



Megan Ernst's husband, Michael, was killed in a Navy training accident just over a year ago. "Never in a million years would I have thought that they would show up at my door.... Never," she said of the day she was notified of his death. **BILLY SCHUERMAN/STAFF PHOTOS**

'HE WAS A DAD. HE WAS MY HUSBAND.'

Virginia Beach family copes with loss and life a year after Navy SEAL's death

Michael Ernst's trifold flag is displayed in Megan Ernst's home in Virginia Beach. She was presented with the flag after her husband was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



By Caitlyn Burchett
Staff writer

Megan Ernst and her two young children were eating dinner on Feb. 19, 2023, when four uniformed sailors and two Navy SEALs knocked on their front door. "If they are at your door, there is no hope," Ernst said, shaking her head as tears

trailed down her cheeks. Michael Ernst, chief special warfare operator, died in a training accident while performing a high-altitude, low-opening jump in Arizona. He was 36 and had been assigned to Naval Special Warfare Development Group, also known as SEAL Team 6, based at Virginia Beach's Dam Neck Annex to Naval Air Station Oceana. More than a year since her

husband's death, Megan said her focus is on healing her family and remembering her husband for more than the uniform he wore. "First and foremost, he was a dad. He was my husband," she said. "And he was a good, kind person." The couple met while attending college from 2004-08 in Ohio. They reconnected **Turn to SEAL, Page 18**

Trucker alleges firm falsified driver's logs

Man says fake switch made shortly before fatal party bus crash in 2022

By Peter Dujardin
Staff writer

YORK COUNTY — The trucker who in late 2022 slammed into the back of a party bus on Interstate 64 — killing three young people from Hampton Roads — claims the firm he worked for routinely falsified driver logs required under federal law. Daniel Lee Cramer, 62, of Alabama, told federal investigators he would call the Chicago-area firm, Triton Logistics Inc., then a company office in Lithuania would "electronically switch" his tractor-trailer to a fake

"co-driver" — a man he never met — and Cramer would continue on his way as if he were the other driver. With the switch, Cramer said, he would have a "fresh clock" to keep logging hours at the wheel. Cramer asserted that this was done with Triton Logistics' knowledge and at its direction. In fact, he said, company employees told him exactly what to say when asking to be logged in and out. Cramer said he logged himself back in as the driver less than two hours before he crashed into the back of the party bus as both vehicles traveled eastbound through York County at 1:38 a.m. on Dec. 16, 2022. **Turn to Crash, Page 4**

INSIDE

Purple haze over Virginia hoops

By knocking off favored Wisconsin, JMU — the state's last team standing — reaches the NCAA's second round for the first time since 1983. **Sports**

Greek myths get a modern twist

Amaya Braganza celebrates her Filipino heritage and first lead role as Broadway's "Hadestown" opens this week at Chrysler Hall. **Sunday Break**

SUNNY TO PARTLY CLOUDY

High: 53 Low: 37

Details on the back page of news



CHESAPEAKE

Carey calls an audible, aligns with Democrats

Ex-NFL player leaves GOP, plans run against West in mayoral race

By Natalie Anderson
Staff writer

CHESAPEAKE — Council member and former NFL player Don Carey will challenge Mayor Rick West in November's mayoral election — and he's switching political parties to do so. Carey, who made an unsuccessful bid for a statehouse seat as a Republican last year, has gained the backing of one of Virginia's most powerful Democrats — Don Scott, the Virginia House speaker — as well as the Chesapeake Democratic Committee. **Turn to Carey, Page 18**



Carey

Though local elections in Chesapeake are nonpartisan, the benefit of having a party's backing is that a candidate's name is listed on sample ballots that party leaders and volunteers distribute at the polls. But in this year's election cycle, Carey was one of a handful of Republican incumbents the local GOP did not endorse when it voted on its official slate of City Council, mayoral and school board candidates in January. Carey said he's making the



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SEAL

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years later at a friend's wedding, and in February 2013, Megan found herself visiting Hampton Roads. At the time, Michael was assigned to Virginia Beach-based SEAL Team 10.

They married in December 2014 at the chapel at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek. They welcomed a daughter, now 6, in 2017, and a son, now 4, in 2020. For the bulk of Michael's Navy career, the family has lived in Virginia Beach near his East Coast-based assignments.

