



BRIDGET

Bridget Bell's story: 'He manipulated the whole system'



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As soon as the policemen walked in, Kelly Bell knew her daughter was dead.

She was working the third shift at a Camillus factory on Nov. 21, 2011, when she received a call from a 911 dispatcher telling her that something terrible had happened to Bridget.

"The minute I saw them walk through the door, I lost it," Kelly said. "I lost my mind."

The mother of two slipped into a grief-induced haze, a fog that drew a veil over her memory of the worst moment of her life. But her Rock-Tenn Plant co-workers filled in the blanks.

When Kelly set eyes on Capt. Paul Casper — the man who found her daughter breathless with a large knife anchored deep in her chest — she hurled a chair. Then, she fled.

Eventually, Kelly sought shelter in the plant's inner office, punching a wall before collapsing into a chair.

"Then I sat there. I wouldn't move," she said. "They had to pick me up and carry me away."

Bridget, 29, had been murdered, and Kelly knew exactly who to blame.

When Bridget started dating Ryan Brahney about five years ago, Kelly said the Auburn man was a "bundle of joy" who seemed happy to have fun with her vivacious, ever-smiling daughter.

After growing up with a mom and dad who were very much in love, Kelly said Bridget wanted what her parents had: a loving marriage, two kids, family vacations and "the little white picket fence."

Ryan professed he craved the same idyllic life, and told Bridget he wanted to leave his criminal past — a 10-year-long stint in prison for breaking every bone in a man's face — behind.

But after spending a few months with Ryan, Bridget started to hear unnerving rumors about his history. When questioned, Ryan got mad and brushed Bridget off.

The first time Bridget saw an example of his rumored rage, Ryan's anger was not vaulted in her direction, but toward a woman he previously lived with.

Kelly said Bridget visited her the day Ryan tore up the woman's home, abuzz with nerves and a life-changing piece of news: Bridget was pregnant.

But as she leaned against her mother's stove and prepared to share her story, police knocked on the door in search of Ryan.

As members of the Auburn Police Department combed through Kelly's home, she said then-Capt. Brian Neagle took her and Bridget aside to describe the man he knew Ryan to be. Kelly — who is friends with Neagle, the current APD chief — reminded her daughter that Neagle wouldn't lie to her.

But Bridget didn't accept the officer's assessment, even when Ryan was sent back to prison for violating the terms of his probation.

"She got sucked in on the bad boy part," Kelly said. "And him saying he wanted to change."

Ryan spent Bridget's entire pregnancy in 2008 and the first eight months of his son Finn's life behind bars. The couple kept in contact. Bridget visited Ryan a few times. He wrote her letters.

During his first four weeks out of prison, Kelly said Ryan acted like a different man. He attended family events, and made attempts to spend quality time with Finn.

"He had us all baffled. At first, he was great," Kelly said. "It was like he wanted to change."

But the violent man's transformation was ephemeral. Slowly but surely, the true Ryan Brahney emerged.

The violence surfaced in 2009 in the form of controlling words and actions.

The behavior worried Kelly and her husband, Joe. But she said they still felt comfortable going on vacation and leaving Bridget to housesit their Auburn home.

When the couple was in Joplin, Mo., they received a phone call that shattered their repose.

One night, Bridget and Ryan were at Kelly's home. After tucking Finn into bed, the couple climbed into the hot tub to relax.

"Next thing I know, at 2:30 in the morning, I'm getting phone calls from her," Kelly said. "That's when he broke her face."

During a fight, Ryan knocked Bridget to the floor while she held their infant son and stomped on her face, breaking her jaw and nose. Bridget escaped to the bathroom and called police as Ryan attempted to break down the locked door.

Ryan fled, but didn't evade capture for long. He was caught and sent to the Cayuga County Jail for assaulting the mother of his child.

Bridget's parents were horror struck, aghast at what happened to their daughter. Kelly said her suspicions about Ryan were unhappily confirmed.

"It was a surprise, but it wasn't," she said. "I always had in the back of mind that that was who he was."

At the start of 2011, Bridget's father fell seriously ill.

Kelly said her husband was admitted to the hospital March 25 — the same day the Bells learned Ryan would soon be back on the street. A few weeks later, Joe died.

"Part of me thinks that's what killed my husband," Kelly said. "I think it was the stress with him getting out and the medicine that caused infection."

