

STORY:
GEORGIE OAKESHOTT

A MOTHER'S GRIEF HAS LED TO
A CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE LIVES
OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS AT
RISK ONLINE.

Carly Ryan met a good looking young Melbourne musician through her *Myspace* webpage back in 2006. A whirlwind cyber romance followed and the bright, sociable teenager was completely won over by the charm and good looks of 20-year-old Brandon Kane.

But it was all a lie. There was no such person. There was only 50-year-old Gary Francis Newman with time on his hands to pursue with evil intent the impressionable young teenager.

Pretending to be someone else on the internet is not a crime as such. But for what he did next, Gary Newman is now in prison.

After months of cyber flirting, the paedophile showed up at Carly's Adelaide home as 'Brandon's dad' and made a sexual advance. She rejected him and in his anger he used his fake son to arrange a final meeting, drove her to a secluded Port Elliot beach, bashed her, drowned her and left her for dead.

Finding out her daughter had been murdered was a moment that changed Sonya Ryan's life forever. She remembers being shocked at how quickly she had lost her teenager whose clothes were still on the floor and whose cereal bowl was still perched on the edge of the couch.

But rather than lose herself in sorrow, Sonya Ryan has taken her grief and anger and is fighting for the lives of thousands of young Australians she believes are making the same mistakes as her daughter.

"These cyber predators are everywhere," Ms Ryan says. "They even exist in groups, trying to come up with ways to approach children online. For them, the internet is a perfect medium. It's like a smorgasbord of children for predators, they don't even have to leave their own lounge room.

"And having the internet in your home or in a child's bedroom with a webcam is like opening all your windows and doors and inviting anybody in."

TRAP

POPPED

ON THE WEB



*EASY PREY: Young Australians
are vulnerable to web predators.
Photo: iStockphoto*

CYBER SAFETY ADVICE

When online keep in mind

Make your profile private.

Passwords are yours, don't share them. They can be used against you.

Consider who will see the profile photos you post. You may think your pose is 'hot' but it may draw some unwanted attention.

Never respond to nasty or suggestive messages.

Never hesitate to block individuals who make you feel uncomfortable online.

Why participate in cyber bullying? It's nasty and no different to the school yard.

If someone offers you something that seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Would you give your personal information to a stranger on the street, ie phone numbers, addresses, school names or locations, places of employment etc? People online are strangers too! Think twice before posting any personal information on your profile.

Be selective of the friends you add on *Myspace*, *Facebook* and other social networking sites. Your personal profile is not a popularity contest. Don't add strangers just for the count. How many people on your friends list do you actually know? Is it worth the risk?

Have you ever added someone who you think is 'supercute'? Are they really who they say they are? It is not uncommon for the identities of people in the public eye, eg musicians, photographers and popular professionals, to be stolen and used to lure you.

Rather than talking to someone online about personal problems, reach out to someone you know and trust who will listen.

Think before sending a photo of yourself to anyone online, once they are posted they can't be retrieved.

Remember people you've met online are actually strangers no matter how long you've been talking to them.

Never agree to meet anyone face to face. If an online friend requests a meeting tell your parents, carer or a friend.

Please never ever meet anyone alone.

From the Carly Ryan Foundation at www.carlyryanfoundation.com



“Having the internet in a child’s bedroom with a webcam is like opening all your windows and doors and inviting anybody in.”

Top of her list of advice for students, teachers, parents and anyone who will listen is not to make online friends with someone you don't know.

“I want this to become the new stranger danger,” Ms Ryan told federal parliament’s Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety at a public hearing in the Adelaide Town Hall. “I want it to get to the point where every child when they are online thinks about what can happen as a result of what they put out there in the cyber world and I want them to have the tools and the support they need.”

Through the not-for-profit Carly Ryan Foundation, Sonya Ryan is taking the cyber safety message to young people, embracing youth culture by seeking sponsors which kids see as ‘cool’ and targeting events such as music festivals where they hand out brochures and t-shirts with striking graphics.

“We’re aiming to come to kids at their level, to talk to them one on one about what they’re doing daily online and to give them the tools and information to make wise decisions when their parents are not around. The internet is

SAFETY MESSAGE: *Sonya Ryan with Parkside Year 6 and 7 students. Her daughter Carly Ryan went to Parkside during her primary school years. Photo: Tricia Watkinson, Newspix; (inset) Online safety poster from the Carly Ryan Foundation.*

not retrievable. They simply want to be socially accepted, adding people they do not know just for the count.”

