

Issac Dale Clem: 1998-2024

A nomad with a soft spot for returning home

TRIGGER WARNING: THIS STORY DISCUSSES SUICIDE.

BY EMMA J NELSON

Issac Dale Clem loved to laugh, family members say, and he would do whatever he could to put smiles on their faces. He was a traveler, the self-selected term for unhoused people who move from city to city and state to state. He always returned to see his family.

His mother, Suzanne Gerhardt, says Issac struggled with his mental health. She says he always put the feelings of others before his own.

“He was always thinking about other people,” she says. “He just, for some reason, couldn’t see that he was a great person, too.”

Issac, 25, died by suicide in Junction City after setting himself on fire. (*Eugene Weekly* does not normally report on individual suicides or discuss the method of suicide. In this case, the death was in public and has been reported in the news and social media.)

‘He was always thinking about other people. He just, for some reason, couldn’t see that he was a great person, too.’ — SUZANNE GERHARDT

He was born Dec. 22, 1998, in Klamath Falls. From the beginning, family members say, Issac could only be described as tender hearted.

“Issac was full of love and whimsy and so many easy smiles to brighten the world,” his aunt, Linda Weatherford, says. “It would never take long to laugh when he was around.”

Suzanne says Issac rarely got into trouble. When he did, he was quick to ‘fess up and apologize.

“How can you stay mad,” she asks, when “he was disappointed in himself more than we ever could be?”

When Issac was 14, the Clems moved to Vancouver, Washington, and lived with Gerhardt’s partner, Lewis Gerhardt, and his daughter, McKenna. McKenna Gerhardt

says she and Issac were not only step siblings but also became close friends.

“It was just me, and then my dad’s new family,” McKenna says. “I was in a lot of emotional distress, and Issac was the only person who actually took the time to notice.”

Issac first left home after turning 18, seeking to find himself, his mother says. He never stayed in one place for long, but he’d return to Vancouver every year.

“He was kind of a wanderer,” Suzanne says. “A nomad, a gypsy. But he always came back.”

Issac lived in Oregon, Washing-

ton, Nevada, Michigan and Texas during his life. Suzanne says he was well-loved wherever he went. Out-of-state friends traveled to attend his July 28 celebration of life in Vancouver.

“He always starts off very excited at the prospect of new dreams and new goals,” Suzanne says, “and then for whatever reason, unfortunately, he gets in his own way, and it goes south and he comes back to Vancouver.”

According to members of his family, in the days prior to his death, Issac told his family that he was struggling and wanted to move back home. He did. And then at around 11 am on June 29 he left to drive his girlfriend’s car to Eugene. Suzanne gave him money for an Amtrak ticket so he could return home.



Courtesy Suzanne Gerhardt

Suzanne says she received a text from Issac at 1:33 pm that he was still struggling.

“He knew he could come home,” she says. “He was supposed to come home.”

At 2:05 pm, Eugene-Springfield Fire responded to a 7-Eleven in Junction City after receiving an initial report of a brush fire. Paramedics rushed Issac to PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center RiverBend in Springfield and then he was sent by life flight to Legacy Emanuel Medical Center in Portland. He died in the hospital’s burn unit at 7:44 pm. Suzanne, Lewis, Issac’s brother Colin and Colin’s girlfriend were with him when he died.

At the scene in Junction City, bystanders tried to help. “I’ve talked to witnesses, both in person and then I’ve spoken to four or five different people online, including who tried to help him,” McKenna says. “In situations like this, people don’t generally think about people outside of the family who had to witness it. So I mainly just wanted to reach out and let them know that there’s nothing else they could have done.”

Issac is survived by his mother and stepfather, Suzanne and Lewis Gerhardt; brothers Colin, Codon, Trevor, DJ and Sammy; sisters Kenzie, McKenna, Teyana and Ashley; and grandparents Jim and Yvonne Clem. The family suggests donations to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in Issac’s honor.

The Suicide Prevention Coalition of Lane County says that if a loved one is isolating, having extreme mood swings, increasing drug and alcohol use, talking about being a burden on others or acting reckless, they could be warning signs of suicide. The coalition advises speaking to the loved one alone about if they’re having suicidal thoughts and calling 988 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

slant

Because It’s Slanted

>> What do you think about *Eugene Weekly*’s new look and, in particular, the new logo? We think you (like us) will really like the way we redesigned the calendar listings, but we want to hear it from you! Do you love it, hate it or just don’t care? Drop a note to Editor Camilla Mortensen at Editor@EugeneWeekly.com. And if you have big feelings you want to see in print, send them to Letters@EugeneWeekly.com. You can also call 541-484-0548 and leave your tepid enthusiasm or rapturous excitement in a voicemail or call with office manager JJ Snyder.

>> From the amazing bespectacled pommel horse guy to that amazing picture of the Brazilian surfer rising above the waves, to Christian conservatives unable to tell the difference between Dionysis and Jesus, the Paris Olympics have had us enthralled.

>> Also enthralling is watching the groundswell of support for Vice President Kamala Harris

as her presidential campaign against Donald Trump surges. We are intrigued to see who she will choose as her own VP from what The Daily Show called the “Midwest White Guy Emporium.” We wonder if our country is still so racist and sexist that it would rather support a crooked white man than an accomplished woman of color? **The election is in November.**

>> Since opening in 2019, Big City Gamin’ has been one of downtown’s best places to grab a drink, eat at a food cart hub and watch Ducks football games — or hang out in the video game lounge. In January, Big City Gamin’ earned a place in our hearts after it opened its heaters for people experiencing homelessness during the ice storm. But bad news is here. Earlier this week, Big City Gamin’ announced it was closing its doors. If this is truly the end of Big City Gamin’, we hope whoever takes its place is just as dedicated to our community.

>> In better food news, it started out as a kitchen called Las Dos Aguilas — known for its *chile rellenos* served out the back of a church’s kitchen. Now Esther Sampayo Chavez says for her family, the ownership of the new Los 2 Paquitos is living out their lifelong dream. After 20 years, Sampayo Chavez’s father, Poco Sampayo, was able to open another family restaurant Friday, July 26, “which has been a big dream for our family,” she says. **Los 2 Paquitos restaurant is open Monday through Saturday from 9 am to 9 pm, while on Sundays from 12:30 pm to 9 pm — located on 1915 West 11th Avenue.**

>> It’s a ways out, but we do love us a parade (and still mourn the long-gone Eugene Celebration). The city of Eugene, however, has announced the return of last year’s fabulous and fun BRiGHT Parade on Sept. 24 — for more info go to EugeneBrightParade.com.