

# The Winchester Star

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WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA 22601 \$1.25

SATURDAY IN THE STAR



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Pastor Brad Hill of Grace Downtown of Winchester church delivers his sermon Sunday after being reinstated as senior pastor.

## The restoration of Bradley Hill

### Local pastor battles back after recent drug relapse

By BRIAN BREHM  
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — In April, Bradley Hill found himself alone in Williamsburg, fearing he had lost his wife, his friends, his church — everything.

Hill, affectionately known throughout the Winchester area as Pastor Brad, had fallen hard from grace. The recovering addict who preached faith, love and sobriety every week to the hundreds of people in his congregation at Grace Downtown of Winchester had secretly relapsed.

"Relapse doesn't care who you are," Hill said last week in his first interview about the situation. "It doesn't care if you're the pastor of a church, a doctor or a street person."

Pastor Brad said he was weakened by his personal ambitions to become a prominent member of the community, and that caused him to lose sight of his faith and recovery.

In late January, he started using drugs again, even as he publicly touted the blessings of a drug-free lifestyle.

Pastor Brad was able to keep his secret for awhile, but eventually, his wife and members of the church at 35 E. Jubal Early Drive in Winchester caught on to the fact that something was seriously wrong. In April, they removed him from his role as lead pastor of the church he had founded.

But they also offered him a path toward redemption. If Hill got clean, successfully completed treatment and counseling, and made amends for his transgressions, he could be



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Pastor Brad Hill addresses his parishioners at Grace Downtown of Winchester church as his wife Mary looks on after he was reinstated as senior pastor during the 9 a.m. service Sunday.

"If none of us got second chances, none of us would be here," Matt Fanning, a member of Grace Downtown of Winchester's board of directors, said on Sunday. "Grace is in our

name."

#### 'I was desperate'

No one chooses to be an addict; you're either born that way or you're not.

For example, if five friends go out for a drink after work, four of them will be perfectly content with one beer. The fifth will want to keep the party going, either with the group or at home alone.

If five friends pass around a joint, the fifth will be thinking, "If weed makes me feel this good, I wonder what painkillers feel like?"

Pastor Brad is the fifth person. The 60-year-old started succumbing to addiction when he was a young man. Like most addicts, he made excuses to himself and others in order to justify his alcohol and drug use — even though he knew it was killing him — because it was too terrifying to think about facing life sober.

"I got high on crystal meth one time and thought I was swallowing my tongue," Pastor Brad said. "I stopped at a convenience store and ran in saying, 'Call 911.' I was so high, I was having a hallucination."

His addiction eventually got so out of hand that he would visit friends just so he could raid their medicine cabinets. One day, Pastor Brad gobbled down two odd-shaped pills he found in the prescription bottle of a friend who was recently discharged from a hospital.

"It didn't look like pills, but I figured they

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JOHN MINCHILLO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A mourner places flowers and pictures in the name cut-out of Kyung Hee (Casey) Cho on Friday at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York.

## U.S. marks anniversary of 9/11 amid pandemic

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, KAREN MATTHEWS and JENNIFER PELTZ  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Americans commemorated 9/11 Friday as another national crisis reconfigured memorial ceremonies, dividing some victims' families over coronavirus safety precautions, and a presidential campaign carved a path through the observances.

In New York, victims' relatives gathered Friday morning for split-screen remembrances at the World Trade Center's Sept. 11 memorial plaza and on a nearby corner, set up by separate organizations.

Standing on the plaza, with its serene waterfall pools and groves of trees, Jin Hee Cho said she couldn't erase the memory of the death of her younger sister, Kyung, in the collapse of the trade center's north tower.

"It's just hard to delete that in my mind. I understand there's all this, and I understand now that we have even COVID," said Cho, 55. "But I only feel the loss, the devastating loss of my flesh-and-blood sister."

Around the country, some communities canceled 9/11 ceremonies, while others went ahead, sometimes with modifications. The Pentagon's observance was so restricted that not even victims' families could attend, though small groups could visit its memorial later in the day.

On an anniversary that fell less than two months before the presidential election, President Donald Trump and Democratic challenger Joe Biden both headed for the Flight 93 National Memorial in the election battleground state of Pennsylvania — at different times of day. Biden also attended the ceremony at ground zero in New York, exchanging a pandemic-conscious elbow bump with Vice President Mike Pence before the observance began.

In short, the 19th anniversary of the deadliest terror attack on U.S. soil was a complicated occasion in a maelstrom of a year, as the U.S. grapples with a pandemic, searches its soul over racial injustice and prepares to choose a leader to chart a path forward.

