

SUBMISSION: INQUIRY INTO SUICIDE IN AUSTRALIA

TO: COMMITTEE SECRETARY

SENATE COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

- **Personal Cost**
- My son Jeremy took his own life on 29 January 2008 by hanging himself in his bedroom using the cord from his skylight window. He was 21 years old. His father Harry found him when I asked him to call Jeremy for dinner. I had made bruschetta and commented to Harry that Jem would not be impressed with the menu. I have never made nor eaten bruschetta again and the mere mention of it on a restaurant menu can take my breath away. The minutia.
- When I returned home from work that evening, Harry was already home from work and Jim (Jem's younger and only sibling) was playing with a school friend in his bedroom having been out to purchase school shoes for the new academic year starting the next day.
- Music was coming from Jeremy's room, as per usual, I had no sense of anything being wrong. None of us did. Once Harry opened the door and found Jeremy, our lives were irrevocably changed. By piecing together the afternoon and evening, we believe Jem had been dead for about an hour before Harry found him.
- To go about preparing an evening meal, chatting and laughing to Jim and his friend, talking to Harry and all the while my son is dead in his bedroom is something I cannot, at this point, get my head around. How could I not know?
- I called 000 and remained on the phone with the female service operator until the authorities arrived – fire brigade, paramedics and police. The paramedics and police officers that attended our home were compassionate and professional.
- At some point during the evening, one of the paramedics took me by the hand, looked me right in the eyes and said “This is not your fault.” He kept repeating those words and keeping eye contact. He had lost his best friend to suicide. I will be forever grateful that this young man came to our house on that dreadful night and had the wisdom to take my hand and tell me those words.

- The private contractor's (one male and one female) dispatched by the Coroner's Office did what they had to do. Unfortunately they knocked the stretcher carry Jeremy against a cabinet on their way out of our home. Harry is a removalist and intervened and helped the male carry Jeremy out to their van. Not something any father should have to do.
- The following day friends and family rallied around us.
- Harry, Jim and I immediately attended our family GP who referred us to a clinical psychologist (experienced in dealing with trauma associated with suicide). After a joint session we have all continued seeing the psychologist on an individual as needed basis.
- A friend of Harry's who lost his daughter to suicide two years earlier, put us in contact with The Compassionate Friends of Victoria (“TCF”). Harry and I attended the March meeting (suicide specific) five weeks after Jeremy died. We have only missed one meeting since.
- I returned to my full time job as a legal secretary on 14 February 2008, Harry returned to his full time job on 14 April 2008 and Jim commenced his Year 10 academic year on 11 February 2008.
- On 4 May 2008 (Harry's 52nd birthday), Harry, Jim and I attended the Prahran Police Station to give our statements concerning the night of Jeremy's death. The police officers were compassionate and professional but nonetheless it was another difficult process.
- On 26 June 2009 I submitted a WorkCover claim for workplace bullying. My employment was terminated on 10 July 2009 and is now the subject of legal proceedings.
- On 26 August 2009, almost 19 months to the day Jeremy died, my bowel ruptured and I was taken by ambulance to The Alfred Hospital. After life saving surgery I now have a colostomy and am halfway through my third chemotherapy cycle. Treatment of the cancer should be finished around April 2010 after which my colostomy will be reversed.
- Despite the challenges our little family unit faces we continue to move forward. This would not be possible without the support of wonderful friends and family (my parents have become estranged from us since Jeremy's funeral), excellent professional healthcare providers and a network of kind and courageous people we have been privileged to meet and befriend through TCF.

- **Social Cost**

- After losing a loved one to suicide, how do you continue to be a contributing, functioning member of society?
- Structure and routine were vital in the first 12 or so months. To keep within our network and to keep day to day living as simple and as gentle as possible was essential.
- Meeting new people was not something any of us actively wanted to do, aside from those within TCF who understood our grief. The questions associated with meeting someone new such as “how many children do you have?” or “do you have any brothers or sisters?”, even “how are you?” were fraught with potential distress. This becomes easier over time but takes a lot of work.
- Although I don't remember a lot of games from 2008, I forced myself to keep going to the footy each week. Society owes a great deal of thanks to Aussie Rules. To cheer and scream and yell for your respective team for a couple of hours each week is a tremendous release for thousands of people.
- As a family we made a conscious effort, with the assistance of a clinical psychologist, to maintain a level of social activity. This was not easy in the early days (and sometimes still isn't) but the benefits, particularly with our surviving son, are worth the effort.

