

SURVIVING THE LOSS

Tina Johnston

I have heard said "you only truly die when no-one remembers you". My intent today is to tell you about my son Scott Robert's untimely death, about IDSA the support forum we have in my home town of Geelong, and to stress that we all need to remember that every worker has people who love them and that many lives are influenced by just one workplace death. I hope that in doing so you will all remember Scott's story.

It is not necessary for me to inform you all about relevant logistics. Nor should I have to report on the dissatisfactions with the processes. Deaths in the mining industry are not new. Inquiry recommendations probably give the same information or at least the same intent! My belief is that I cannot move the mighty political mining monster. I cannot change or improve any legalities already in process. I am but one human being, one woman, one mother!...but you people can.

On Monday November 23, 1998 my eldest son Scott Robert Johnston fell 35metres down the M62 shaft at the Enterprise Mine, Mt. Isa and died at 31 years of age. The M62 Internal Shaft is a major part of the construction of the Enterprise Mine Project, was mined by Byrncut-RUC, and will be used for hoisting copper ore from the Enterprise Mine. According to the Mining Warden at the subsequent Inquiry it was most probable that Scott fell where "there was a safety rail missing"

The knock on the front door at 10.40 p.m. was 2 policemen with the unenviable task of telling me that our Scotty had died. I will never forget the feeling of total disbelief, shaking my head and walking around in circles and not knowing what to do next. I asked the police to wait until I could get someone else there. My daughter Shelley and her husband were there quickly – my feeling of absolute helplessness when Shelley threw herself onto the kitchen floor distraught and screaming, was totally overwhelming.

I was in a haze and let others take over – we rang a friend to collect my son Lyndon who was living 2 hours away. We had to find Scott's father somewhere in Adelaide – more friends to the rescue calling all the hotels/motels until they found him. Other special friends drove 3 hours at 1 a.m. to be with us. I rang my sister in Tasmania – Sue was there before I knew it as were my dearest friends from Adelaide. I was still shaking my head. Byrncut sent counsellors and Peter Dwyer-Smith to help us understand what happened. Poor Peter could only tell me what he had been told but he willingly repeated his story over and over to Scott's friends who called in – I was still shaking my head.

Three days later Byrncut flew us to Mt Isa where we were met by Bill Blake and Chris Corbett at the airport. I knew I was going to like these men – Bill had tears in his eyes and looked straight into my eyes. Again I was overwhelmed and still shaking my head. That night we met the boys who were with Scotty when he fell – they were the best people – Scotty always said you could pick your friends and he picked the best! I would like to publicly thank Joey, Marty, Oatsy, Tommy and Corbs – your support and friendships have meant so much to us, and I know will continue to do so!

Finally, 5 days later (!!) we were allowed to go to the morgue at the Mt. Isa hospital to see Scott – his face was so bruised and his hands scraped and he was so cold. He did not look peaceful (as you are 'supposed' to be in death) – he looked traumatized and hurting – but beautiful. On Monday we took Scott home with us – we were very possessive and made sure he was never alone on this his last journey home. I think about Scott constantly. We have many photographs around our home – some of which you have seen here today – and I often say "Hi Scotty" if I go past his photo. And if we are going away I take the photo with me and put it in the motel room or wherever I am. I guess I still do not like leaving him alone.

I do find it difficult when people ask me how many children I have, I say I had three children – a daughter and two sons, one of whom died in a mine in Mt Isa. I see no reason why I shouldn't say that even though at times it seems to knock the wind out of some people's sails and they do not know what to say next! Even though it is almost 2 years since Scotty died I still enjoy talking about

him and I find that I like to be with people who've known him because any fond memories or naughty things he did we can talk and laugh about them. I try hard not to be gloomy!

For the first fortnight I kept thinking this can't be happening, this is not my Scotty, not dead, can't be, and I have had some really amazing experiences. I think, no matter how a child dies you as a parent feel as though you could or should have done something different to prevent this disaster. I always used to say to Scotty as he left "be safe!" – he always assured me that he was. His mates told me he was the most vocal at the safety meetings and I know he would take notes and pursue different events – I have his notebooks. I can remember watching Scott walk to the train station at 4 p.m. on August 7, 1998, begging him to be safe - I often used to tell him I hated him underground but I have forgiven him because it was something he loved doing – his way of life!

I am telling you all of this so that you can hear how many people were affected – and this is only the surface! A death is not something you ever get over but you do learn to live with it. You learn that the happy times are so important – I feel I am the lucky one to have had Scott as my son even though he is gone. Our lives although they go on will never be the same. There will always be a giant space where Scotty fitted and nothing will ever fix that. His birthdays, mothers days, Christmas days, the anniversaries of the last day we saw him and of the end of his life are all milestones and precious for all of us. In fact we went to a wedding - his cousin Dani was married and he even sent her a telegram telling her how good the beer in heaven was! I can't understand it!!!

