

Her son went missing at Mass. and Cass, and her desperate search to find him began

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated October 12, 2021, 6:46 p.m.



Christina Frost found her missing son after posting on the Facebook group called The Mass Ave. Project Inc. She posed for a portrait outside of Boston Medical Center, where her son was being treated. GRETCHEN ERTL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Christina Frost gripped the wheel of her old hatchback. More than 280 miles lay between her and her son, dead or alive — she wasn't sure. But she swore she'd find him. She would bring him home.

She'd been up for hours the night before at her home in New Egypt, N.J. — wracked with guilt and anxiety. What had Andrew done this time, she wondered? The last time they spoke, he swore at her. Earlier that night, he called from an unknown number, saying he lost his phone and needed cash for a ride back to the hotel where he was staying in the Boston area. He sounded agitated. His words slurred. Which hotel? He didn't know.

"[Expletive] you," he muttered when Frost rebuffed his request for money. Then he stormed off, alone, in the dark.

For years, Frost's brilliant and talented son had wrestled with debilitating mental illness and addiction. (The Globe is identifying Frost by her maiden name and Andrew by his middle name to protect the family's privacy.) His 24 years had unfolded fitfully, in agonizing stops and starts. He was better until he wasn't. He was sober; then he relapsed. He cycled through doctors, medications, and diagnoses; hospitals, detox centers, and sober homes. Recovery is a tortuous, torturing journey, and to Frost, it was clear: Andrew was suffering.



A photo of Andrew that his mother Christina had shared on Facebook when he went missing. FACEBOOK

On the morning of Sept. 29, before setting off for Boston with just two changes of clothes in the back of her car and a vague sense of where Andrew had been the night prior, she posted a message in a public Facebook group called [The Mass Ave. Project Inc.](#):

Looking for my son. Last seen on Mass Ave and Southamptn at 11 pm last night. He has no phone, no money ... I am driving up from NJ today to look for him.

She added her phone number and a photo of Andrew from a trip they took to Rockport in August. Andrew — blond and square-jawed — is sitting on the edge of an embankment, his feet dangling out of frame. The water is crystalline, the sky is pearlescent blue, and Andrew is smiling.

A steady stream of comments, praying hands, and heart emojis rolled in:

Praying hes safe and will come home ... I pray you find your boy ... Praying for your family

Here, Frost found some solace, in this group of 6,000 people that has emerged in recent months as an [online clearinghouse](#) and support network for desperate family and friends, searching for loved ones in the chaos of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard, epicenter of Boston's homelessness and addiction crisis. The group [was founded](#) in June 2020 by friends James Bradley and Justin Downey, both in recovery for addiction, to recruit volunteers and organize donations for the homeless, as conditions in the area deteriorated.

"It's hell," said Bradley, who has watched this corridor, known as "Mass. and Cass.," transform over the course of the pandemic into a grim homeless encampment, where people buy and use drugs in plain sight. "It seems like there is no way out of there."



Tents and makeshift shelters lined Topeka Street in the area known as Mass. and Cass in Boston. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Over the past 15 months, The Mass Ave. Project has evolved into a crowdsourced repository for information — on empty detox beds, support groups, and sober home recommendations — and a virtual milk carton for missing persons. When he started the group, Bradley never envisioned people would use it this way, but he's not surprised: They have nowhere else to go, no one but them to turn to.

"A lot of these people are mothers. They don't know how to get this out there," Bradley said. "If you call the police station and say 'My son's missing, I think he's down on Mass. Ave,' they're gonna say, 'He's not missing. He's down there because he wants to be.'"

Pleas for help are posted almost daily, affixed with photos of loved ones from happier times. (Bradley and Downey, who approve the posts before they're published in the group, don't allow photos of people in circumstances that might compromise their dignity.) Commenters offer not only prayers and encouragement, but promises — to ask around, to stay on the lookout next time they venture into Mass. and Cass., searching for their lost loved ones, too.

Please help me find my son — a typical post goes — We have been so worried. He was clean for a year.

Still MISSING!!! It's been a few weeks since family has heard from him — goes another — We just want to know he is alive and OK.

"I can't believe it. I will inbox them and say, 'I'm sorry. I feel your pain. I get it,'" said Jennie Mazzola Gargone of Marlborough, who started regularly posting to the group in August. Her brother suffers from drug addiction and has been missing since July. Their father has Alzheimer's disease and it's getting worse.

I cant handle this much more please dad needs to see u — she wrote on Sept. 19, with a photo collage of her father and brother attached — don't do this to him he's so sad and u r basically the only one he remembers he is so lost.

"Nobody cares. We're throwaways," she added, her voice breaking. "But they're our family. That's what I have."

Andrew was 12 when he started experimenting with recreational drugs, like synthetic marijuana and bath salts. He was severely depressed and anxious as a child, prone to violent outbursts and panic attacks. He was taking a variety of mood stabilizers and antidepressants, but nothing seemed to help. He was a "tornado," Frost said, his temperament turning on a dime from one moment to the next.

He was also uncommonly bright with a gift for music. He started playing piano when he was 5, and by age 10, he was performing at the Shanghai Grand Theater and professional music venues across New Jersey and New York. In a local newspaper article about his trip to China, a reporter described Andrew as “the typical boy-next-door — he loves playing piano, skateboarding, playing baseball and soccer and hanging out with his friends like any 10-year-old boy does.”

But privately, Andrew was spiraling. Doctors suggested a mishmash of diagnoses to explain his behavior: intermittent explosive disorder, panic disorder, generalized anxiety, and ADHD. Finally, at 16, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Meanwhile, Frost was finding contraband — plastic baggies of white powdery substances — in Andrew’s pants pockets, beneath the floorboard in his closet, buried in the backyard.