"It's funny to think about the perception of what being married to a SEAL is like versus the reality," Megan said with a laugh. "It is not romantic in any way, shape or form. They are gone all the time. They are stressed out a lot."

Throughout their relationship, Michael deployed for more than six months on three occasions. There were times they went weeks without communicating and, due to the nature of his job, she often was left in the dark about where he was and when he would return. When he was not deployed, Megan estimated training pulled him away for a cumulative six months per year.

He kissed his family goodbye on Feb. 17, 2023, with the expectation that he would be home a week later to celebrate his birthday and settle into a slower-paced work schedule. With 13 years of naval service, Michael was working toward becoming an instructor, she said.

Then ... the worst. "I was blindsided," Megan said. "Never in a million years would I have thought that they would show up at my door on that training trip. Never."

She said in the weeks after his death, life was a blur.

"The machine that is the military starts," Megan said. "It's so sad but they know what to do and how to do it when this happens."

Michael's unit, the Navy SEAL Foundation and the larger Hampton Roads military community swooped in to tend to the family's every



Megan Ernst said of late husband, Michael: "He was kind and he was a good person." **MEGAN ERNST**

need. A dignified transfer happened at sunset the day after his death. One week later, a memorial service was held at the Little Creek amphitheater, just down the road from the chapel where the couple had married.

In late March, the family buried him at Arlington National Cemetery.

"That was my worst day," Megan said through tears. "It was so final. The image is burned into my head of them giving my son the flag — his little baby hands reaching out for that flag."

She said she hopes her husband will be remembered as a family man — who prioritized loved ones above all else — and as a dedicated Navy SEAL who excelled in his professional endeavors. His accolades included three Combat Action Ribbons, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal and a Silver Star, which was awarded in 2021 following a successful hostage rescue.

But more than anything, she hopes he is remembered for his kindness.

"That's what I keep telling my kids. You know why 1,700 people showed up at his memorial? It is because he was kind — not because he was a Navy SEAL," she said. "It's because he was kind and he was a good person."

Ernst explained to her children, who were 5 and 2 at the time, that "Daddy went to the stars. Daddy went to heaven."

"But my son didn't understand that that wasn't a location. It wasn't like Florida or Arizona or wherever," Ernst said. "He didn't understand

that Daddy was not coming back."

The family began therapy to help cope with their loss, but helping her children understand their father's death, Megan Ernst said, will be a lifelong process.

"It will be lifelong for me, too," she said.

'Grief is enduring'

For military families, the loss of a loved one because of service-related incident is like living their worst nightmare, said Andy McNeil, senior adviser for Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors. The national nonprofit, also known as TAPS, has provided resources for 30 years to families grieving the death of a military member or veteran.

The loss of a loved one, McNeil said, is a major disruption that shakes the bedrock of families — including their routines, rituals, responsibilities, values and faith. Unique to military families is that the death of service member often means the family loses connection to the military community, McNeil said.

The concept that grief is a set of stages that are a minor disruption for a short period of time before someone finds their footing and moves on isn't reality, he said.

"Grief is enduring and just becomes a part of their life," McNeil said. "We continue to love those people who died, so it's really like a transition to that relationship. It doesn't end, it just shifts to something different — one

FINDING SUPPORT

Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors (TAPS) chapters across the country offer grief support, which nonprofit senior adviser Andy McNeil said focuses not on healing, but on adapting to the reality that a loved one has died and the grief that loss brings. The Virginia Beach chapter meets on the second Wednesday of each month. For emotional support or to connect with resources and programs, military or veteran survivors can call a 24/7 helpline at 800-959-TAPS (8277). For more information, visit taps.org.

of remembrance."

Her grief, Megan Ernst said, has been intense and constant.

"You are in the greatest pain of your life and trying to function, yet take care of these two little people and make them feel comfortable and safe when you don't even feel safe," she said.

But her responsibilities as a mother to two young children has taken precedence.

"I would give myself a certain amount of time to just be on the ground," she said. "But after that time, you have got to get up and you have got to do laundry and go get groceries."

Cheyenne Malmstrom, a fellow Navy SEAL spouse, stood by her friend through the past year's darkness. They've grown close since 2018 — experiencing pregnancy, deployments and life milestones together.

"A part of her died along with him that day," Malmstrom said. "She hides it well, but she lost her person that day and no matter how much time goes on, that hole is always going to be there."

