“We want the hospital and the system to be held responsible”: Family member of Orlando Health patient who died by suicide demands answers

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On May 16, Richard St. Onge, a patient at Orlando Regional Medical Center (ORMC) in Florida, committed suicide sometime between 7:00 and 11:00 pm. St. Onge had recently undergone surgery, and the hospital had reportedly changed his psychiatric medication. That night, with no sitter to watch over him, he used a bedside table to break the window of his 8th floor room and plunged to the grass below.

While it is still unclear whether anyone witnessed his fall late that night, he was eventually found and taken to the emergency room. On the eighth floor, badly understaffed nurses in the Progressive Care Unit had been assigned heavy patient loads in the double digits, and they did not discover his absence for a considerable amount of time.

Richard Allen St. Onge was born in Michigan on June 1, 1978. He died just a few weeks before his 44th birthday. He is survived by three children; three half-siblings, including his half-sister, Brittany; his father, Richard St. Onge; and his mother, Hope.

The family wants to know the truth about the circumstances surrounding Richard’s death. After reading social media comments from ORMC nurses, 31-year-old Brittany told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “What I have been told by the hospital is vastly different than what other nurses on social media are reporting.”

Despite the attempt to silence ORMC nurses and health care workers, hundreds have spoken through prominent nurse advocates on social media. The WSWS has received many reports from nurses on the case. According to anonymous health care workers who have reportedly been forced to sign non-disclosure forms regarding the incident, Richard responded negatively to the change in his psychiatric medication, and the staff begged ORMC administration not to take his sitter away.

This tragic turn of events could not have come as a greater shock to his sister, who noted that Richard was in good spirits, sober and sounded well just the previous day.

“The day before the incident was the last time I talked to him. He was in the hospital and going to have surgery the next day. He seemed to be in good spirits. He was a little nervous about surgery and going under as he had never done that before, so he made jokes about it. I remember he was really excited because he was able to order whatever food he wanted. He said, ‘Brittany you wouldn’t believe it, I had four dinners today!’ That was the last time we talked.

“The next day I received a voicemail at 1:43 p.m. from a nurse who said they were calling on behalf of my brother. My phone was off, so I didn’t get the voicemail until the day after. When I called the hospital back, I kept getting transferred around, and nobody would tell me anything. I called seven times and gave my number to at least four people. It took nine hours before finally anyone called me back. It was the president and who I assume was a lawyer called me back. They said there were people there, staff on the ground talking to him before it happened. I asked them, ‘So, he didn’t die alone,’ and they said, ‘No he didn’t die alone.’

“The exact words from the hospital were, ‘He fell from the eighth floor, that there were staff on the ground talking to him before he fell, and that immediately after he fell, there were staff on the ground helping to try to save his life.’ But, from every other account, that is a lie. They said they would send me a text and an email and I

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never heard from them again.

"At the time I was so emotional and in grief that I took it. But the more I thought about it, what the hospital told me doesn't make any sense. What does makes sense is what other nurses on social media have reported, such as Nurse Nander. The hospital was just calling to smooth it over.

"What really kills me is that I fully believe they thought they could get away with it because he was homeless in the area. They didn't think he had family who would fight for him.

"Talking to his kids, we are in agreement. We want the hospital and the system to be held responsible. We want this to come to light because of how they treated their nurses, how they treated their staff, and now they want to push this under the rug. This is not okay, and it's not the first time someone has died at the hospital because of how they treated staff. This is not any of the staff's fault, it's the hospital. They made decisions that led to this. It's enough.

"What's awful is that the staff feels guilt over it, because they are people who genuinely care and want to help and they are being taken advantage of. The hospital is the winner and everyone else loses. It's just awful and disgusting that hospitals can try to say, 'Well, this is the reason, or this is the reason.' But no, the reason is that you are greedy and selfish and you don't care about the people you should be taking care of, or the people you employ who are taking care of people."

Brittany has a message for health care workers at ORMC:

"First and foremost, thank you and I'm sorry you had to experience this in the flesh. It's hard for me to even hear about it. I'm sorry you feel like if you do the right thing you are going to lose your livelihood. I would appreciate anything from anyone who wants to come forward. I will keep your identity private as best I can. I want the hospital to be held accountable. Any help we can get from the people who know anything I would be sincerely grateful if they came forward, but I completely understand if they can't."

Brittany went on to describe Richard's life. "My brother had a very rough life. He struggled a lot and he wasn't a perfect person but he always took care of me and protected me when he was around. Since he left when I was young I always thought of him as a superhero. He called me his baby sister, and I always looked up to him. "

Among Richard's other qualities, Brittany added, "He had an ear for music and could play anything he heard. When I was younger he taught me how to play one of Beethoven's symphonies on a piano." She also described him as goofy, funny, and always wanting to make people laugh. He could be reserved about serious or emotional topics.

"He was intense with the people that he loved. Anytime he thought I was upset or sad, he would stop and look me in the eyes, ask me what was going on. He was kind to me and always made me feel safe and protected."

She added that what she wants everyone to know is just how much was lost, that her brother was on a good path and had made significant strides despite the obstacles he faced. "The last I talked to him he was sober and wanted to be better, was talking about feeling better and turning his life around."

Brittany is currently searching for a beloved picture of the two of them together from when she was a toddler. "It's a great picture. I was two or three years old. We were in a living room fort he made, and it was just him hugging me."

In discussing the difficulties faced by nurses everywhere who are being placed in impossible positions with superhuman workloads, Brittany said, "I love my brother and I'm very upset about what happened to him, but what happened to him was the result of the incompetency and neglect of the hospital, and that comes from greed and the whole system of health care."

Nurses across the world are working to build rank-and-file committees to fight against the for-profit health care system which places profits over patients. Visit wsws.org/nurses for more information.

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