

Closing The Net – Episode 5, Turning Grief into Hope

Disclaimer:

Due to themes of child sexual abuse and exploitation, the content of this podcast may be distressing to some people. It is not suitable for children and listener discretion is advised. For advice and support, please visit accce.gov.au.

Hetty Johnston:

Silence, secrecy, and shame are the sex offender's very best friends and fear, and they're our kids very worst enemies. So we have to fight. As hard as it is, we have to fight and we have to be honest.

Sonya Ryan:

She's right in my heart every moment of every single day. Death cannot break our love connection. And the work that I'm doing is a pure power of love in action.

Bruce Morcombe:

Look towards tomorrow. Don't look at yesterday. We can learn from yesterday, but you can't change it. We're stuck with that. But we can influence the future.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The death of a child is heartbreaking under any circumstances. For a parent to lose a child and have their grief played out in the public eye, well, that can be soul destroying. Some families are torn apart as they deal with the unbearable loss. Others turn their grief into hope, galvanized by a determination that what happened to their child will never happen to another. I'm Rodger Corser, and this is Closing The Net. A Podcast series that explores the world of those policing the borderless crime of online child sexual exploitation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Men and women who work tirelessly to protect children from harm and bring child sex offenders to justice. The Australian Federal Police has a significant role to play in ensuring children and young people are safe. It leads the Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, known as the ACCCE, which is at the heart of Australia's coordinated response to this horrendous crime type.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The ACCCE is a world-leading facility, uniting law enforcement agencies and child protection organisations from across the country and the world to combat child exploitation in all its various forms. Some of the stories you're about to hear maybe confronting, but they're stories that need to be told, stories that need to be talked about by teachers, by community members, and by parents. People just like you and I.

Sonya Ryan:

My last interaction with Carly was she was arranging to stay at her friend's house overnight. She gave me four great big hugs at the door, the front door, and she was so happy. And she skipped off the verandah and she said, "Love you, mum," and off she went, happy as anything. And that was... Yeah. Little did I know that would be the last time I would see her.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

That's the voice of Adelaide mother, Sonya Ryan, who in 2007 was cruelly thrust into the limelight, following the murder of her 15 year old daughter Carly by an online child sex offender.

Sonya Ryan:

From the initial moment detectives walked in through my front door, after I put out the missing persons report when I couldn't locate her, to that moment when they sat me down and said, "We found the body of a girl that matches the description of your daughter," and in that moment, kind of everything began to fall away. It's as if time stops and everything becomes distorted. My whole world fell apart and I was left in groundless grief, complete groundless grief.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For 18 months, Carly Ryan thought she was chatting online and falling in love with a young American male by the name of Brandon Cane. But Brandon didn't exist. He was the invention of an online child sex offender Garry Newman, a 50 year old man living in Melbourne.

Sonya Ryan:

Garry Newman had over 200 fake profiles. He was operating online to lure young people.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

On the morning of February 20, 2007, Carly's battered body was found in shallow water at Horseshoe Bay in the South Australian town of Port Elliott. 11 days later in Victoria, police arrested Garry Newman, who at the time was online again as Brandon chatting to a 14 year old girl in Western Australia. In March, 2010, Garry Francis Newman was sentenced to life in jail with a non-parole period of 29 years for the murder of Carly Ryan.

Sonya Ryan:

Looking at all of that evidence and going through the suffering and seeing the suffering in Carly's body, what she had to face as a child, and when you go through that level of suffering, for me, I genuinely didn't want any other parent to ever have to identify their child like that. I didn't want to see any other child ever have to suffer as Carly suffered that night. I'll never know the level of suffering she went through, but I can tell you that I am absolutely focused on trying to help prevent that from happening to even just one other child.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Carly Ryan is believed to be the first person in Australia to have been killed by an online child sex offender. Her mother, Sonya Ryan, channeled her grief into trying to protect other children from online child sex offenders. In 2010, she formed The Carly Ryan Foundation and began campaigning relentlessly for legislative change in the online space.

Sonya Ryan:

I thought, okay, how can I best honour her? What can I do that's going to create adequate education in Australia in relation to online safety, remembering this crime happened in 2007, way before the establishment of the Office of the eSafety Commissioner and way before there was anything in the curriculum. We pushed to start shifting that and create an education program to be able to educate

aware equip a young people for the online space and to be able to use it as it was intended to be used. I just knew I had to do something, and I guess I just didn't see any limitation.

