

Reflection by Janine Haskins at the 26th Remembrance Ceremony

Hi, my name is Janine, and I am a mother who has lost a child to suicide.

I would like to thank the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, particularly the wise and wonderful Bill Bush, for asking me to speak at this special remembrance ceremony; I am especially honoured to be here today.

Today I speak about my daughter, Brontë Elouise Haskins, who was born on the 6 July 1996, a healthy 8lb 11 ounces. Bronte was everything to me.

On Tuesday 18th February 2020 at about 3:50pm, I received a phone call no parent ever wishes to receive; Brontë was in ICU in an induced coma after a reported attempted suicide. Three days later, we lost our beautiful girl. However, being the generous person she always was, her donated organs have been given to four donor recipients who we have heard are now living a healthy and fulfilling life. Bronte, continuing to give, always.

Despite being a surprise pregnancy, Brontë (also known as 'Poppy') was very much a wanted child. The decision to be a single parent was not an easy one given I had very limited family support. However, I was fortunate to have some very good friends, who would go on to establish wonderful long-standing relationships with Brontë.

When Brontë was 7 months old, I met and then married her stepfather, Peter, in 1997, when Poppy was just 16 months old. Brontë adored Peter, and although she never called him 'Dad' personally, she referred to him as her dad when speaking to friends and colleagues.

Brontë was afforded a happy childhood. Her brother, Bailey, arrived in January 2000, and along with her stepbrothers, Jamie and Craig, from Peter's previous marriage, our family was complete. Although it took Brontë some time accepting she was no longer an only child (as is often the case), she and Bailey enjoyed a healthy and loving relationship and were always supportive of each other.

Throughout her childhood and teenage years, Brontë enjoyed many adventurous family holidays in both Australia and overseas holidays. These experiences helped to cement the strong bonds she developed with her cousins and other family members and contributed to her understanding of the world and a deep empathy for people and animals who were less fortunate.

A keen sportsperson (Brontë was a formidable AFL player, and I'm glad I wasn't at the receiving end of one her gruesome tackles!). She was also a horse-rider, joey, cub, scout, venturer, animal rescuer, and great friend. As a venturer, Brontë was awarded a meritorious medal from the Chief Scout for saving a fellow venturer from drowning. Brontë was an outgoing, gregarious, funny, intelligent, caring, and generous person throughout her life. She was also our 'wild child'.

As Brontë entered her teenage years, we noticed some behaviours which indicated Brontë may have been struggling with some mental health issues; namely, anxiety and depression. Her relationships with friends often became intense and unfortunately led to conflict and fall-outs with family members and friends. Brontë also started self-harming in the form of cutting which

she tried very hard to hide from us. Although we were concerned, we naively held the belief that, like a lot of teenagers, she would grow out of this distressing behaviour.

Once Brontë gained her driver's licence, our gypsy girl was often out and about, and we could no longer keep her contained at our property in Murrumbateman.

In the ensuing years, Brontë led a busy and eventful life including relocating to Melbourne for a period-of-time to connect with her paternal family, particularly her younger half-sister, Jess. This was also when she first started dabbling in the use of ICE. Brontë's return to Canberra was the beginning of a troubled period where she found herself involved with an outlaw motorcycle gang and being figuratively 'owned' by a gang member.

Fortunately, Brontë was able to remove herself from the tentacles of these people and settled into a kind of 'normality'. She gained employment in the hospitality industry and developed the quality and skills of a great customer service operator.

Brontë later gained employment as a residential youth worker for children and young people living in out-of-home care. We watched our Poppy girl thrive in this work environment up until she was assaulted by a client with the matter being settled out of Court. In late 2017, a few months after the assault, Brontë recommenced dabbling in ICE.

Then in March 2018, Brontë was subjected to a prolonged and horrific physical assault by a so-called 'friend' she had been staying with. This resulted in Brontë being hospitalised and ending up in ICU after an adverse reaction to the dye contrast that was administered due to being strangled.

