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Son's fatal overdose consumes ex-pitcher

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Jeff Reardon gave us a window into his pain.

Dear Shaner,



[enlarge](#)

BELOVED SON: Shane Reardon was the middle of Jeff and Phebe Reardon's three kids. He died in 2004 from an overdose at age 20 and left behind a father racked with guilt and grief.

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It was your 21st b'day today and we still can't believe you are not here. Mom and I went to your grave and of course we were very sad.... Please come home, we need you with us. I know this is not possible but you are missed so much by everyone....

A young son dead from a drug overdose. A father tortured by grief and guilt.

Jeff Reardon, for 16 years one of the best relief pitchers in major league



Greg Lovett/The Post

[enlarge](#)

LEGAL PROBLEMS: Jeff Reardon at his first court appearance in December with attorney Mitch Beers. He is facing felony robbery charges and awaits his next hearing in a Palm Beach County mental health facility.



AP

Jeff Reardon, at the time of his arrest in December.



[enlarge](#)

Shane with younger sister Kristi and older brother Jay.

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history, today sits in a Palm Beach County mental health facility trying to cope.

He knows he no longer can be a rock for his family. He knows he can't ignore his feelings of helplessness.

And he knows he can't bring back his son, the one he cries out to in online messages.

Reardon's dark world, spinning out of control through depression and medication, came to a crashing halt last month when he was arrested for robbing a jewelry store at The Gardens mall. He had nothing more than a handwritten note saying he had a gun, and he turned himself in to mall security within minutes.

He faces felony robbery charges and awaits his next hearing.

"He was crying for help," said his mother, Marion Cavanaugh. "He's very, very deeply depressed."

Reardon, who has

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really believe that is what's wearing on Jeff more than anything."

Passion for writing, music

Shane Reardon was different from his siblings. Teachers at Palm Beach Gardens High School remember his older brother, Jay, for being a formidable golfer, and his younger sister, Kristi, for being a star athlete who eventually accepted a field hockey scholarship.

Shane flew below the radar. He was creative, intelligent, tenderhearted. He loved writing and music. He was *different* — and he ran with a different crowd. Shane's friends had a more jagged edge than the jocks. Some were into alcohol, others were into drugs.

It wasn't long before Shane abused both.

As a junior in high school, he became more and more rebellious. Jeff and his wife, Phebe, saw their thoughtful boy drifting further and further away. Those years wore on the Reardons, especially Jeff, who had retired from baseball in 1995 and turned down big-league coaching offers so he could spend time with his family.

"We all knew it was bothering him, trying to get (Shane) straightened out," said Carol Vella, one of Jeff's sisters.

Jeff and Phebe made the toughest decision of their lives.

They pulled Shane out of Palm Beach Gardens High before his senior year and sent him to the Academy at Swift River, a private treatment center and boarding school in western Massachusetts, near Jeff's hometown of Dalton. Swift River bills itself as a "therapeutic boarding school," specializing in college

lived in Palm Beach Gardens for more than 20 years, spent his career bailing out teammates with his 98 mph fastball. But he couldn't save his son from a tragic ending.

"We can't comprehend the remorse, the guilt he must be feeling at the loss of his son," said Hall of Fame catcher Gary Carter, Reardon's friend and former teammate who also lives in Palm Beach Gardens. "I

prep for "troubled teens struggling with behavior, emotional issues or academics."

All told, family members and friends said, the Reardons spent more than \$100,000 trying to help their son recover. Swift River was their last hope.

"Jeff's heart was broken that he had to put him in there," Cavanaugh said. "It hurt him terribly."

Shane was allowed few visitors. But he spoke to his parents often and even recorded a rap video for them, in which he's laughing and telling his parents how much he loves them and appreciates their support.

It made Jeff and Phebe laugh every time they saw it. It makes them cry every time they watch it today. And they watch it often.

By the time Shane graduated from Swift River, he was a role model to his peers. Everyone saw a change. He had a tattoo applied to his chest, with a heart, a cross and a crown of thorns and the word "Salvation" written across it.

"He was thoroughly convinced he was all better," Cavanaugh said. "But it's awfully hard to go back and mix with society."

The Reardons were nervous when Shane deemed himself ready to go on with his life, but they were encouraged by his decision to attend college.

Shane began studying recording arts at Full Sail, a film school in Winter Park, which also teaches music, art design and media production.

The only thing that truly worried Jeff was when Shane reconnected with a friend from his troubled youth. The boy also had problems with drugs and alcohol, and the two partied together as teenagers. Still, the friend approached Jeff directly and convinced him he was clean. Jeff agreed to let them share an apartment minutes from campus.