Malmstrom said it was a delicate balance to give Ernst the space to grieve and also be there to lift her up when she needed it most. At times, that meant silently being there. And other times, it meant helping with tasks such as exterminating spiders or planting trees.

The family suffered another loss last June when their 9-year-old dog, Gus, died from bone cancer. Gus was Megan's companion while her husband was away.

"Losing him felt like losing a last connection to the life she knew before Mike died," Malmstrom said.

The Ernsts cling tightly to their memory of their husband and father. They watch home videos of pillow

fight, family outings at the park and the children playing in leaves stirred up by their dad.

Each night, the kids gather at the kitchen island to play "High, low, what the heck, and what would Daddy love," where they share details of their day. On a nearby counter, a digital photo frame flashes images of the life they shared with him. Across the kitchen, his espresso machine sits on the counter of his "coffee corner."

Coffee, Megan said, was never her thing. But now she drinks a cup each day.

She feels closest to her husband when she cuts the grass — he was meticulous in caring for the yard. She said she will probably never wash his clothes kept in a laundry basket in the bedroom, although his scent will fade in time.

"Ten years is what I got with him," Megan said, her voice cracking. "But that has to last me a lifetime."

In honor of her husband's 38th birthday, Ernst arranged a 3.6-mile community run with coffee and doughnuts in February at a local park. It coincided with the one-year anniversary of the last weekend she saw him. She invited members of their military family to participate — and share memories of him.

When she hears stories from people reevaluating their life because of her husband's impact, the loss hurts less.

"I think my worst fear is that he's going to be forgotten," she said. "But I will never forget him."

'She loves them for me'

About a week after his death, Megan said she watched a video of Michael

giving a speech in April 2022 at MIT as part of the Sloan Fellows master's degree program.

"SEAL is what I do. It is not who I am," he said in the video.

The 30-minute talk summarized his life, including why he joined the Navy, his commitment to service and the kind of leader he strived to be. But through it all, he referenced his love for his family and the resilience of his wife.

"I am gone for about 150 days a year. That is 150 days that Meg is a single working mom, essentially. These kids love her, and she loves them," he said. "And she loves them for me when I am not there."

Megan has watched the video so often she has memorized her husband's closing remarks. The point that has stuck with her is when he spoke about facing insurmountable odds.

"You can do nothing and let it consume you, or you can start to do something, even if you don't know what that something is," Michael said.

It is a mantra, Megan said, she uses to get through each day.

The mother tells her children "Daddy loves you" every day as they learn to navigate life without him. They don't eat Ice cream, make silly jokes or play laser tag without someone saying, "Daddy would love this. Do you think he is jealous?"

"Probably, because he loved ice cream," Megan said with a laugh, recalling the previous conversation with the children.

As she laughed, she subconsciously twirled her husband's gold wedding band dangling from a delicate chain around her neck. A framed display of his stars and achievements hung on a wall nearby while the trifold flag handed to their son rested on a mantle in the kitchen.

"I know there are more bad days to come," Ernst said. "But the time in between when I'm just on the floor crying is getting longer and longer."

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Carey

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switch after realizing the notions and values he thought Republicans stood for seem to no longer be the case.

"When I ran for City Council in 2020, I expected I would be part of a group that would listen to new perspectives and welcome change. That I would be seen as a teammate who could make a difference in a city with tremendous potential to do more for everyone," Carey said.

"Instead, I've learned that smoke-filled rooms and insider trading aren't things of the past in Chesapeake, and that the notions of openness and transparency haven't been much more than dressing on a word salad."

Carey, first elected to City Council in 2020, declined to elaborate on some of the challenges he said he's encountered at the local party level. Last year, he ran for House District 89, an open seat representing parts of Chesapeake and Suffolk. In the Republican primary, he lost to Baxter Ennis, who went on to win the seat.

A former defensive back who spent one season with the Jacksonville Jaguars and eight with the Detroit Lions, Carey said in sports, in life and in politics "change is inevitable."

"So, yes, I've changed parties and I'm in the race to become Chesapeake's next mayor because the notion that 'it's my way or the highway' isn't a path to a (bright

future, and ribbon cutting is no substitute for leadership," he said.

This year's City Council election is in November — a relatively new change for the city — meaning a higher turnout is expected since it's also a presidential election.

Scott told The Virginian-Pilot that his support for Carey follows a meeting with Chesapeake Democratic Committee members last week, where he and other Democrats vetted Carey "in a very public way" and that he answered all their questions "with some pressure."