Sonya Ryan:

If my daughter had to face what she had to face, she's not going to go through such suffering for nothing and I'm going to make sure of it.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For the Morcombe family on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, Sunday, the 7th of December 2003 was just like any other day. Christmas was around the corner and parents, Bruce and Denise, had a work party to go to. One of their three sons, 13 year old Daniel, wanted to go shopping for Christmas presents.

Denise Morcombe:

But I remember going to the clothesline that morning, putting some clothes out, and Daniel said to me, "Have you bought something from dad from that magazine that I bought yesterday?" He'd bought a collectors magazine. Bruce used to like just old antiques and different collectibles. I said, "No, I haven't looked at the magazine yet," and just waved goodbye to him and to Bradley and that was the last that we saw of him.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

After heading off to catch a bus, Daniel was never seen alive again. His remains were found eight years later. In 2011, an undercover police sting resulted in the arrest of Brett Cowan, who was subsequently sentenced to life in prison for Daniel's abduction and murder.

Denise Morcombe:

Well, the day we got the phone call to say that Cowan had been arrested for Daniel's murder, which was seven years and nine months to the day, that was harder than the day that Daniel went missing, because that's the day we found out that he wasn't... We're in a better place now knowing that Daniel has been buried. He's now buried not far from our old family home was. At least we've got somewhere to go and visit. It's not the same as waiting to have grandchildren with them or anything like that, but at least we know he's not hurting now.

Bruce Morcombe:

That was a resolve within our family that whoever took Daniel, who was responsible is not going to destroy this family. We made sure we had time for each other, and we gave each other a bit of space if you're on a better day than somebody else.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In April 2005, 17 months after Daniel had been reported missing, Bruce and Denise Morcombe were somehow able to channel their heartbreak and despair into the establishment of The Daniel Morcombe Foundation. The foundation educates children and young people about how to stay safe, not just in the physical world, but in the ever prevalent online space as well. The couple themselves regularly visit schools to reinforce the message to kids that their social media friends may not be the real deal.

Bruce Morcombe:

What Denise and I do when we're talking to kids in school is to identify a very simple balloon test. If I throw a balloon to you, can you catch the balloon? Can you throw it back to me? Can you throw it to your classmate? This is the real world. You might be chatting to somebody online that you think, "He's funny. They're my friend. I like them," but they can never catch that balloon. This is just something really simple that if you throw the balloon to that person you chat to and you know, "Well, they're wonderful.

Bruce Morcombe:

It's a 13 year old girl. They got a pony. They live around the corner. I'd like to meet them," hang on, you cannot meet anybody that you've only been chatting to online. Think of the balloon test. They cannot catch the balloon. They cannot throw the balloon back to me. You must check with mum and dad first. You can't meet those people.

Denise Morcombe:

We tell the kids at the school when we do have school presentations that it's not a popularity competition. We ask them not to accept friends that they don't know. If they're not from the real world and they don't know them, don't accept friends, and especially if your parents don't know them, things like that. We just say, it's okay to have a few friends from school or maybe a couple of relatives, but we don't want you to have a hundred or a thousand or 2,000 friends. You don't know any of these people.

Bruce Morcombe:

We did go to a little country school in Queensland sometime ago, and the whole population let's say was 500 people. We sort of ran through the exercise, who's got 200 people on their social media with likes and 400, 600, 800, and one girl had more than a thousand. We didn't make a song and dance. We didn't want to embarrass the young girl, but all the teachers and there were police and a lot of community people there, including Denise and myself, we all were thinking the same thing, who the hell are these people? It's more than double the whole town.

Bruce Morcombe:

I'm afraid some of those will have bad thoughts and bad intentions and they want to hurt you. That's what we wanted to say to her. Of course, the authorities would have looked after that and her teacher and no doubt her parents, but that's of great concern when she just wanted to be the most popular person in town and have the most likes on Facebook or whatever. But seriously, that's placing her in serious risk.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The foundation is also working to prevent young people from becoming offenders, not just offended against.

Bruce Morcombe:

We have a program at The Daniel Morcombe Foundation where we've employed five educators. The program is called Changing Futures, and it's developed to identify harmful sexual behavior of preteens. The reason of the foundation, and particularly Denise and myself are driving the foundation into this area, is to make sure that these youngsters don't become pedophiles themselves when they grow up and they're in and out of jail.

Bruce Morcombe:

But most importantly, because we don't want them to have a hundred victims under their name by the time they turned perhaps 50.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For Bruce and Denise, that commitment to early intervention has been driven by the question, what if? What if someone had recognised Cowan's potential for offending? What if he'd received therapy? What if?