"He had all good intentions that he would never do anything like that again," Jeff's mother said of her grandson. "And then, he went to college. He must've gotten in with the wrong crowd."

Shane was arrested and released on bond for marijuana possession in North Palm Beach in August 2003. But on Feb. 21, 2004, the Reardons' worst fear came without warning.

Shane was found dead in his Winter Park apartment.

He was 20 years old.

Police found alcohol and several kinds of drugs in the apartment. An autopsy confirmed Shane died after taking a lethal dose of methadone, a synthetic narcotic used to treat patients with heroin addiction. The medical examiner also found trace amounts of other drugs in Shane's system: Oxycodone, a painkiller, and Alprazolam, commonly called Xanax, used to treat depression.

On the day Shane died, his roommate came home and found Shane disoriented and nauseated. Shane eventually passed out. The roommate thought he was drunk, according to the police report, and did not call 911 until Shane started turning blue.

Shane was pronounced dead at the scene. Jay Reardon, who at the time was nearby in Orlando, was called to identify his brother's body.

"When somebody tells you that something could have been done, that maybe a phone call to 911 could have saved him, that's when you start to beat yourself up," Gary Carter said. "I think that's when the depression set in more than anything."

Web postings cathartic

February 14, 2005

My dearest Shaner.

It was exactly one year ago i picked you up at the airport to come home for Valentine's Day. This holiday was named after you with your big heart for everyone and i sure wish i was headed to that airport again to get that big hug. Even though we can't hug in person i'll do it in my thoughts as you are constantly in my thoughts more and more every day. Things are still really tough without you ... *but we all are trying to cope with things the best we can....*

Love ya,

Dad

Shortly after Shane's death, Phebe Reardon started a guest book in his memory on *The Palm Beach Post's* Web site. There are now more than 600 entries, 16 written by Jeff Reardon.

Writing to Shane became cathartic for Reardon. He revealed his deepest pain, especially on special days. But this was no substitute for the help he needed. "He held up for (Phebe). When she started to feel a little better, it started to get to him," Cavanaugh said.

The Reardons had a slice of paradise to help relieve the pain — a lake house near Jeff's family in Dalton, where they spent summers fishing, water skiing, shooting fireworks and sitting around a campfire. But the family's first trip to the lake without the youngest son was too much for Jeff to handle.

"That was Jeff's escape," Carter said. "But without Shane... "

October 20, 2004

Dear Shaner,

our summer has come to an end and it wasn't the same without you. the memories we have of you will never be forgotten. all the fires at the campsite you started weren't really there this summer because we missed you so much. you know i always loved the campfires but could not go out there because you were not there....

your dad

Last summer, the Reardons visited the lake house for a second time without Shane. Reardon rarely left his bedroom, sitting in the dark with the shades drawn. Not long after the vacation, the Reardons put the place up for sale. Jeff gave away the furniture, the decorations — the entire contents of the house — to

friends and family.

Plenty of time to dwell

Reardon always has been an intensely private person, even in the camaraderie of a baseball clubhouse.

His Montreal Expos teammates nicknamed him "Yak," a lighthearted moniker mocking his quiet demeanor. There were few glimpses into his life, even during the many idle hours of the baseball season.

One night, as some Expos sat in a hotel bar in Los Angeles, Reardon noticed a baby grand piano in a corner and let it slip that he could play. His teammates didn't believe him and after some prodding, Reardon reluctantly approached the keyboard.

The pitcher played only long enough "to show us all what he had," said Dave Van Horne, the Marlins announcer, who back then was in Montreal's booth. "The guys that knew him the best said it was the first time they'd ever seen him do that."

Reardon hasn't worked since his retirement, but the empty hours were a curse after Shane's death. Family members and friends say the Reardons spent most of their waking hours mourning their son.

"He just never had any reason to get up in the morning," Carol Vella said of her brother. "They just sat there and thought about Shane all the time."

Jeff, in particular, became more reclusive. He stopped accepting invitations to play golf or to go to dinner.

"He should have been working," said Marlins analyst Tommy Hutton, a former teammate and a friend of Reardon's for 20 years. "He chose not to, and that idle time, I'm sure, made it even worse."

Treated for depression

Last year, as the anniversary of Shane's death approached, Jeff Reardon fell deeper and deeper into despair. He began taking prescribed pills to sleep through the night.

But he awoke each day to face a nightmare.