- **Financial Cost**

- Aside from the immediate expenses of an unexpected funeral, there has been ongoing medical costs associated with psychological therapy. Medicare subsidises appropriate psychologist services now – a great step forward within Australia's health care system.
- Harry has been unable to work overtime since Jeremy's death. We have never sat down and calculated a financial figure relative to Jem's suicide but it has been substantial. For those people who are unable to work at all after losing someone to suicide, and I can understand how this happens, then the financial cost is enormous.
- I have received no income and have been unfit for work since 26 June 2009.
- Prior to this date I worked full time since April 1981 (with the exception of time off to have each of our boys) and have an impeccable resume.
- When Harry was unable to work for the few months following Jeremy's suicide he used his long

service leave and annual leave for time off. Meanwhile his sick leave (approximately 70 days at the time) continued to accrue.

- Until I am fit for work Harry is the sole income earner.
- **Coroner's Office**
- I have not yet read the Coroner's Report and do not know when I will be ready to. Harry has read the Report and we were notified that an Inquest would not be necessary. I did read the Autopsy Report and broke down afterwards. It is very strange to read cold clinical facts about a human body, and being struck by the fact that this is your child, your baby. He was not drug or alcohol affected at the time he died.
- I am yet to chase up a copy of the Police Brief. I did leave a message with the Coroner's Office to obtain the same, but this was the week before Black Saturday and understood that resources would be stretched to, and beyond, their limit.
- On the night Jeremy died the police took his computer, external hard drive and iPod. We were allowed access to his external hard drive at the Prahran Police Station to download some photos for his funeral. I tried unsuccessfully to get Jeremy's personal items back, via the Coroner's Office, over the next few months. On 1 September 2008 I decided to make a concerted effort to get Jeremy's computer home and started by leaving a message with the Coroner's Office. Between 1 September and 15 September phone calls went back and forth between myself, the Coroner's Office and Prahran Police Station. Police said it was up to the Coroner to release the computer and the Coroner said it was okay to release the computer if the police had finished with it. On 16 September 2008 I left a message with Prahran Police, sent an email to the relevant Officer, and phoned the Coroner's Office. Australian Story ABC had aired a documentary the previous evening covering the suicide of a teenager who died the day after Jeremy. The parents had in their possession their daughter's diary and excerpts were used on the documentary. I spoke to the Coroner's Office on 16 September 2008 querying why I was having problems obtaining Jeremy's personal items, yet another family whose loss was a day later, but more public, had their daughter's diary. I was allowed to collect Jeremy's computer that night after work which I did. The police and staff at the Coroner's Office were always polite and understanding. For me it was very personal and took a great deal of effort to follow

through on. Once I had loaded Jem's items into the car I sat in the police station car park and cried for almost an hour.

- **Summary**

- Since Jeremy took his own life, it has been my goal to move forward, with my family, and take Jeremy forward with us. We have been doing this through a lot of personal and emotional hard work. Jeremy's brother Jim has just completed his Year 11 exams and his Year 12 VCE English exam. He has an active social life and plans to travel overseas during his GAP year before university – he sees a future for himself and is a remarkable young man.
- I consider my family fortunate to have had immediate access to excellent support services but sadly we have met parents and siblings bereaved by suicide who suffered alone before stumbling upon help. Dr Frank Campbell, a speaker at the May 2009 Australian Postvention Conference in Melbourne, is a Director of the Baton Rouge Crisis Intervention Centre. The concept of such a service being readily available throughout Australia is worthy of investigation and consideration (<http://www.brcic.org/programs/crisisresponse/>).
- I do not know what can be done to prevent anyone from taking their own life but I do know what can be done to help those left behind. Immediate support and information of available suicide support services should be provided as an adjunct to the essential services used when a suicide is reported.
- Public awareness of the impact of suicide is important. There is still a stigma associated with suicide and also a lot of ignorance and generalisation. Projects such as Hope for Life run by the Salvation Army are to be encouraged. My family and I were fortunate to be involved in the Memorial Quilt (<http://salvos.org.au/suicideprevention/index.php?lifekeeperquilt>). It is an important part of our healing and puts faces and lives to the word “suicide”.