Bruce Morcombe:

Because he did give verbal evidence at the coronial inquest that he was not abused himself, but he started offending... He was groping youngsters at the local swimming pool. He has said that when he was nine and 10 years old. He is the perfect example of somebody as a youngster that perhaps we could have with additional therapy perhaps identified that person, perhaps modified his behavior, perhaps he wouldn't have had a life that's in and out of jail. All of those victims would be in a much healthier state and, of course, Daniel had still be with us today.

Bruce Morcombe:

That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to make sure the next Cowan receives help, receives therapy, has modified behavior, and becomes a decent person within our community.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It's remarkable that a grieving parent can create something positive out of their loss, despite their heartache. The Carly Ryan Foundation and The Daniel Morcombe Foundation are both collaborating with the ACCCE to develop programs, tools, and resources that will further kids' education around staying safe online. The Morcombe family and Sonya Ryan share a common thread, a thread which speaks to an incredible determination to want to spare other families from similar grief and the pain of loss they've had to endure.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

It was grief that saw the creation of America's National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, otherwise known as NCMEC. Grief that's been galvanized into providing healing to countless numbers of families in the United States and around the world. NCMEC works closely with the ACCCE on a daily basis to try and identify and recover missing children and children who are victims of online sexual abuse.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Since the abduction and murder of six year old American boy Adam Walsh in 1984, NCMEC has been constantly driven by the notion of hope, hope that they can help other families avoid the pain and suffering that Adam's parents went through. If the crime of online child sexual exploitation is borderless, then so is the empathy shown by other parents. As NCMEC CEO Michelle DeLaune explains.

Michelle DeLaune:

We have a long history as an organisation of working with survivors and victim families. We were founded by parents of a victim. And, of course, their family, their entire family was victimised by the

tragedy. We have a really wonderful program that we've operated for many years called Team Hope, and Team Hope is a group of volunteers, hundreds of them, volunteer parents or family members of either missing children or exploited children.

Michelle DeLaune:

And when a new case arrives at the national center and we talk to her parent of a child who was groomed online and their family is trying to put their pieces back together again, we can ask them, "Would you like to talk to another family who's been through this?" They're not trained counselors. They're not somebody who can provide them specific mental health support.

Michelle DeLaune:

They're somebody who can actually say, "You know what? I have been through this. You can feel that it's a safe environment to share your thoughts, share your frustrations, and I will listen and help you." What we have found, one of the most important things on exploitation or missing side, all of these families feel alone. With the exploitation, so many of the cases that we see where the children have been identified, having been seen in the child sexual abuse imagery, it's a family member who abused them.

Michelle DeLaune:

And how hard is that for a family to pick back up the non-offending parent moving forward knowing that their neighbors may know what's going on or their family knows what's going on. How does that family put itself back together again? Being able to just tell them, "You're not alone, and there are other people out there who want to help you," goes a long way. We're trying to help them reclaim the power. Not only NCMEC. There are many great organisations that are doing this with us.

Michelle DeLaune:

It's a movement within this field to really allow a survivor to provide their voice, to help us better our process, to better serve the children of the future that we're going to encounter, and make sure that their experience with law enforcement and the criminal justice system is better than what it was in the past. We have well-meaning authorities, well-meaning organisations out there that are doing great things, but we can do better. We will do better when we learn from those that we're serving how we can do better.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In 2020, research was commissioned by the ACCCE to assess awareness around online child sexual exploitation in Australia, and some of the findings were staggering. Around 80% of those surveyed didn't think online child sexual exploitation could happen to their child, and almost 50% didn't know what they could do to keep kids safe from online child sexual exploitation.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

ThinkUKnow is a national program and free website that provides valuable information to Australian parents, teachers, and students around how to stay safe online and how to make a report if things do go wrong. Simone McKeough leads the AFP's Online Child Safety Team, who run the ThinkUKnow program. Simone believes greater awareness around online safety for our kids is a critical issue for parents and carers, but we need to be more proactive.

Simone McKeough:

I think it's a type of issue where people may not necessarily seek preventative information until something has happened. And by that stage, harm may have already occurred or there may already be a victim. That's why it's really important that we push this prevention message out so that we can effectively prevent harm before it occurs. The same research, just 3% of parents listed online grooming as a concern in terms of online safety and things that their children might be doing online as well.