I cannot go to the cemetery on my own, beautiful as it is – in Pt. Lonsdale – you can see, hear and smell the ocean – but I do go as often as I can. Ruby, Scott's 6 year old niece was with me the last time – as we drove away she stuck her head out the car window and called "Bye Scotty, see you soon! Have a good day!" And I had to growl because she had taken her seatbelt off!!!

My family and friends have experienced so many emotions this last year you would wonder where and when this roller coaster ride is going to end. I am proud of us all and believe that Scotty would have been also – the coping mechanisms we have developed, and any positive outcomes from this tragedy, are vital and at the same time precious for all of us.

One of my family's most positive steps has been to join IDSA Inc (Industrial Deaths and Support Advocacy) a forum whose primary focus is to provide both social and emotional support, and practical assistance and guidance for bereaved families and workmates during a time of enormous grief. IDSA 's services are provided at no cost to families and workmates by volunteers who have all experienced a workplace death in some form or other. I believe that the most important statement made by IDSA is that they will encourage and promote public and political awareness on issues of workplace/industrial safety. This is done by speaking at forums such as the unveiling of the Workers' Memorial at the Trades Hall, Melbourne, union O.H.& S training courses, and radio programmes. More important for Queensland is that there is now a new branch in Brisbane. This is being established by Sally Baker and Helen Chadbone who lost their husbands when they were fatally electrocuted at a construction site in 1998.

A safe mining site is every worker's obligation and right – not just mine management, the team leaders or the occupational health and safety representatives. Risk management and assessment should be continuous and should involve every employee management and otherwise. A mine site is one of the most dangerous work sites and therefore requires total commitment to developing a working environment that is safe and without risks. Every worker should observe and report any situations or circumstances which might have the potential for injury or accident to any workers, just as Scotty did!

I think that that awful burning sensation of absolute anger and rage has gone. I felt for a long time as if I was in a huge fire of pain – very hard to explain because I could never have felt such a sensation if I hadn't actually felt it- does that make sense?. I think probably we do not grieve sufficiently when we should. I do feel angry about death. I cannot understand death and can't see the purpose of the pattern but somehow I guess it will be alright. I did have a very vivid dream – I was in bed in the daytime – a nightshift worker always seems to be in bed! – and he came to the door with his arms outstretched. I could not believe my eyes! – I got out of bed and fell in his arms – I could smell him and feel him on the inside of my arms. He said "It is alright Tina (that is what he called me!) we are going to be okay" and then he was gone. I think he came to remind me that he was alright – a bit like a visitation – a true dream – a positive experience – and I believe Scott – we will be alright! I am

trying very hard to keep in touch with Scott's friends and when I see them having children and getting married (not necessarily in that order!) I do begin to think "if only". However Scott will always be mine and my son – maybe that is a selfish way of looking at it! I have made an effort and feel very close to his mates – Joey even rang me at 7.30 a.m. on Saturday morning to ask me to represent Scott at his wedding – that sort of thing helps a great deal.

Surviving the loss: we perceive to be "all the better in time" We, that is all the members of IDSA, are working towards surviving the loss. But to do that we first have to live the loss: experience all the pain and anguish, watch our loved ones hurt, live the anger and tragedy over and over to achieve an understanding of how and why!! We need the empathy of the mining industry, not just their expertise, experience, knowledge and tacit sympathy. You are good at that! But....
Where are the Generic Guidelines for Safe Shaft Sinking Operations? I haven't seen them yet!
My son died in a mining shaft and the Reviewers at his Inquiry recommended the establishment of an Industry Workgroup to develop such guidelines in May 1999!

What about the Generic Guidelines for the Investigation of Serious Mine Accidents? This was a recommendation also made at the inquiry into my eldest son's death. Where are they? I haven't seen them! Be pro-active, please give Scotty the satisfaction that something good and positive can result from his family and wonderful friends having to live his loss.

Please use IDSA and all their expertise and empathy.

Work deaths are a minority, thank God! They are only talked about if they have been particularly dramatic or linked to a societal disruption and become media fodder. But this is the death of my son. I am a member of IDSA, I am trying to be pro-active and empathetic, I wish that the mining industry would give this death the importance it deserves.

Thank-you all for giving me the opportunity to address you– I especially want to thank Scott, Lyndon and Shelley, and his wonderful family and friends! Here is a very special message written by one of Scott's best mates – Mattie Lund

Memories of a Friend

A ring of the phone
Scott's not coming home
I feel so alone, so alone.

Tall and proud
Determined and strong
It's gone so wrong, so wrong.

Bike, beach, the snow, the air
Never a care, but always aware,
I sit and stare, sit and stare.

Gave so much, asked for so little
So far away, yet always so near.
Loved a beer, yeah, loved a beer.

Carved in my mind
He was one of a kind
In my memory to stay, every day, every day.