And when things go wrong, Ms Ryan says, they don't know where to turn.

She told the committee she receives hundreds of emails from children seeking help, too afraid to talk to their parents in fear of embarrassment or punishment or, worst of all, losing access to the internet.

“Kids get caught up and they don't know what to do and they panic. They tend to go along with things, they even sometimes feel bad about saying ‘no’ because they don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or they don't want to come across in a mean way. This is how vulnerable our children are, my daughter being one of them, having no comprehension that somebody could be so manipulative, so cruel.

“I have personally helped two young girls aged 12 and 13. I worked with them individually, counselled them, supported them and prevented them from meeting men over 40 years old for sex,” she told the committee, adding that police are arresting over 400 online predators a year and the numbers are rapidly increasing.

She also tells students – who may be spending hours every day on the internet – to try turning off the computer.

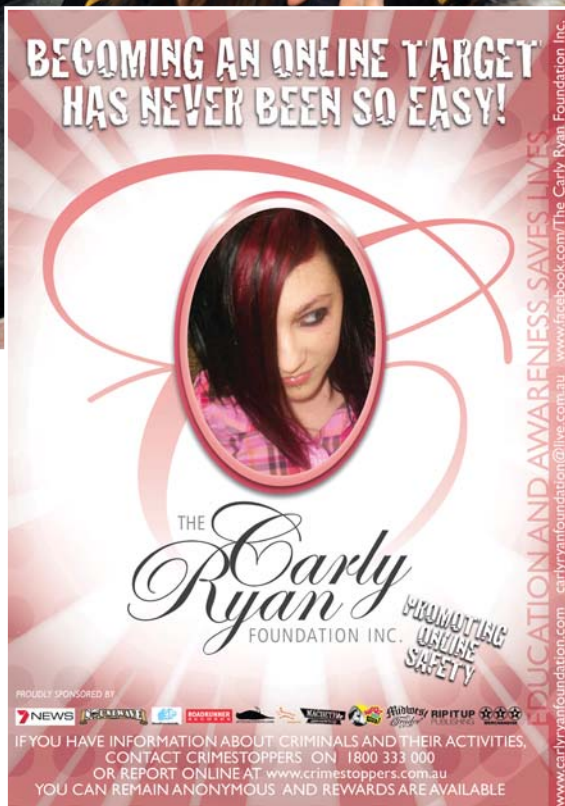
“I talk to them about getting out with their friends and seeing people face to face. I tell them to get out into life and not spend so much time locked in a room. I encourage them to follow their dreams because they only have one chance at it, and Carly has lost that chance. I don't want that to happen to any other child in the future,” she says.

“If I can save the life of one child, then I will feel as though I have done my job.”

When police finally caught up with Gary Newman 11 days after Carly's brutal murder they found him at home, logged onto his computer as ‘Brandon Kane’ chatting to a 14-year-old girl in Western Australia.

He was sentenced to life behind bars with a non-parole period of 29 years by South Australian Supreme Court Justice Trish Kelly who said he deserved the sentence for what he did to “a child that fell in love with the idea of the handsome, musically inclined and rather exotic Brandon Kane. The real man was in fact an overweight, balding, middle age paedophile with sex and murder on his mind.”

In memory of Carly and for all young people facing the same dangers, Sonya Ryan is fighting back. •



available, as we know, in so many different mediums such as mobile phones and this danger will continue,” she told the parliamentary inquiry.

She's also taking her cyber safety message to schools, with a seminar which has proven so popular it's difficult to keep up with demand. The emphasis is on education and awareness, she says, and the feedback from teachers and students has always been positive.

More importantly, she knows she's making a difference because students are often “completely shocked” to learn that people may not be who they say they are, and admit to having no idea about the importance of safety measures like privacy settings.

“When I ask how many of them have a Facebook account every hand goes up. When I ask them how many have read the terms and conditions of Facebook, no hands are raised. They are not aware that once they post a photograph on their account it becomes the property of Facebook, it is

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety, including submissions received and transcripts of public hearings, visit www.aph.gov.au/jssc or email jssc@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 4202.