Still, families say it's important for the nation to pause and remember the

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## Guns returned in Frederick's first red flag law case

By EVAN GOODENOUGH  
The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — A man whose guns were seized in Frederick County's first enforcement of Virginia's new red flag law has had them returned.

The man, who The Winchester Star isn't naming because he wasn't charged

with a crime, appeared at a substantial risk order hearing in Frederick County Circuit Court on Friday. He said his son and father lied about him allegedly pulling a pistol on his son in their home on Sept. 2.

"The red flag law is wrong because anybody who is spiteful can have someone's

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### CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

#### COVID-19 Count

Number of reported COVID-19 cases and deaths as of Sept. 11, 2020

Virginia: 131,640 cases, 10,155 hospitalizations, 2,711 deaths, 1,863,062 tested

Lord Fairfax Health District: 2,905 cases, 257 hospitalizations, 98 deaths, 49,969 tested

Locality	Cases/hospitalizations/deaths	Locality	Cases/hospitalizations/deaths
Winchester	461/35/4	Shenandoah County	785/84/50
Frederick County	806/62/11	Page County	367/41/27
Clarke County	86/12/0	Warren County	400/23/6

Number of outbreaks in Lord Fairfax Health District: 32 (890 total outbreaks in Virginia). Seven outbreaks in health care settings, 12 outbreaks in long-term care facilities, 12 outbreaks in congregative settings and one outbreak in a correctional facility.

SOURCE: VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

## Daily U.S. deaths down, but trend may reverse

By CARLA K. JOHNSON and NICKY FORSTER  
Associated Press

The number of daily U.S. deaths from the coronavirus is declining again after peaking in early August, but scientists warn that a new bout with the disease this fall could claim more lives.

The arrival of cooler weather and the likelihood of more indoor gatherings

will add to the importance of everyday safety precautions, experts say.

"We have to change the way we live until we have a vaccine," said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. In other words: Wear a mask. Stay home. Wash your hands.

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### TODAY'S FORECAST

Mostly cloudy with isolated showers. Southeast wind 3 to 8 mph. Mostly cloudy tonight with more isolated showers before dawn.

74 HIGH

60 LOW

Full report A13

### CONTACT US

540-667-3200  
8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday





JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

Board members at Grace Downtown of Winchester church lay their hands on Pastor Brad Hill as he is reinstated as senior pastor Sunday after he went through rehabilitation and met their requirements to resume his role as senior pastor.

## Restoration

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probably got melted or something," Pastor Brad said. "I was desperate."

When he came out of the bathroom, his friend asked if he would like to see the kidney stones he passed while he was in the hospital. "That's how bad my addiction was," Pastor Brad said. "I ate kidney stones."

In 2012, he finally managed to overcome his fears of sobriety. He became an advocate for addicts and started telling them how his faith helped him overcome addiction. He even launched a church, Grace Downtown of Winchester, to share God's message with those whose faith had faltered or never existed.

About two years into his sobriety, he got married. Pastor Brad had been so forthcoming about his addiction, so steadfast in his resolve to stay sober, that his bride, Mary Hill, said she believed he would never again succumb to the temptations of drugs and alcohol.

She was wrong. "He put so much pressure on himself to not let people down that eventually, it got the better of him," Mary Hill said.

### 'The backlash'

Pastor Brad is a man of profound faith. He gets strength from the Bible, and he considers it to be God's direct word.

His literal view of the Bible's teachings got him in hot water on Jan. 11, and played a significant role in his recent release.

It was a Sunday morning and Pastor Brad was speaking to his congregation about the Bible's stance against homosexuality and living together outside of wedlock. While he personally welcomes gay and unmarried couples into his church, he said God opposes relationships outside of the so-called natural order. He then proclaimed that gay people and unwed couples could no longer work with children in the church's youth ministry.

"A lot of people didn't understand, but one of the things I have to do as a pastor is tell the truth about what God's word says," Pastor Brad said last week. "It was God's word that compelled me to do what I had to do."

An article about his sermon appeared in the local newspaper and the community's response was overwhelmingly negative. Pastor Brad said most of his neighbors put up gay pride flags in front of their homes, and he and the church were bashed relentlessly by hundreds of people on social media.

"The backlash from what happened really messed with me," he said. "I didn't handle it well."

By the end of January, Pastor Brad—who still stands by his interpretation of the Bible's views regarding drugs and unwed couples—was turning to drugs to fill his emotional and spiritual voids.

He started with kratom, an Asian plant that is legal to buy but, when taken in sufficient dosages, can produce effects similar to those of opioids and stimulants. Pastor Brad then visited doctors to complain of anxiety, which led to them prescribing ben-

zodiazepines like Valium and Xanax.

