

Thirteen-year-old eighth grader in Missouri dies of COVID-19

Genevieve Leigh
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Peyton Baumgarth died of COVID-19 at Cardinal Glennon Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, on Saturday, October 31, becoming one of the youngest victims of the coronavirus in the US. He was only 13 years old.

Peyton was an eighth grader at Washington Middle School. His last day in school was on October 22, before beginning his quarantine on October 26. Within a week, his symptoms worsened dramatically, and he was hospitalized. He died less than two weeks after he last attended class.

Peyton's uncle told *5 On Your Side* news that the family never thought anything like this could happen. "We thought this was a passing...nothing worse than the common flu, and obviously that's not the case," said Wayne Franek, Jr.

Sadly, Franek reported that Peyton's mom has also tested positive for the coronavirus: "I can't imagine what she's going through," Franek said. "Nobody should ever have to deal with that."

Like hundreds of thousands of people across the US, Peyton's parents are undoubtedly struggling through unthinkable pain.

On top of the immense grief that comes with losing a child, these parents are facing outrageous medical bills from Peyton's brief hospital stay. A GoFundMe page for Peyton's parents, set up by a family friend, reads: "Peyton's parents, Stephanie and John, are now left with HUGE medical bills, funeral expenses and loss of pay related to time off of work."

The page also sheds light on the bright young child lost to the virus. "Peyton was a wonderful young man, who always had a smile to share with you. He was so very sweet and caring and FUN."

"He loved Christmas, video games, and enjoyed making YouTube videos, playing Pokemon GO, playing football and being with his family."

The family issued a statement Monday that reads, in part: "Peyton was a wonderful young man who was just discovering the joys of everything this life has to offer. We would like to thank the medical professionals that assisted our family and all those on the front lines of this pandemic; you are all heroes."

The sudden and tragic death of such a young child has sent shockwaves through the community and across the US. Hundreds of comments have been posted in the comment

section of news articles, on social media, and through the GoFundMe page.

One comment, by a former teacher, reads, "Just a few years ago, Peyton was my first grader. He was a sweet boy with a wonderful smile and a limitless future. My heart breaks for his parents, sister, family and friends."

A friend posted: "Peyton, I am so so sorry that this happened to you. I hope you get to play all the video games you want up in heaven. You are such a sweet boy and I am so glad I was able to know you."

Peyton is the youngest person in the state of Missouri to die from COVID-19. There is no doubt that his death will leave deep and lasting scars on all those who knew him, including his friends, classmates and teachers.

Consider for a moment how a parent of a young friend or classmate of Peyton will explain this tragedy. How will a child so young, age 12 or 13, cope with the idea that he or she could similarly become infected and die? Or the fact that he or she could become a vector for the disease at school, and possibly bring it home to mom and dad or brother and sister?

In a letter sent to families, the superintendent of the district of Washington, Dr. Lori VanLeer, notes that the district will be providing extra counselors for students when school reopens on Wednesday. However, the real question being obscured by the media is why the school will reopen for in-person learning at all.

Like almost every other state in the US, Missouri is seeing a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths. With a positivity rate of 28.8 percent, the state is 10-fold beyond the benchmark set by the World Health Organization for reopening schools and businesses.

The dashboard of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services shows a devastating situation. According to the reported figures, there have been more than 15,200 new cases in the last seven days alone. Missouri has reported the seventh-highest tally of deaths in the nation over the past week—104.

Nearly 500 people are in intensive care units in hospitals across the state of Missouri, and hospitals are reporting a severe shortage of beds.

In one recently recorded conference call between Governor Mike Parson and hospital leaders, BJC HealthCare President

and CEO Richard Liekweg reported that there were “basically no beds” available for patients across the BJC hospital system.

“We’re in the process right now of reassessing whether we’re going to need to start to cancel elective procedures (again) in order to accommodate what we think is going to continue to be a gradual increase in COVID patients at a time when our staff, like everyone else, is completely exhausted” Liekweg reported.

Despite the health catastrophe unfolding in the state (and across the country), the governor continues to allow schools to remain open, leaving it up to each district to decide on safety precautions. There is no statewide mask mandate or social distancing requirement.

Under such conditions, there is absolutely no scenario in which in-person learning can be conducted safely or responsibly. Such criminal and reckless policies will lead only to more needless deaths, including of children and young people.

The US death count includes scores of young, bright and previously healthy children, such as 17-year-old Elvia “Rose” Ramirez, one of nine brothers and sisters, who died in the first week of October. Elvia died in a North Dakota hospital room without any family members present. Her mother was sick with COVID at the same time, being treated in a neighboring hospital. She caught the virus after taking on most of the care for her daughter in a hospital that was overwhelmed with patients.

Her mother said goodbye to her daughter by phone, after she had already passed. COVID may claim such young victims less frequently than it does older people, but these deaths are occurring, and with increasing frequency.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children’s Hospital Association reported Monday that more than 61,000 children in the US were diagnosed with COVID-19 last week—more than in any other week of the pandemic.

According to the report, a total of 853,635 children have been diagnosed with the virus this year, representing 11.1 percent of all US cases. The percentage of pediatric cases has risen steadily since mid-April, when children accounted for just 2 percent of COVID-19 cases in the country.

As of Thursday, 121 children—those under the age of 18—had died. Countless more young people in their late teens and twenties have also been put into early graves.

In the last few months alone, COVID has claimed the lives of 19-year-old Chad Dorrill from North Carolina, 20-year-old Jamain Stevens Jr. of Pennsylvania, Michael Lang, a freshman at the University of Dayton in Ohio, and Jezreel Lowie B. Juan of Hawaii—to name only a few.

These deaths, like that of Peyton Baumgarth, were entirely preventable.

The handling of the pandemic by the US ruling elite, Democratic and Republican alike, has been driven not by any concern for the health and well-being of workers and youth.

Instead, the priority has always been the financial health and well-being of Wall Street, the corporations and the bank accounts of the rich.

Virtually nothing has been done to protect the population. Testing remains at abysmally low levels and is often unreliable. Contact tracing is almost non-existent. Unemployment aid has been cut off for millions. Social services are being robbed of resources. Families devastated from the loss of a loved one, like Peyton’s, are being forced to deal with outrageous medical bills that threaten to throw them into financial ruin.

Such tragedies are unfolding across the US and around the world every single day.

The immense and tragic experiences of workers and youth are not taking place in vain. These are mass experiences that are profoundly impacting the political outlook of millions of people.

There is a growing recognition within all sections of the working class, and especially among teachers and students, that if there is going to be a progressive solution to the crisis, it will have to come from the workers themselves, in opposition to both the Democrats and Republicans.

As for the reopening of schools, teachers, parents, students and other educators across the country are bravely taking action to fight for the safety of students like Peyton as well as the safety of educators and school workers. Rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, have begun to form in cities throughout the US and internationally to fight the spread of COVID-19 and demand the immediate closure of schools and fully funded remote learning.

These committees base their demands on the principle that even one death is too many.

We urge all workers and youth who want to fight against the unsafe reopening of schools to contact us today to learn more about these committees or to speak about your own conditions.



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