

## **25<sup>th</sup> Annual Remembrance Ceremony: for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs**

**Weston Park, Yarralumla; Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

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### ***Reflection by Wilson Oscar and Julian Juhas***

I first met Matthew last year. Although technically Matthew and I had several 'first meetings' as it were, every time insisting we had never met before and he had never seen my face. But by the fourth or fifth occasion of meeting him, I was seemingly etched in his mind and never forgotten again. Matt had a much easier time making a lasting impression on me than I did on him, as right from that first meeting I knew he was beyond any kind of character I had met before, possessing a certain *je ne sais quoi* that placed him in a league of his own.

Matt was a friend to everyone who met him, and it seemed inevitable that I would come to meet him given the size of Canberra and his influential presence in our community. I quickly came to love his warm and welcoming apartment in Bruce, which was constantly filled with guests from every continent, save Antarctica. Everything from his frantic living area which contained the biggest video game collection known to man, to his spare bedroom which fluctuated constantly between being the designated lego space and the committed music studio, served to cement Matt as a terrific entertainer and welcoming host. He was a true socialite, and there was no telling who you would run into when you visited him.

While Matt played Gatsby to us, some of our female friends knew his softer side. One of our mutual friends recounted to us one of the many occasions that exemplified Matt's caring nature. She was sick and didn't want Matt to catch it, but also didn't like being home alone and Matt's presence was often a comfort. Matt's elegant solution was to trek it to our friend's place and simply sit outside her door and talk to her for several hours, which sounds laborious but was a sacrifice Matt was more than happy to make to put a smile on his friend's face.

As much of a smiling and boisterous presence as Matt was, it covered the troubled and often turbulent reality of his life from many of his friends, me no exception. He had a fanatical belief in the power of medicine in more ways than one, often stating that if one drug wasn't doing the job, another might just hit the mark. More than someone looking for a good time, Matt was looking for a solution to his problems, problems that left him in a constant struggle with the system at large. His mental health was perhaps the biggest area of concern, sadly an area we cannot speak upon; not because of its lack of impact, rather Matt's own secretive attitude toward it. While I cannot say for sure, I theorise this came from a place of selflessness as opposed to shame, not wanting others to worry about him or unnecessarily stress on his behalf. A theory I find constantly corroborated by friends who knew him best, and a theory I find supported by his own unyielding complaints against Canberra's mental health system, which routinely let him down in more ways than one. As problems such as insomnia and anxiety became unmanageable, Matt was forced to turn to Canberra's healthcare in addition to its mental health system in search of a solution, only to

be rejected and turned away as a 'druggie' time and time again. The obvious irony is that Matt's drug usage was an attempt to solve the problems our healthcare system refused to solve for him, and as his drug use grew to compensate for the challenges life was throwing at him, so did his dependency on these medications, perpetually increasing the need to maintain usage. The most effective medication he could get his hands on was also one of the most demanding, and we knew as he did, that stopping suddenly was not only extremely difficult but downright dangerous. Sometimes we wouldn't hear from Matt for days at a time and would fret and speculate about what might have happened to him, but then he would pop up again and we'd breathe easy for the time being.

It was on the 20th of July that Matthew Joel Llyod fell victim to a multiple prescription drug toxicity. I heard the news only a day after the fact, a mutual friend calling me immediately after discovering the news himself to share in the grief. Having seen him only a few days earlier and having never dealt with the death of a close personal friend before, my world was shattered. I could not possibly imagine or compare the impact of Matt's death on his family to my grief - a family who constantly displayed love and affection toward him throughout and past his life. But his untimely passing had me reflecting on what I could have done differently to perhaps prevent his death. He had died during an episode where he was unresponsive to calls or text, episodes which in the past had amounted to a particularly tiring few days of entertaining and nothing more, but this time should have been a serious cause for concern. What if I had checked on him in person? What if I could have saved his life? Hindsight is a funny thing, and I hear from people much older and wiser than myself that these kinds of questions will never truly leave your mind, engendering nothing but grief and depression upon a person. What is done is done as they say and torturing myself with speculation about ifs and buts won't bring back Matt, as hard as I might try.

Matt's long-term struggle with mental health, particularly anxiety and insomnia, left him with no option but to turn to medications that ultimately caused his untimely passing and left his friends and family heartbroken. Unlike his enigmatic character, Matt's demons were not unique and I know many other friends who suffer from similar issues and find themselves forced to take illicit substances, putting themselves at risk just to get by. Matt's death has left us all feeling lost and confused, but if there's anything we can take away from this tragic event it's that mental health services need to do more to protect younger generations. Nobody should be treated like a criminal by health services or the police simply for trying to medicate their illnesses. The healthcare system needs to provide safe, effective, and accessible solutions to the problem of mental health issues so that young people do not senselessly lose their lives. Nobody should have to go through what Matt's family is going through, and no young person should find themselves stigmatised by authorities meant to protect them to the point where they put themselves in harm's way.