Simone McKeough:

I think there's a bit of work for us still to do in this space to increase awareness, to help parents and carers start these conversations with their children at home.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Communication between parents and kids is critical to help shape the future of online safety. Kids aren't always going to be perfect, but they need to know they can trust their parents. And that when they have a problem, their parents will provide a safe environment where they can talk freely and without judgment. That safe and protective family unit was ultimately what led to the formation of Bravehearts, an organisation born out of family heartache.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In 1996, Hetty Johnston and her husband Ian were left devastated when their seven year old daughter Kayleen disclosed to her dad the abuse she'd suffered at the hands of her grandfather.

Hetty Johnston:

That was the end of my husband's life as he knew it and the end of mine, although I didn't know it at the time. And certainly really brave and courageous of a little seven year old child to trust the parent that much, that they would tell that despite all the threats and all the, "They'll never love you again. You'll get sent back to Australia on a plane and with no one there to meet you," and all of these terrible things that he was telling her. But she still trusted us.

Hetty Johnston:

She just knew that our love for her would prevail over anything, and I think that's the key message for every parent. She did tell him and he did... This is why I just adore... I loved him when I met him. I loved him when I married him, and I love him more today than then. Because we hear so many terrible stories where parents don't react protectively for their children, but he immediately did.

Hetty Johnston:

He had to decide right then and there lying on that bed, if you can just imagine that, and decide whether he was going to believe and protect his daughter or whether he was going to protect his father and just keep it a secret. He chose his daughter.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

In a joint effort between Queensland Police and Interpol, Kayleen's grandfather in New Zealand was arrested, tried, and sent to jail, where he eventually passed away. But Kayleen's disclosure had raised other questions for Hetty.

Hetty Johnston:

Who does this? Why do they do it? I just need to know all of these things. I was horrified when I went on the net, because I just saw the stats. Back then, it was one in four girls and one in six or one in eight boys. And I thought, how did I have babies and no one told me this? I started looking for help because I looked and I saw, well, look, this is what can happen, depression, suicide, failure to complete your studies, your education. Just all the bad things in the world.

Hetty Johnston:

85% of prisoners have been sexually assaulted as children, people filling up our jails and our psych wards.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

That parental instinct to protect her daughter and provide a voice for other children who had been sexually abused was what ultimately led Hetty to form Bravehearts in 1997. For Hetty and her team, the fight against child sexual abuse was only just beginning.

Hetty Johnston:

Sexual offending against children used to be person on person, like people we knew 85, 95% of people we know and trust. That's not true anymore. With the online world, people are approaching our children in their bedrooms, on their phones, under our very noses. Because if you don't know what you're looking for, then you don't see it. We have a responsibility to know what we're looking for, so we do see it. And that's true on the online world, as well as the offline world. So now offenders are bypassing the parent.

Hetty Johnston:

They don't have to groom us first and get our trust and our confidence, and then go on to our children. They're going straight to the child through the internet and our kids are online all the time. They're on chat features. They're on Facebook. They're on Insta. They're on all of these platforms. They're almost sadly working almost against their own safety.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Hetty's daughter Kayleen found the courage to disclose her abuse and has since gone on to become a resilient and empowered young woman. Many other children, though, continue to suffer in silence and Hetty is determined to fight for them.

Hetty Johnston:

There are sex offenders in every walk of life, and they are numerous in number. And because this is such a difficult topic and such a touchy topic, it's easy for everyone to look the other way and far more comfortable, because silence, secrecy, and shame are the sex offenders' very best friends and fear, and they're our kids' very worst enemies. We have to fight. And as hard as it is, we have to fight and we have to be honest. It doesn't matter who it is.

Hetty Johnston:

If somebody is doing the wrong thing by children, we have to stick up for what we believe is right, even though sometimes that causes us a lot of pain.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

The road to eradicating online child sexual exploitation is a long one. And while Australian law enforcement is committed to disrupting child sex abuse networks, the end game requires a whole of community response, and that response starts with parents.

Hetty Johnston:

Build your relationships with your children. They are your priority. They know that they are your priority. They know that no matter what happens, no matter who, that you will believe them and you will protect them. That's what they need to know. And no matter how bad it is, the situation, that they will not get in trouble. They just need to tell you the truth and you will help them. And if I can believe that 100% and you give them the clues of what to look for.

Hetty Johnston:

You're chatting to someone online and they start asking you a lot of questions about where do you go to school, where do you live, how old are you, all of that stuff, they start inviting you to things or asking you to keep secrets, all of these well-recognised now clues. If you sit down with that list, go to ThinkUKnow website. Just a terrific website. And just look at that. It's all there.