When Ryan got out of jail after serving about a year for breaking Bridget's jaw, Kelly kept her distance. For a while, Bridget avoided him too.

But Ryan still found ways to approach Bridget — in part by taking her to family court, where he fought to gain visitation time with Finn.

Kelly said he occasionally threatened Bridget, telling her that he would "take out" her mom if Bridget spoke up. He also refused to allow anyone to monitor his time with Finn, forcing Bridget to supervise visits.

Kelly said Ryan showed up at Bridget's Olympia Terrace home unannounced, slinking around the side of her apartment to surprise guests sitting on her back porch. When he wanted to speak to Bridget, he would bring one of his nephews along to deter Bridget from calling the cops.

"He manipulated the whole system," Kelly said, "and manipulated her."

On Aug. 8, Ryan earned himself a trip to jail when he smashed Bridget's patio furniture after she refused to speak with him. Ryan made multiple calls from behind bars, enraged that Bridget put him in jail on his birthday.

"I'm going to f***** murder her," he said in a recorded phone call.

After his mother bailed him out of jail, Ryan changed tactics. Kelly said Ryan sucked up to Bridget, playing on her desire to ensure Finn had a father.

"They were getting along quite well," she recalled. "Ryan got her to the point where she wouldn't let me see Finn."

Kelly said she realized Ryan wanted to turn Finn and Bridget against her when Finn said, "Grandma, my daddy says you're the devil."

Eventually, Ryan's rage returned to Bridget.

At the end of August, Bridget went on a weekend trip to Darien Lake with her friends. Kelly said Ryan wanted to tag along, but Bridget refused.

So Ryan hitched a ride to the amusement park and confronted Bridget during a concert. Kelly said Bridget called her after Ryan slashed her tent with a knife, reporting that Ryan was "going psycho on her."

From then on, Bridget started to truly fear for her life.

The week before she died, Bridget visited her mother and begged Kelly for her gun.

"I told her: 'If you're that worried, Bridget, stay here,'" Kelly said.

A few days later, Ryan threw a cinder block chunk through Bridget's window in the dead of the night, slithered into her home and pulled the sleeping woman out of bed.

He then stabbed her 38 times with a butcher knife, wounding her chest, back, face, arms and neck.

When he was sure Bridget was dead, Ryan fled, leaving the knife buried just above her heart. He left Finn upstairs, alone with his mother's corpse.

Soon after Kelly learned her 29-year-old daughter was dead, officers — aided by her son, Joey — carried the grieving mother into a car and drove her back to Auburn to pick up Finn.

When she arrived at the police station, Kelly said Finn, then 3, was wrapped in a blanket, wearing his bathrobe and pajamas.

Although his legal surname was Brahney, Kelly said, Finn told police his name was Finn Killian Bell, immediately distancing himself from his father. She said he still gets upset when he's called Finn Brahney.

Kelly said Finn brings up his mother and father quite often, referring to Ryan as his "bad daddy."

"He's got a bad daddy. He wants a good daddy," Kelly explained. "He knows his daddy's in jail."

More than a year after Bridget's death, Kelly still isn't sure what her grandson witnessed. She said certain comments make her wonder if Finn saw his mother's body.

"He said: 'Mommy's got a boo boo on her neck, and we've got to send a doctor up to heaven with glue,'" Kelly said. "Either he heard something, or he saw."

For the Bell family, the 17 months following Bridget's death have been colored by heavy grief.

The army of people who loved Bridget suffered through a gruesome trial, finding brief relief after Ryan, 40, was convicted of murdering Bridget and sentenced to spend 54 years in prison.

The day of his November sentencing, Ryan covered himself in Vaseline and refused to leave his cell, threatening to harm anyone who tried to make him go to court. Kelly wishes he had been forced to listen to her speak.

However, she expected no remorse from Ryan.

"People like that can't," she said. "He has no soul."

Kelly Bell has spent the 17 months following her daughter's death relearning how to live.

While she tries to figure out life as a single, 53-year-old parent, Kelly said she works to keep her loving grandson happy, always reminding Finn of the loving, laughing mother who considered him her world.

But living with half her heart buried in the ground isn't easy.

When asked if she misses Bridget, Kelly inhaled slowly, as if breathing made her sore.

"All the time," she said, shutting her eyes. "All the time."