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Thank you. It is an absolute delight to be with you all today. It has been a constant refrain of mine over recent years that the sky has not fallen in ever since last Thursday. I think I am going to retract that because the weather is terrible. But we have all made it here the sky can't have fallen in too much.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we're meeting upon, the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and also any other aboriginal people who may be with us today.

It is an immense honour to be here with you all. Today is a very important day. I know that I have been asked to speak as a member of the ACT Legislative Assembly and I will speak to that later but I first want to speak to the story of my family. I come from a very small family: one brother, mum and dad. I've got one set of cousins and they have one set of cousins on their side. To us we're all cousins and we're all boys. Now I know every family has a different dynamic; different numbers, different and changed relationships but in ours it has always been pretty straight forward. We were all small families so every single bit was important. We'd spend our Christmases together and family holidays as well. We all grew up together, David Flynn, Connor, myself, Liam, Bronson and Max. Max was the youngest. He was born in 1997, six years younger than me. Now I've got contradictory memories of Max growing up. As a little infant he used to run around the house screaming like a little terror which I couldn't stand because I'm quiet and boring. As he grew older he was shy and quiet, and he developed a love of surfing and the ocean.

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By the time he'd grown up he had accumulated a few tattoos, a permanent fixture of stubble but he still loved the ocean and surfing. I saw less of Max as we got older. He moved further north, but we still saw each other at family get-togethers. Increasingly, we had a bit of a symbiotic relationship. I was interested in politics, and he knew everything there was to know about fishing. I had no interest whatsoever in fishing but I did want to learn a little more about it and Max did not care one bit for politics but always took the opportunity to learn a little thing or two from me and my interest.

Now over many years it became obvious that Max's health was struggling and that he was using illicit drugs. He always had a rock solid tan but he didn't look as healthy as he used to. He looked less fit than he used to. It's hard to articulate but I think everyone knows when they see it. A few years ago I even remember the conversation we had about drugs: eye-opening for me at the time, but I appreciated his openness. As someone interested in politics it's very easy to give off nark vibes, so I am not normally the go to person to speak to about drugs, even with my public policy interest, but he spoke freely and it has shaped my views on the world for many years. Max is not interested in politics. His mum though loves politics and she has never been shy in talking about it. If any of you have ever spent any time on my social media pages you can actually find Max's Mum in most of them fighting people with bad opinions. In particular, I want to pull out one comment she left a bit over a year ago. She said "addiction is a public health issue. Addiction should be classed as a health priority under mental health. I know the

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health system is letting people with addiction down. Putting people in prison only escalates the issue and increases the cost on the healthcare system and the justice system.” She said “Good luck Michael you are on the right path.” I knew at the time what she was referring to but it’s one of those things that just doesn't seem real or maybe that nothing will happen because nothing has happened yet.

Max struggled for many years: a combination of mental health, financial struggles and his drug use made things harder for him than it was for everybody else. In January this year Max committed suicide. He was 24. It doesn’t feel real, if I’m be honest. I've attended this ceremony for many years now and I’ve always found myself safely able to distance myself from the tragedy that we gather to remember. I was here to support others. I was here because it was the right thing to do and I am here today for the first time because I want to remember Max.

This ceremony is beautiful and it’s also a timely reminder to fight like hell for the living. There is still so much work to do and there are lives that we can save. The great tragedy of this day is, of course, is that we shouldn’t even be here but we are. For too long our laws and our society have sought to punish and shame people that use drugs. Instead of helping those who are struggling we’ve pushed them further down. We’ve criminalised them.

Now last week was an important week in the ACT. The ACT Legislative Assembly voted to decriminalise possession of small amounts of common illicit substances. That was a big deal but that was possible because we stood on the shoulders of those before us and the people

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here that have advocated for so long - 30 years ago. Members of the Legislative Assembly had the courage to stand up and say the war on drugs has failed and that cannabis no longer needed to face punitive prohibition laws. Last week the Legislative Assembly stood up and said that even further substances do not need to experience those same punitive prohibition laws. That's a good thing because criminal laws have a chilling effect in our community. They make it harder for people to access the help they need. In moments of crisis when people should be thinking only of the health services that they might need instead they're thinking about what if police turn up instead. The change that the Legislative Assembly voted for last week was only ever possible because of the many people standing here today that for so many years have told their stories, but they didn't tell their stories once; they told them time and time again and they told their stories to politicians that either didn't listen or didn't care or sometimes they told their stories to politicians who did listen and did care but did nothing. Regardless, either way you persisted, and I'm glad you did because there's still a lot of work to do. We need to continue to fight like hell for the living because there's so much at stake. Now I'm very proud that I was asked to speak today. It is a tremendous honour and I am so proud for each and every single one of you that have the strength and courage to come here today and join others for the exact same thing. Thank you.

12:00 PM; 16/01/2023

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