January 14, 2005

Dear Shaner,

I miss you so much, believe me you are in my mind and thoughts every minute of the day and night. I have a lot of trouble sleeping at night because when it is quiet all I do is think of you and wish I could be with you protecting.... It's been almost a year even though it seems like last night to us and I wish I could reverse time and have you with us.

I love you kid,

Your Dad

Reardon was consumed by what-ifs. What if he had stood firm and not let Shane live with a friend with

a history of drug use? What if someone had called 911 sooner?

Jeff, who had been a social drinker, stopped drinking altogether six months ago, hoping it would help him face his life more clearly. It didn't.

His wife and children underwent counseling and begged Jeff to do the same.

"He is a very private person, and he thought he could handle it," Reardon's mother said. "We just couldn't get him to go. He just didn't feel like talking. He kept it all inside and look where it got him."

By November, with the holidays approaching, Reardon's suffering became too much to bear. He checked himself into a mental health facility for a week — the same one he's in now — and was treated for depression and given several medications.

He wrote one more online entry two days after Thanksgiving.

November 26, 2005

Dear Shaner,

I miss you more than ever, can't stop thinking of you

Love you,

DAD

Ill-fated trip to mall

Three days before Christmas — a week before what would have been Shane's 22nd birthday — doctors found Jeff Reardon had more than a broken heart.

He had a blocked artery and needed immediate angioplasty, his third such procedure.

Jeff, 50, stayed in the hospital overnight and was given several medications for his heart condition. At that point, by some family members' counts, he was taking about 10 different prescriptions a day for his heart and depression.

The chemical mixture, his attorney believes, is what led to his arrest on Dec. 26.

That morning, Reardon dropped off his son Jay to pick up his car. Jeff told Jay he was tired and just wanted to go home and have a cup of coffee, Marion Cavanaugh said.

But Jeff's mind was not clear. He fumbled with the coffee maker and couldn't get it to work. He called Jay and told him he was going out to buy a new one — and he disappeared for the rest of the day. Jay would later tell his grandmother that the coffee maker was working fine.

Jeff drove his black Lincoln Navigator the 5 miles from his house to The Gardens mall. He parked outside P.F. Chang's restaurant and walked across the mall holding two white garbage bags with red pull strings.

Reardon, according to police reports, entered Hamilton Jewelers and handed a saleswoman a note that read: "I have a gun please place \$100 bills and jewelry in bag and no one will get hurt. Thank you."

The manager stuffed \$170 into a green store bag — Reardon arrived with \$500 cash in his wallet — and Reardon left in no great hurry. The manager followed him from a distance.

Reardon then stepped outside the mall. Jay Reardon later told his grandmother what his father told him:

"I looked down and I had a bag and I looked inside and there was money in it. And I said, 'What? Did I rob the place?' "

He walked over to a mall security guard's car and told him what he had done, just before a Palm Beach Gardens police officer arrived.

Someone yelled, "That's him! He has a gun!"

The officer told Reardon to put his hands up and walk to the squad car. When Reardon at first didn't respond to an order to put his hands on the car, the officer pulled his weapon and Reardon "immediately complied."

On the way to the police station, Reardon repeated to the officer, "I'm sorry. I did it. I robbed them. I don't know what I was doing. I'm out of my mind. It's the medication. I'm sorry."

He was released on \$5,000 bond.

The next day, Carter and his wife, Sandy, who is a close friend of Phebe Reardon, stopped by the Reardons' home. The phone kept ringing with calls of support. The Christmas tree was still surrounded by presents.

"You just say, 'Wow, this is so out of character,' " Gary Carter said. "Phebe kept saying, 'We'll get through this just like we did with Shane.' "

Two days later, Jeff checked back into the mental health facility where he remains today. He's under the care of a "good, competent psychiatrist, someone who really cares for him," said his attorney, Mitch Beers. Jeff and Phebe declined through their attorney to be interviewed for this story.

Reardon has not spoken with anyone in his family except for his wife, not even his children.

Phebe told friends that Jeff is embarrassed about the arrest, and he is scared of the legal ramifications. Reardon faces a maximum sentence of 15 years, though Beers believes a chemical imbalance that might have been caused by Reardon's prescription drugs will keep him out of jail.

Marion Cavanaugh said her son has admitted to thinking about suicide, and that scares everyone who knows him.

But he now realizes he cannot deal with his grief and guilt alone, and for that his family and friends are thankful.

"We're all hoping Jeff will open up and things will come out," his mother said. "I'm more worried about his mind."

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