Somehow Brontë managed to leave the hospital against medical advice and her substance use increased from that time on. I believe this assault was the catalyst to life becoming chaotic and unmanageable; and the people Brontë associated with regularly took advantage of her kindness and generosity.

Following the 'pay out' from her civil claim, Brontë partied hard, and the money was gone in a matter of months. She had also progressed to using heroin daily.

Throughout this time, Brontë broke into our house on numerous occasions as she was able to squeeze through our pet door due to her massive weight loss. She also cleverly hacked into our Paypal account and my laptop. As you can imagine, this had an adverse impact on our relationship with our Poppy girl. It didn't make us love Brontë any less, however the strain and stress from these incidents were distressing and took a toll on all of us.

At the end of January 2020, Brontë was remanded in custody at the AMC for 13 days. In that time, she was assessed as a person-at-risk and housed in the Crisis Support Unit while she detoxed and was under observation for her suicidal concerns. She was then moved to the women's mainstream wing. During this remand period, Brontë looked the best she had for two years; she was lucid and eating well, and she started calling me 'Mumma' again, rather than 'Janine' (or a few other choice words I won't articulate here today!

Bailed on the 12 February 2020, Poppy was directed to reside with us, and she moved into the flat under our home. For the first few days she was fine, however then relapsed back into substance use. This appears to be the beginning of the end.

Saying goodbye to such a loved child is the worst thing I have ever experienced, and our lives have changed forever. I would not wish this on my worst enemy.

Today, my concerns lie with several issues.

Firstly, the continued stigmatisation of substance users is of great concern. It appears that many members of our community often lose sight of the fact that substance users are 'people' first and foremost. This judgemental approach merely amplifies many substance users' sense of worthlessness and effectively not feel like a member of our general community.

I know, through reading Brontë's many journals and diaries, that she felt incredibly ashamed of her dependence on substances and the negative impact her dependency caused to herself, her family, and her friends.

In the last few days of Brontë's life, the interactions myself and my husband had with Police Officers, Mental and general Health Services were simply substandard to say the very least. Despite pleading for Brontë to be provided with assistance for her acute substance-induced psychosis, no one listened to us. It was an overwhelming situation, particularly as I had agreed to undertakings by an ACT Magistrate. The Magistrate's orders were completely undermined by AFP Officers who apparently didn't believe me when informed I could be prosecuted for failing to notify them if Brontë appeared to be under the influence of illicit substances.

Further, these AFP Officers appeared to be able to assess Brontë's mental status better than her own mother. I was watching Brontë in our flat, telling me "Mumma, this is a Nazi gas chamber, this is where the Jews were gassed."

What comes first, the horse or the cart? It really doesn't matter. The bottom line is people living with co-morbidities deserve the same attention as everyone else in our community. Whether they have physical substance dependency, and/or psychological issues in relation to substance use, we are ultimately dealing with a serious health issue, not a criminal one.

However, whilst we continue to have a broken system of siloed services in the ACT, loved ones will continue to fall through the gaps and the community as a whole, loses.

We should expect and demand more from the services employed to support and assist our loved ones and my hope is there will be significant and positive changes made in these areas of service delivery soon.

What I would also like to impress today is that our Poppy did not wake up one day and decide she wished to become a substance user as her vocation. Like every other young person, she had dreams and aspirations she wanted to fulfill and a full life to live..

Brontë is a daughter, a sister, a stepsister, a granddaughter, a cousin, a devoted animal lover, and a great friend to many. Sadly she ultimately became 'a tag on a toe' by under resourced

and inadequately trained so-called professionals. There are no alternatives here, things must change.

A Coronial inquest will be held early 2022 for our beautiful girl, and whilst we won't get Bronte back, our family and friends are hopeful that recommendations will be made, implemented, monitored and reviewed. Hopefully, these changes save the lives of loved ones in the future.

Thank you for listening to Brontë's story; forever young, and forever our Poppy girl. Our love for her is insurmountable.

I now introduce a song, 'Big Yellow Taxi' which Bronte performed at her end of year performance when she was in sixth grade.