"I didn't let them know that I was an addict, which I should have done," he said.

In a matter of weeks, Pastor Brad looked weak and tired, and his personality had changed.

"People in the church would come up and ask me, 'Are you OK?'" he said. "I would tell them, 'I'm just tired.' Nobody knew, not even my wife."

Or so he thought.

### 'My lowest place'

In early April, Mary Hill told the church's board that her husband was using again, and together they staged an intervention. They told him he could no longer serve as lead pastor of the church he had founded unless he committed to an intensive, prolonged course of treatment and therapy.

Pastor Brad's initial reaction was anger and outrage, but Mary Hill would hear none of it. She shot back with a fiery passion that left her husband with no doubt that he had to agree to the board's conditions if he wanted to save his marriage and ministry.

"I dropped a few f-bombs," Mary Hill admitted. "In church nonetheless."

A few days later, Mary Hill drove her husband to the Farley Center, a residential rehabilitation clinic in Williamsburg.

"God met me there in my lowest place," Pastor Brad said. "He told me he loved me, he wasn't done with me, and he would help me. He's been faithful to that promise."

After a week of detox, Pastor Brad took advantage of the Farley Center's recovery programs.

"It lasted five weeks and it changed my life," he said. "It caused me to realize where I was and the weight of what I'd done."

Once he was out of rehab, Pastor Brad said the church's board put him on "a program of restoration," which included staying in contact with his recovery sponsor, participating in a 12-week outpatient treatment program, having weekly conversations with both a psychological counselor and a spiritual advisor, and committing to a 12-step recovery program.

"I had to make a list of people I had harmed," he said. "I think I'm up to 65 pages."

As of last week, Pastor Brad said he had met every one of the board's conditions "and then some," and was well into his ongoing 12-step recovery program.

"We believe that God can restore anybody who wants to be restored," Shelley Temple, a member of Grace Downtown of Winchester's board of directors, said on Sunday. "He's probably closer to God now than ever. He's a changed man."

"He definitely has the willpower to keep going and get his life back together," added board member Don Scarfoss. "I didn't think it was possible, not in the shape he was in. I'm very proud of him."

None of the church's five board members hold ill will toward Pastor Brad, and they all acknowledge he had become overwhelmed with the responsibilities of running Grace



JEFF TAYLOR/THE WINCHESTER STAR

ABOVE: Pastor Brad Hill of Grace Downtown of Winchester church gets a congratulatory hug from parishioner Jason Miller after he was reinstated as senior pastor Sunday. RIGHT: Bella the service dog welcomes Pastor Brad Hill back to his senior pastor role Sunday at Grace Downtown of Winchester church. Bella belongs to parishioner Melissa Ambers.

Downtown of Winchester on his own. To ease his burden, they recently took over the administrative aspects of church operations so he can focus on the congregation's spiritual well-being.

"Brad was a central part of helping me turn my life around," Fanning said. "I think it would have been very hypocritical of me to even consider the thought of not giving him this chance."

Mary Hill said she has forgiven her husband and is proud of his comeback.

"There were quite a few people in the NA [Narcotics Anonymous] community that walked away from him, which I thought was pretty sad given that he had supported them for so long," she said. "We all fall. We have to have grace and mercy, especially if we want to receive the same things from God."

### 'Rising from the ashes'

Shortly after 9 a.m. on Sunday, Pastor Brad stood in front of the Grace Downtown of Winchester congregation and spoke to them for the first time in five months as their lead pastor.

"This is a big day," he said as members of the board of directors came forward and formally reinstated him to his position. "I'm so excited to be back, and I'm so humbled that I've been given another chance."

Pastor Brad then launched into a 30-minute sermon with no notes and nothing prepared in advance—just a man speaking straight from the heart about love, compassion and mercy.



"No matter what you've done, God is not done with you yet," he told the congregation as they cheered and applauded. "It's not the failure that matters; what matters is what you do with it."

Today, Bradley Hill refers to himself as Pastor Brad 2.0. He has a renewed passion for his church, faith and marriage.

"My relationship with God is better than it ever has been, by far," he said.

He has resigned from several community and nonprofit boards, including the Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Abuse Coalition, and apologized to hundreds of people he believes he hurt with his recent relapse.

"Most people have been very loving and accepting," Pastor Brad said. "Every day when I get up, I ask God to forgive me. I hope and pray others can as well."

He is also improving his personal health by exercising and maintaining a low-carb diet that has dropped his weight to 167 pounds and given him the physique of a long-distance runner.

"The Bible says, 'The righteous man falls seven times, but he gets up again,'" Pastor Brad said. "I've been rising from the ashes since April 4th. I had a lapse, but that's not going to keep me down."

—Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com