And Frost, too, was unraveling. A public defender, Frost thought she understood “the system.” She had cross-examined forensic psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. She knew where treatment and services were, how to access them, and their limitations. She recognized addiction as a complex disease of the brain, not a sign of moral degeneracy or personal weakness.

But fighting for your own family, she realized, is different than fighting for a client. Andrew’s father died when Andrew was 3, and Frost was alone to bear this crushing load. She tried talk therapy. Her debts mounted. At one point, her weight dropped to 98 pounds.

Andrew spent his high school years in and out of psychiatric crisis units, juvenile detention, and therapeutic group homes for children with substance use issues and mental illness. When he was 18, he enrolled at the University of Rhode Island, but left after one semester. He moved back in with Frost in New Jersey, got sober, and started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Frost thought this was Andrew’s turning point, until one day when she arrived home from work and found him passed out on the sofa with a baggie of white powder in his hand.

She shook him awake, seized the drugs, and announced she was throwing them out. Andrew chased her around their house. As she tried running outside, he slammed the door against her arm and demanded that she give him back the drugs. So Frost tossed the baggie to him, and Andrew let her go. Then Frost did something she never imagined doing: She drove to the police station and filed a restraining order against her son.

Andrew was arrested, charged with possession and simple assault, and sentenced to probation. He enrolled in a drug court program, moved into an apartment with a girlfriend, and got a job. During this time, Frost adopted a “tough love” approach to her son. She would go one year with no contact. Then, she figured, they could try to repair their fractured relationship.

But just shy of one year, Andrew overdosed on fentanyl. He was revived with Narcan, a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose, and Frost dropped the “tough love” act. At the hospital, she asked Andrew if dying had finally convinced him to stop abusing drugs and take his recovery more seriously.

“No,” Andrew said. *“Dying is beautiful.”* He’d never felt so at peace.

The promise of recovery brought Andrew to Massachusetts in the beginning of 2021. By then, he had bounced from an outpatient treatment program in New Jersey to prison for violating his probation. He was released in November 2019, but when the pandemic hit, he started using again. He eventually secured an empty bed at a 30-day drug and alcohol addiction inpatient facility in the town of Millbury, south of Worcester. But after a devastating breakup with his girlfriend, he relapsed on benzodiazepines and returned to the Millbury program.

Recently, it seemed to Frost that Andrew was getting better. In late September, he moved in with a friend he’d met at detox. They were living in a charming little suburb west of Boston, with access to intensive outpatient treatment in a nearby city. Andrew was looking for work. He had an appointment with his psychiatrist on Sept. 28 that he intended to keep

But on Sept. 27, the winds shifted. Andrew called his mother five minutes before she was due to log into Zoom for court. He said he was having trouble using his Uber account, but Frost didn’t have time to help him. She had three back-to-back cases on her schedule, including two hearings. He called her five more times, but Frost couldn’t answer.

Hackles raised, Frost knew something was wrong. She tried calling him later in the afternoon, but Andrew didn’t pick up. His phone was dead.

Finally, around 9:30 p.m., he called from a borrowed cellphone. Andrew was in Mass. and Cass., a place he’d frequented in the past to buy drugs, and he sounded high. He argued with his mother over money before cursing at her and abruptly returning the phone to its owner. The next day, Frost blinked back tears as she bolted up the New Jersey Turnpike. The woman from whom Andrew had borrowed a phone spoke to Frost afterward, and said she would try searching for him. Like Frost, this woman said she was a mother — who had fallen on hard times — and her son was an addict, and she understood how Frost was suffering. She asked Frost if she was a member of The Mass Ave. Project on Facebook, and sent her a link to the group.

Frost scrolled through the group’s posts, an avalanche of hope and hopelessness spilled onto the screen. She wrote a pleading post of her own and waited.

At 1:30 p.m., Frost pulled off the turnpike and into a rest stop, about 30 miles north of her home. Andrew’s sisters from his father’s first marriage had spent the morning calling Boston area hospitals and police stations, asking if any John Does had been brought in. Frost sobbed in the parking lot, convinced Andrew was dead.

“I was trying to prepare myself for something that I always felt I had to prepare myself for,” she said later, “which was that my son was not going to come home.”

While Frost was in the bathroom at the rest stop, she answered a phone number with a Boston area code. A social worker from Boston Medical Center introduced herself. Then she explained, *“I’m calling about your son.”*

Andrew [had been stabbed](#) several times in the gut. When he arrived at the hospital, he had no ID and no phone. He needed immediate surgery. The social worker said he was alive, but recovering.

The hospital's social work team had seen Frost's post in The Mass Ave. Project, Inc. Facebook group. Frost updated it the following morning.

FOUND and SAFE! — she wrote — *Thank all of you for your thoughts, prayers and sharing*

Andrew was discharged last Thursday and in far better shape than when Frost first saw him on the evening of Sept. 29 — his face swollen, his left arm raised above his head in a partial cast, and his stomach pieced together with surgical staples and swaddled in transparent dressings.

Andrew was groggy from the pain medication, drifting in and out of consciousness. He managed to tell Frost what little he could remember from the previous night. He said he didn't know why he'd been stabbed or the man who'd done it. But he was alone when it happened, and he had to hold his intestines in his hands.

"Where am I going to go?" he asked his mother.

"I'm going to take care of you," she told him. *"You're coming with me."*

They both began to cry.

"That's what I needed to hear you say," he said.

She took her son home, as promised, ready to nurse him back to health. But whatever peace she'd grasped in the aftermath of his improbable survival evaporated almost as quickly as it came.

Andrew left on Oct. 10, for another notorious drug market, this time in Philadelphia. And Frost was back behind the wheel again, searching for her son.

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