

**From:** Anna Sanders <[asanders@siadvance.com](mailto:asanders@siadvance.com)>

**Date:** December 7, 2015 at 18:34:23 EST

**To:** Mayor's Press Office <[pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov](mailto:pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov)>

**Subject: Pool report: de Blasio meets with Staten Island family**

Pool arrives at split level home in the New Springville neighborhood of Staten Island around 1:30 p.m. Mayor Bill de Blasio and his wife, first lady Chirlane McCray, will be visiting with the family who lives here before a press conference on the South Shore announcing an effort to reduce opioid overdose deaths citywide.

Pool meets James Brenker, 21, and his grandfather, Stu Brenker, 75. James is a recovery opioid addict (used both heroin and prescription painkillers) and lives in the first floor apartment of his grandfathers home.

Stu is the president of the Mid-Island Political Action Committee and has a few photos on the wall of himself with former Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Though he's a registered Democrat, Stu's involved with the Staten Island Conservative Party. Stu said he knew the mayor "pretty well" when de Blasio was public advocate.

Everyone goes upstairs to an open dining room and living room. There is a large tan leather couch taking up most of the living room and facing a cabinet made of mirrors but everyone decides that the dining room table will probably be a better place for the conversation with the mayor and first lady.

James' mother, Yvoone, has brought everyone coffee and donuts from Dunkin Donuts but she has to leave for work before the mayor. James offers everyone coffee, though few take him up on the offer. Marti Adams Baker from the mayor's office, members of press, and Angela Attanasio of the Community Health Action of Staten Island are also here.

James says he was connected to the mayor's office through Alicia Palermo-Reddy, who runs Addiction Angels, a grassroots group on Staten Island. Alicia referred him to Diane Arneth of the Community Health Action of Staten Island, who then referred him to Marti.

James is nervous about meeting the mayor, but Angela tells him, "This is nothing compared to what you've been through already."

Staten Island Borough President James Oddo comes upstairs at around 2 p.m. and takes a seat at the table with James and Stu, where they begin talking about the opioid and heroin problem. They discuss the need for more resources, specifically detox beds for those in recovery, on Staten Island. "It's a mention that's got to be delivered to the mayor," Oddo (BP) says. They talk about the epidemic in general for about 10 minutes.

At 2:10 p.m., de Blasio (BDB) and first lady (FL) walk up the stairs and greet James, his grandfather and the BP. They gather around the dining room table. (From left: BDB, FL, James, Stu and BP) A joke about the Council/Mayor's Office softball game earns some laughs -- de Blasio's Republican third basemen, the BP, is apparently still limping from the game -- and cuts down some of the awkwardness. They have a conversation about James opioid use and recovery:

*BDB: Thank you so much for spending time with us.*

*James: no, thank you for hearing me out.*

*BDB: it means a lot to us.*

*James: and it means a lot to me because I want people to know that there's help out there. And that people like you guys are getting involved you know it shows people like me that this is serious, you know? And it shows that people are starting to care because, you know, a while ago it seemed like no one cared. That's how I felt. I felt*

*like there wasn't enough resources. Like my grandpa, we were just talking about it, out here, it's hard. It's hard to get even into detox these days because there's no beds. Cause everyone's just going in. And with just one detox on Staten Island how does that benefit us?*

*Stu: Staten Island hospital-- 20 beds. That's it. They have to turn away kids every day of the week. Unfortunately he's been there a couple of times. It's impossible to get out. And they closed Baley Seton and we have the other one. It's got to be more and more resources committed to this. I mean it's an epidemic. Everybody knows it now. It's an epidemic.*

*FL: it certainly is.*

*Stu: when he told me he wants to talk about it, I said absolutely, let's talk about it. I'm not embarrassed or ashamed of it. ... It touches every family.*

*BDB: that's right.*

*Stu: everybody has somebody. And that's it. The federal governments got to get involved also. There's got to be resources committed. More detox centers. More help centers. More resource programs (de Blasio nod in agreement), education. Everything.*

*FL: we need people to speak out. I'm so proud of you and grateful to you for speaking out about your problem because this affects all of us, every New Yorker. So can you tell us your story?*

*BDB: yeah, tell us your story.*

*James: well, I started my opioid use at 16, very young. Me and my friends one day we're just like, everybody's doing these pills for a reason. It's not for no reason. It has to make you feel good. So why not try it? Not knowing that months or years down the road that we're going to be physically addicted to this pain prescription that you can't get out of bed without it. So at 16 I experienced my first in patient treatment and from there it's just been a roller coaster. It's been up and down. Me personally, I started with Oxycodone and eventually found my way to IV-ing heroin. It just never got better. I blocked everything out. That was my thing. I personally didn't want to feel any emotion. I just wanted to--even physically dependent I still wanted to be hot and from 16 to 18 I was really just on a massive rampage with this. Losing everybody, just pushing everybody away and, the thing is, what I learned is that I had to want the help (BDB: yes.) I couldn't sit there and have my grandfather or have my mother and father force me into a place because it doesn't work like that. Because I'm just going to be sitting there, I'm not going to learn everything. I was going to block everybody out. And that's what I did for a long time. I did that for about 3 years. And then at 19, in 2013, I experienced my first overdose. And when I woke up, I woke up three days later and they had told me, we had brought you here on this table and your heartbeat was four beats per minute. You were legally dead. (Bdb and BP both gasp) and to wake up and hear that was just like, what am I doing with myself? You know, that's where it started for me. That's where I was ready to fight back. I wasn't going to give up I wasn't going to let this disease kill me. I couldn't. The Narcan (aka naloxone) saved me. Cause they told me if we didn't have this shot to give you, we don't know how you would have made it. You probably wouldn't have. So um, I found a rehabilitation center in California through a friend, I went out there and that's where my recovery really started, where I first really started to make my first attempt at staying clean. I was clean for about 18 months. I was clean from like 19 just till I was about to turn 21. I couldn't tell you what me go back out, if it was the people, or if it was me going back into these environments or if it was me hanging out with the wrong kids. I just, one day I picked up and I went right back. It was like I never stopped. (BDB + FL: Mmmhmmm.) The thing was I didn't have a big support network of sober people. That was where I went wrong. I didn't go full force into it. I wasn't in the meetings. And when I did go to the meetings I surrounded myself with the bad kids in the meetings, cause there's bad and good everywhere (BDB: Right) We could get 1,000 meetings here, but there's going to be people that are gonna be there that want to sabotage us, because misery loves company and I learned that at a very young age.*