Scott said Carey understands and stands with the core values of Virginia Democrats, which he described as working toward an economy that works for every hard-working Virginian, world class public education for children, a \$15 minimum wage, voting rights freedom, protecting women's reproductive health care and eliminating "the scourge of guns in our communities."

"I think it's a big deal when you have someone who's been running as a Republican," Scott said. "People who had been moderate conservatives are now having to find a home in the big tent of Democrats because MAGA Republicans have become too extreme and too corrupt."

Chesapeake Democratic Committee chair David Washington said Carey's desire to switch parties was a "welcomed surprise."

Washington said the main question Democrats asked before granting the endorsement was how sincere Carey

was. He said Carey made it known the Republican party has changed over time and no longer aligns with his personal values.

"(We) believe that Don Carey wants to represent all of Chesapeake, from South Norfolk to Western Branch to Deep Creek and those communities that feel like they aren't being represented on City Council, or they don't have a voice in City Hall," Washington said.

In an emailed statement to The Pilot, the Chesapeake GOP said it endorsed Carey when he first made his bid for City Council in 2020 but that he withdrew from seeking its endorsement after "voters rejected his bid for the Republican nomination last year." The statement said Carey was a "political opportunist."

"Mr. Carey ultimately decided to seek the Democrat Party's Endorsement for Mayor when they had no other candidate," the statement said. "Voters in Chesapeake will soon realize the only loyalty Don Carey has is to Don Carey."

Carey founded the Don Carey REECH Foundation, a nonprofit that provides youth football camps and focuses on supporting children's participation in STEM and arts fields. He's also the eastern region representative for the State Board of Social Services, and serves on the Hampton Roads Transportation Commission and the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia.

He also serves on the board of the Crisis Pregnancy Center of Tidewater, a Christian- and ministry-based

organization that works to aid women and families with unplanned pregnancies without providing or referring individuals for abortions. While campaigning for the District 89 seat last year, Carey described his work with the center on Facebook.

"Being pro-life is more than just a political statement to me," he wrote in an April 15, 2023 post. "I believe that every life is precious and created for a purpose. I will support legislation that protects the lives of the unborn, supports families, strengthens our communities, and keeps our communities safe."

When pressed about his ideological stance on Democrats' core values, such as the issue of abortion — a key tenant of Virginia Democrats' platform — Carey declined to elaborate and said it's not an issue that touches the local level.

"I was not raised partisan. I was not raised as a Democrat or a Republican," Carey said. "For me, the thing that mattered to me is serving my community. It's something I've done since I was a child. Helping others where it's appropriate to do so."

"So going from the Republican party to the Democratic party, I'm still holding on to my same value of service to my community, helping those in need where appropriate, making sure the city of Chesapeake is prepared for the next 30, 40, 50 years with strategic planning and things of that nature."

At this time, Carey hasn't formally filed the necessary

documents to declare his bid for mayor. The deadline is June 18. Only West, who's been officially endorsed by the Chesapeake GOP, has filed.

West told The Pilot that Carey's bid comes as a bit of a "surprise," but believes he and Carey are professional enough to not allow the campaign to interfere with their City Council roles.

Scott said it's not unusual for elected leaders to change their political party, noting that many sheriffs across the commonwealth who were once Democrats have switched to the GOP and that Del. Cliff Hayes, a Democrat representing parts of Chesapeake and Portsmouth, was once a Republican, too.

"I think the problem is we try to pigeonhole people, when in reality, all of us have some values that we share with the political politics of the other party," Scott said. "But sometimes, there are some deal breakers."

Scott said he's talking with more Republicans "behind the scenes" in Chesapeake who are frustrated with national and local leadership.

"(This) won't be the

first person that leaves the Republican Party in Chesapeake. They are in disarray," Scott said. "And we're going to have a lot of Republicans that are going to be joining us as Democrats because they're fed up with the way the direction and the leadership of the party is going."

Chesapeake City Council member Robert Ike is another Republican who didn't receive the party's endorsement.

He told The Pilot he's now running for reelection as an independent, noting that holding the local elections in November instead of May changes the dynamics when it comes to campaigning. Ike, who still aligns with the national GOP, said he supports Carey in his bid for mayor.

"I think he'll make a fine mayor and I would encourage people to vote for him," Ike said. "I think Don is the best man for the job whether he's got a D or an R."

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