

# NO CURE FOR THE HEARTBREAK

Train conductor dies in derailment on isolated siding

by Katie Giesbrecht



Bryan Giesbrecht.

**N**ovember 28, 2012 was a normal, average everyday kind of day. My husband Randy and I went to work, my son went to school, the snow kept falling and at 10:30 p.m. we went to bed. I have four children. Bryan is my oldest son; he is married to Kasey and has two beautiful daughters. Nicole is next; she's married to Kenzie and has a step-son and a daughter. Derek is my third born. At the time in 2012 he was not married. He is now, with a baby on the way. Then there is Jackson. He is now a 15-year-old, grade ten student.

Around 11:30 that night, I was woken by hearing the door open and something in the entry. I thought my two dogs were coming in. You see, if the door wasn't tightly shut, the

dogs would push against it and come inside. I got up to go put them back out and close the door tight. I looked down the stairs and saw Ken, my son's father-in-law. He said to me "Katie, is Randy home?"

I went to get my husband, and when I started back down the stairs I saw my daughter-in-law Kasey. I asked "Kasey, what is going on?" She couldn't look at me. I asked again but this time yelled it. I saw two other guys standing in the entry and they told me they were from CN. That is when Ken told me that Bryan was gone. I said "what? What are you talking about?" One of the CN guys said that Bryan had passed away at work. I didn't cry or yell. I was confused. "No," I said. As if

they were wrong. That is when Randy came down the stairs towards me. I turned to him and said, "Randy, they said Bryan died". Why would they say that? Why would they come into my home and tell me something so terrible? I was in a weird, confused, dream-like state. They told me that the train had derailed and Bryan was killed in Gutah Siding. I asked stupid questions about Gutah siding; how did it derail; were they sure he was gone. I could not comprehend this. I went outside on the deck for air and then I cried. It was not a cry I recognized. I didn't even know it was me. It was this deep guttural noise. Some sound completely foreign to me. What the hell are these people doing here telling me this? What is going on? I don't understand. Was I crazy? I had always told people that if anything ever happened to one of my kids they would have to put me in an institution because I would go crazy.

I had children I needed to tell. Derek was at work at a gas plant about half an hour away, and Nicole was at home in Grande Prairie about two hours away. Jackson was still sleeping upstairs. I was pretty sure I couldn't drive and I knew Randy couldn't so I called our best friends and that is when I lost it. I had to say it...I had to say, "Bryan died!" I said it over and over.

Bryan, my oldest child, my first born, was gone. He was an amazing big brother to his three siblings. He loved his life and he lived it with as much excitement as he could. He hated to be bored. He skydived, cliff jumped, swam the Great Barrier Reef, spent a year as an exchange student in Australia, and backpacked across Europe. As a teenager he became a life-guard and swim instructor and as an adult he volunteered his spare time to coach a kids' ball hockey team. He loved working with youth. Bryan was my God-sent life saviour. I had him when I was 19. My husband, Randy, and I lived in a remote area of BC. We had no phone, power or plumbing. I was alone for three weeks at a time as Randy worked up in the north on oil rigs. I was so lonely. I made the decision to have a baby in order to keep my sanity. Bryan was my gift from God. He was the sweetest child. He wasn't ever mean spirited. He always included others in play. In his mind, everyone needed to be having fun and he didn't allow anyone to sit on the sidelines. He was funny, he loved jokes (really bad ones most of the time), caring and fair in

everything he did. Bryan would bound into a room like Tigger and let everyone know he was there. He loved to be a part of the team. In hockey and baseball, he loved to win but it was more important to him to have fun. He won many sportsmanship awards in sports. I had always told him they were the most important ones to win. It shows character and his was obvious. I remember that he was 12 years old and would still come to me for a goodnight kiss and hug. People would comment on his ability to show affection even as a young teen. I miss his hugs so much.

“ This site has changed since Bryan died there, but it seems too little, too late for me and my family.

The next while was just one long day after another. I took six weeks of stress leave from work. During this time I found out as much as I could about the incident that took my son's life. I asked a lot of questions about Gutah siding, trying to find out what it may have looked like. Why did Bryan not set the derail? What was he thinking? I managed to get a copy of the page in Bryan's manual that told him about Gutah siding – what was on the site and where to find it. It was what Bryan knew about the site.

Gutah siding is about 150 km north of Fort Saint John BC. There was an occupied station, a camp of sorts, where the crew was to stop for a rest and a meal after leaving Fort Saint John. There was a camp cook and a couple of workers there. The only other people were Bryan, who was the conductor of the train and the train engineer. After travelling for eight hours they were coming upon Gutah. They had been given a work order that morning to switch out the fuel car. The one that fuels the generator that runs the camp electricity was running low. Bryan and the engineer decided to do this job before they went into the camp to eat. It was already dark and lightly snowing. Part of the rails had been cleared on the siding, but it was a short siding so it shouldn't be a problem. Bryan's job was to get out and unhook some cars. The engineer would drive ahead; Bryan would go and set the switch and the derail. A derail is a mechanical device put on the track that will derail railway cars passing over it. The derail was put on the siding to stop rogue trains from going down the siding and causing damage or death to those in the camp. The derail is by the switch. It has to be flipped to "off" so the train can go by and down the siding. Bryan radioed the engineer that the switch was set and

so was the derail. The engineer started backing down the siding. Bryan let the engineer know how far to go before stopping to hook up to the empty fuel car. He did have a flashlight, but I can only imagine that it would be like turning high beams on in a snow storm. There was a second derail, more than 500 feet from the first one. The courts could not determine whether Bryan was aware of the second derail. The sign marking the derail was not a standard CN sign and it was not retroreflective.

The engineer hears something on the radio, but does not know what was said. He feels the

cars do something, maybe a jarring, and he pulls on the brakes. He cannot make radio contact with Bryan; he is 17 cars ahead of the one that Bryan was riding on. He walks down the tracks and sees the mess: two cars have gone off the track, over a small embankment. Bryan was found in the snow, crushed by the rolled-over fuel car.

CN was charged based on the investigation by BC OH&S: two counts of failing to ensure health and safety of one of their employees, and two counts of failing to ensure that Bryan was aware of the health and safety hazards on the site.

We spent many days in court listening to lawyers, going over every piece of documentation and at the end of two years, the judge gave his decision.



Bryan liked to have fun and to make sure everyone else was having fun too

### CN issued a press release:

“On June 2, 2016, CN was found guilty of breaching section 124 of the Canada Labour Code and thereby committed an offence under S 148(1) of the Canada Labour Code, and on March 24, 2016 was ordered to pay the maximum fine of \$100,000 in connection with an incident that occurred on a CN siding track on Nov. 28, 2012 at Gutah, British Columbia. The court ruled CN failed to ensure the health and safety of its employee, Bryan Giesbrecht, when it did not give proper notice of a safety device known as a derail located on a siding track at Gutah because the sign was not retroreflective as required by company engineering standards.”

The black box expert at the trial determined that the brakes were never touched as the train backed down the siding and it was going twice as fast as recommended. No one knows for sure, but it is believed that Bryan may have been running down the tracks to deactivate the second derail but could not outrun the train.

This site has changed since Bryan died there, but it seems too little, too late for me and my family.

We continue to mourn for Bryan. We talk about him all the time. He is still, and always will be, a huge part of our lives. We still eat spaghetti and meatballs on his birthday because this is what he always asked for. There is no cure for our heartbreak, no getting over it, but our memories keep us going. Life does go on and we continue to move forward, but the loss of my son has forever changed who I am and will ever be.