*(James is starting to tear up at this point. BDB and FL are leaning forward, and de Blasio's arms are reaching out in front of him on the table toward James.)*

*FL: You started at a young age.*

*James: I did, I started at a very young age.*

*FL: You probably haven't had time to develop a whole new network of people.*

*James: It was so hard... Being clean for 18 months was awesome, you know? But it was so easy to get back. It was so easy to go right back to square one. In a matter of an hour, I was back right where I left off 18 months before.*

*Stu: They also had him -- in California -- on this VIVITROL shot, which you can't opiates or heroin or anything like that without recourse. It will make you sick and you can die from it. So they know that, so that kept him off it at that time. That's a good thing to get a start but you also have to be brainwashed.*

*BDB: What happened most recently?*

*James: Most recently, I was dating a girl and she left me and, you know, I was so codependent on her, which is really a problem because in my position, I shouldn't be codependent on anybody. That's what the disease tells me to do--be codependent on this person, let them help you...when she left me, I was just, like wow, I was devastated, it brought me back out. And I went out for just about a year now and I got clean just about two months, two and a half months ago, I ran out of resources, and that's honestly the truth, I ran out of resources, had no where to go. I checked myself into a psychiatric unit to get detoxed and I went into inpatient. My health insurance only allowed me to stay for a certain period of time, so I didn't get the full 28 days. But this time, I was like I'm not doing this. I don't want to be that person that's on the front page because I died. I'd rather be there telling everybody they can get help. And that help does exist and that it is out there and that people like you guys do care about us and that you don't want us to die anymore. I'd rather get my story out there and let people know, wow this kid really went through this and look where he's at. And that's like...when my friend Alicia (Alicia Palermo-Reddy, runs Addiction Angels, a grassroots group on Staten Island) called me, she said the mayor wants to interview you, I was like, wait, wait, hold on, what? (everyone laughs) I was kind of taken back for a second but I was like, I'm a firm believer of God, I think that's God talking to me and telling me, listen, this is for a reason. It's time to get your voice out there and it's time to let people know that if they want it they got it and we're here to help. And that's the start of it. This is hopefully where we'll start to get our Island back.*

*FL: It's a good start, it's a very good start and I know so many young people are going to be looking to you for inspiration and to learn more and more about what they can do to help themselves, cause that's where it starts--it starts with telling your story and reaching out for help. That's like step one. It's a journey and you're going to be on this journey for your life.*

*James: The rest of my life. And I honestly, now, I don't have a problem with that. When I was younger, I was like, drug addict for the rest of my life, how are people going to look at me? But now I don't care because I want to help. I have a younger brother. i don't want to see my younger brother and his friends go through what I went through because I went through everything. There was a point where I had nothing and my family had to give up on me. Because the tough love showed me that someone actually loved me. (BDB: Absolutely) and it didn't, you know at first I hated it -- why they kicking me out, why are they doing this? -- but now, sitting down and in a clear head, knowing that they did this to me because they don't want to see me die. They don't want to see me be that statistic. I really am full-fledged into this this time. and that's what it takes. You have to be fully in this because there's no gray area with this. It's either black or it's white. That's it. It's either you're going to do it or*

*you're not. And honestly, I wish when I was 16 I listened and I listened to the older guys telling me, like, listen, get it now, you don't want to be 23 or 24 or 28 coming in here with 12 rehabs under your belt or 20 rehabs under your belt saying I wish I listened to these people, I'd rather do that now then be 30 or 40 and 50 and being in treatment and still doing the same process over and over again.*

*BDB: And you have a whole life ahead. And you showed the strength to turn things around. There's a lot of people who I know in public life who are in recovery, including mayors, including all sorts of leaders, a lot of people obviously in entertainment in recovery, and a lot of them are stronger people, not that you would ever wish the experience on anyone, but I know for a fact a lot of them became stronger in the process and became leaders. You are right to see it, it has been a time of suffering but it's also strengthened you and given you a clear vision. Do you have now that network of sober people?*

*James: Yes I do. Actually it started with my friend Louise who had actually introduced me to a lady named Diane from Community Health Action who had introduced me to Marti (Marti Adams Baker) who had gotten us here. She gotten me into meetings and set me up with these kids that, they're my age and they have two, three years clean and I'm like, you know this is awesome, it's awesome to have friends that if I don't show up at one meeting, or I don't show up at one place, they're picking up the phone, are you OK? Where are you? Because my friends on the street, they didn't care. (BDB: Right.) The only way they care is if I called them and said listen, hey guess what, I have \$100 for us today, let's go out and have fun. Then they were my friends.*

The conversation continues as the pool and other members of the press are asked to leave so that we can get to the announcement in Eltingville in time.

For questions, please don't hesitate to contact the pool at 917 525-9025 or [asanders@siadvance.com](mailto:asanders@siadvance.com)

--

Anna Sanders  
City Hall Reporter, Staten Island Advance  
917-525-9025 (cell)  
[asanders@siadvance.com](mailto:asanders@siadvance.com) | @AnnaESanders