



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

# **A Real-Life Comeback: Former NFL QB Ryan Leaf to Share Story of Addiction, Recovery at Free Event on May 24th**

Senator Patty Ritchie

May 18, 2018

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### Senator Ritchie's Weekly Column

He was destined to be the next superstar in the National Football League. Physically, Ryan Leaf had everything scouts looked for in a quarterback, a leader. Unfortunately, it was what they could not see that ended Leaf's career before it could truly start.

After a highly decorated college football career, Leaf was the second overall draft pick in the 1998 NFL draft. However, that destiny was not to be. Unable to deal with the pressure of the NFL, Leaf's football career started spiraling. His lack of success weighed on him heavily, both emotionally and mentally. He began to abuse prescription drugs, and what ensued was an abrupt end to his career, a decade-long battle with substance abuse that ultimately led to a failed suicide attempt and a near three-year stint in prison.

While serving his sentence, Leaf found his way. He was able to address the source of his mental and emotional anguish. He dealt honestly with his problems and came to understand the importance of accountability and self-worth. In 2014, when he left prison, a humbled Ryan Leaf had a new outlook on life. He has since dedicated his life to recovery and has traveled the country in hopes of helping others through his cautionary tale for young people.

Leaf's story, and the way that he turned one of the darkest periods of his life into an opportunity to caution others about the dangers of drug abuse is inspirational. That's

why I am proud to share the news that, along with the Northern New York Community Foundation, I will be welcoming Leaf to Watertown for a special presentation on his struggles with mental health and addiction, as well as his road to recovery.

“A Real-Life Comeback: Ryan Leaf’s Struggle with Addiction and Road to Recovery,” will take place on Thursday, May 24<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m. at Watertown High School. Seating for the event is limited. If you are interested in attending, please pre-register via my website, [www.ritchie.nysenate.gov](http://www.ritchie.nysenate.gov), or by calling (315) 782-3418. It is free to attend.

While Leaf was able to break free from the cycle of addiction, many others have not. The story of his drug abuse is all too common here in our region, and nation. Across the country, one in five people suffer from addiction, or mental illness. Jefferson, Oswego and St. Lawrence Counties are certainly no exception. Opioid abuse has become a crisis here in our neighborhoods, with far too many people dying from overdoses. It is tearing our families apart and leaving our children vulnerable to repeating the behavior.

Our local mental health and substance abuse organizations, as well as law enforcement and other community leaders work tirelessly to address this epidemic and they need help getting the message out.

That is why I hope you will join me for this special, free event on May 24<sup>th</sup>.

For those young people yet to experiment with drugs and alcohol, hopefully Ryan’s message is a cautionary tale.

For those who may be struggling with the disease, hopefully they hear that message of hope and recognize that they are not alone and there is a pathway to recovery.

For families and community members coming to learn more, I hope they leave with the understanding that addiction is not a character flaw or weakness; it is a disease that needs to be treated just like cancer or diabetes.

I hope that everyone learns that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.