since Kristin's death I consider the attraction as empathy for Van Gogh's suffering which paralleled her own. Since her suicide I consider the attraction to Van Gogh a red flag, undetected in Kristin's complex landscape.



***This is my Family in the Rain***  
**Family Portrait: 1988**  
**Pencil and Crayon**

Kristin created works of art from the time she could hold a crayon. She sat on the kitchen floor “doing her homework” alongside her older sister and brother. She was never happier. This early family portrait captures us all in the rain. She wrote, Mom, Dad, Kevin, Kim, KoKo (dog) and Kristin on the back of her family portrait. She is small and faceless at the edge of the page.

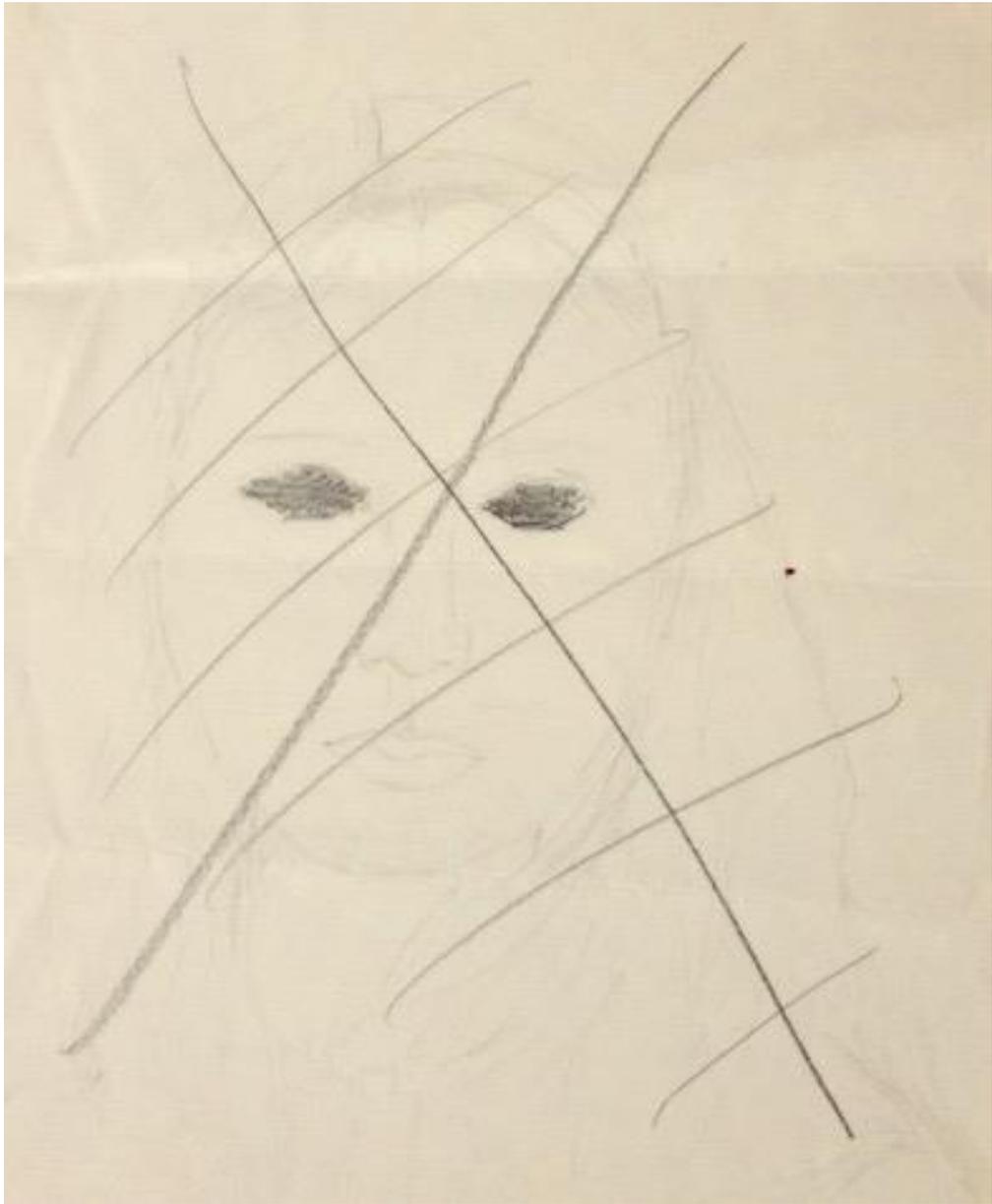




**Hidden II**  
**1999 - 2000**  
**pencil and charcoal drawing**

This simple class exercise, most likely Life Drawing or Portfolio Preparation, took on a life of its own and was used multiple times in the creation of another piece that I call "Hidden II." The class was instructed to combine several pieces and create a new work of art. Kristin stares out at me and instead of feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment in her skill with the pencil, the layering and the composition....I am taken over by a question. What are you hiding?





This tender self-portrait, made with vine charcoal and pastel, was drawn by Elisif 20 days before she passed. She cared enough about it to sign it, something she had not done with her work for years. It indicates a re-emerging self, even as her afflictions continued to have a grip on her, ultimately pulling her down.



Completed between Elisif's 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years, this painting reveals much of Elisif's affect at the time. On the one hand, she looks out at the viewer, almost with a confrontational gaze. On the other hand, that gaze is invisible, hidden behind the mirrored sunglasses she often sported. So here we have her: seemingly fully present, engaged, but also hidden from view. So much of Elisif (we did not realize at the time) was persona... persona of invulnerability covering up a never-dealt-with sense of vulnerability stemming from that early childhood diagnosis of diabetes.



One from a sequence of drawings where she presents herself as shrouded within a blanket: she is there, but she is not. In many ways, this drawing echoes the blue-haired self-portrait also in this exhibition. Upon Elisif's passing, I found in one of her journals from rehab the following expressed fear: 'that people will see through the persona I have held on to for years.'



