

Family of Preacher Who Died of COVID-19 After Mardi Gras Is Praying for Another Great Awakening

Landon Spradlin died of COVID-19 shortly after preaching the gospel on the streets of New Orleans during Mardi Gras. And though his story has gone viral in the media because of his political and charismatic beliefs, his family says they are just trying to grieve his passing—and praying for revival.

The 66-year-old street preacher and his family had gone to Mardi Gras consistently for the past three years to share the gospel. Spradlin was a musician who regularly used his talents to reach the lost in bars and clubs.

Despite the growing hum of concern over COVID-19 in the U.S., the New Orleans festival on Feb. 25 was just as rowdy as ever. Spradlin's 29-year-old daughter, Jesse, tells *Charisma* the family of musicians had plenty of opportunities to evangelize.

Shortly after the festival ended, Spradlin began feeling ill. But since he tested negative for COVID-19, he and his wife, Jean, decided to start the long drive back from Louisiana to their home in Gretna, Virginia, on March 16. During a restroom stop in North Carolina the next day, Spradlin collapsed and was rushed to the hospital.

According to various news reports, by the time Spradlin was hospitalized, he had developed pneumonia in both his lungs, and new tests revealed he did indeed have COVID-19. Since Jean was also sick—though testing negative for COVID-19—she was quarantined in North Carolina.

The tragic situation took a turn for the worse when Spradlin

developed an infection. According to updates on his Facebook page, his kidneys started failing, and he was put on dialysis on March 24. On March 25 at 4 a.m., just eight days after his collapse, Spradlin died.

It didn't take long for Spradlin's story to go viral. Most articles pointed out that he had shared a Facebook post decrying the "mass hysteria" surrounding the coronavirus while he was unknowingly infected with the virus.

The BBC ran an article about Spradlin's death on April 6 with the headline "Coronavirus: Pastor Who Decried 'Hysteria' Dies After Attending Mardi Gras." Spradlin's story soon gained traction with headlines such as "Pastor Who Criticized Coronavirus 'Mass Hysteria' Dies From Illness," "Virginia Pastor Dies From Coronavirus After Previously Saying 'Media Is Pumping Out Fear' About Pandemic" and "Christian Pastor Said Coronavirus Pandemic Is 'Mass Hysteria' Dies From the Virus After Ministry Trip to New Orleans."

Jesse says her dad did share a Facebook post about the "hysteria" surrounding COVID-19, but she still feels the headlines are inaccurate. On March 13, she explains, Spradlin shared a Facebook post that compared the swine flu to COVID-19. The post he shared indicated that President Donald Trump was being treated much worse during the COVID-19 pandemic than President Barack Obama was treated during the swine flu.

"They're saying that my dad said that everybody is acting in mass hysteria, which is not what he said," Jesse says. "He just shared a post that someone else created—it was not an original post. My father's entire perspective was 'Be careful. Follow the CDC guidelines, but I'm not going to live in a state of fear because God hasn't given you a spirit of fear.' Like, 'Be wise and make good decisions, but you don't have to live under a cloud of fear.'"

The headlines added to the tendency to politicize her dad's death, Jesse says. The Spradlin family has received a barrage of attacking messages from strangers online, especially on Spradlin's Facebook page. Some have even laughed about the preacher's death, saying "he got what he had coming." Jesse says she's still deleting hateful comments.

Jean's children—Jesse, 32-year-old Landon Isaac and 26-year-old Naomi—have tried to shield her from the negative comments and messages on social media, but some got through. Some people, she says, have personally reached out to her to tell her "how stupid my husband was and how wrong he was and how it's all Trump's fault."

"A couple of them tracked me down," she says. "And they started talking about Trump, and I'm going, 'My husband just died. Why are you talking to me?'"

The negatives responses to Spradlin's death made Jean "leery" to talk to the Washington Post when they approached her for an interview, but she decided to be interviewed anyway and requested that the outlet not "slam" Spradlin on the title. Jean says they did it anyway. *The Washington Post* came out with its piece on April 26, but instead of focusing on Spradlin's political views, the headline focused on his faith: "A Virginia Preacher Believed 'God Can Heal Anything.' Then He Caught the Coronavirus."

The article highlighted Spradlin's charismatic beliefs, which include the conviction that God still regularly performs miracles today, including supernatural healing. When Spradlin fell ill, his family and those who knew him cried out to God for a miracle, believing for full healing up until the day he died. The article explored the questions that arose when Spradlin wasn't healed as his family and friends had hoped.

But Jesse didn't feel the portrayal of her father's faith was comprehensive. The basis of Spradlin's faith, she says, was

that he believed the Word of God to be true—Jesus heals today just as He did in the Bible. But that doesn't mean He heals every single time.

"I have been physically healed of things, and I've seen God heal people," Jesse says. "But just because He doesn't heal every person in the way and in the time that we want Him to doesn't mean that He doesn't heal, that He doesn't have the power to heal. It just means, ultimately, I'm not God. The Lord is God. His ways are higher than my ways, and His thoughts are higher than my thoughts."

And although Jesse wishes that her father hadn't died and instead had been healed, she trusts that God knows what He is doing and that, ultimately, He is still good.

"It just comes down to trusting the Lord, to be honest, because I don't understand it," she says.

Jesse says her another important aspect of her father's faith was his passion and love for the lost. Spradlin wasn't one to be confined to the four walls of a church building. He could often be found in bars and clubs, trying to show Jesus' love to those society deemed unworthy. It wasn't uncommon for Spradlin to encounter Christians who had wandered from their faith and help them come back to the Lord.

Jesse recalls one man who used to play music with Spradlin until he canceled on him to play a bigger show. After leaving their gig, the man went back to smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol, and he left the church. But in November, this man saw Spradlin again in New Orleans and thought Spradlin would be mad at him for abandoning their gig. But that wasn't the case.

"My dad just looked at him and goes, 'Buddy, I'm not mad at you. Listen, man'—and he puts his hand on the guy's shoulder and he goes—'I love you.' And the guy starts crying," Jesse says. "My dad just embraced him and gave him a hug."

Jesse joined her father in that moment to pray over the man and give him a prophetic word.

Jean offers another example of her husband's evangelistic efforts:

"We have already seen many backslidden Christians come back to the Lord because he was one of the last people they talked to. God was so merciful that he went to visit a man who had left his wife, left the ministry, and what Landon said shook him so much that he went back to the Lord," Jean says. "He went back to ministry. He went back to his wife. And that was one life redeemed."

When Princess Diana died in 1997 and people were confronted with the bleak reality of death, Jean says, Spradlin went to the French Quarter in New Orleans and preached the gospel. He emphasized that no one knows when they are going to die, and no one is guaranteed tomorrow. Jean hopes people will hear that same message now as COVID-19 forces many to grapple with their mortality.

That, she says, should be the nation's focus. She implores people not to make her husband's death a political issue or an opportunity to mock Spirit-filled theology. Instead, she and her family are focusing on crying out to God for revival in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

Jesse agrees: "I want an outpouring of God. I've read about Great Awakenings. I've heard about them. But I want a Great Awakening in my generation. So I'm praying that this [pandemic] will turn into another Great Awakening."