Hetty Johnston:

You go through that list with your kids right from the get-go when they're just little, "These are the things that you're looking for, kids," and you would leave that by the computer. "Now, if anyone you're talking to, if you can tick a box there and then you tick in another box, you come and tell mummy or daddy." We just have to give them information.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For Bruce and Denise Morcombe, Day for Daniel, which happens in October every year, has become much more than a day to remember Daniel with a red ribbon or a red t-shirt. It's also a day when some kids feel they can find their voice.

Bruce Morcombe:

In crunching the numbers, it is something like 300 youngsters come forward on that day, on Day for Daniel, and disclose something of concern to them. The scale might change, but the numbers are frightening on a national basis, there's 300 kids, but we try and look at it in a positive way. There's 300 kids that are receiving care, and there's a number of adults that are being spoken to perhaps about their behaviour. Day for Daniel really has a purpose.

Bruce Morcombe:

It's not just about wearing Ray and remembering Daniel, which is nice, but the point of the day is something has happened to you, please come forward and we'll try and fix it. But most of all, the youngsters will be believed and will be cared for. That is a really powerful message. It's never the kid's fault.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

For Sonya Ryan, she believes parents have a crucial role to play in keeping their kids safe online, both in terms of education and setting guidelines around online use.

Sonya Ryan:

You wouldn't put your child in a car and tell them to drive down the road without any driving experience. Why are we putting them online with no life experience and no critical thinking skills, without adequate resilience and emotional intelligence? Really, it comes back to setting boundaries, guidelines for your child until they're of age, and getting them to understand that that's a vital part of being given the privilege of the internet. That when it comes to their safety, if they compromise that in any way, it's our duty as their parents to intervene and keep them safe. And that's just the way it is. We have an online contract at The Carly Ryan Foundation that we are partnering with the AFP on, and it's available through the ThinkUKnow website as well. And that's a great tool for parents to be implement. When they hand over the device and they hand over the access to the internet, these are the basic guidelines you need to follow to be given the privilege of this service.

Sonya Ryan:

Essentially you become like a shield and you want to protect your kids from inappropriate contact. And you need to talk to them about the different scenarios they may come across. Those critical thinking skills are super important, because we can't be with them all the time. They need to be able to understand when and how to deal with particular scenarios that may happen and unfold when they're talking to people on the worldwide internet. For parents, I think it's really important for those guidelines in place, but also for them to educate themselves about the applications that kids are using, having a look at the apps that are on your kids' devices and knowing more about them. We have app fact sheets on our website, carlyryanfoundation.com, and there's fact sheets on a whole bunch of different applications, which essentially talks to you about what the application is, how it works, what are some of the things that we need to be mindful of, settings.

Sonya Ryan:

Then once you have education and knowledge and awareness around the applications your kids are using, then you know whether they're enabling private chat functionality, you know if their live location is being shared. You are able with them to set those settings appropriately, to reduce the risk of something happening to them. We can't wrap them in cotton wool, but what we can do is reduce the risk of somebody being able to literally step into their bedroom through their phone, because essentially a phone is like a window to the world. I think that's where young people need to understand that it's not about invading privacy. It's not about wanting to inhibit their interactions with friends online and be boring parents. This is having our young people understand that online child exploitation is a multibillion dollar industry.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Bringing an end to online child sexual exploitation and abuse is a driving motivation behind the work of The Carly Ryan Foundation, The Daniel Morcombe Foundation, Bravehearts, and many organisations across the country. They talk a lot about healing and finding strength from tragedy, strength to carry on, and strength to make the world a better place for children and their families.

Bruce Morcombe:

We just keep it real. Of course, Daniel's photo is incorporated in The Daniel Morcombe Foundation logo, so he's never forgotten. Life does go on and certainly a bit of a private motto of the Morcombe family is, "Look towards tomorrow. Don't look at yesterday." We can learn from yesterday, but you can't change

it. So we're stuck with that. But we can influence the future. I often describe who we are and what we do, we are still Daniel's mum and dad.

Sonya Ryan:

She's right in my heart every moment of every single day. Death cannot break our love connection. And the work that I'm doing is a pure power of love in action.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

Today, these amazing organisations work tirelessly to help educate parents and their kids about online safety. In doing so, they're assisting the ACCCE and its international partners such as NCMEC to disrupt, prevent, and investigate child exploitation across the country and even the globe. It's an ongoing fight. In episode six of Closing The Net, child psychologists and educators share their views on how parents and kids can all be better equipped to safely navigate the online space.

Kerryann Walsh:

We can't jump in at the deep end with them on teaching them grooming lures if we haven't already done some of the groundwork in teaching them how to be online, how to interact with other people online, how to develop and maintain relationships online with other people.

Rebekah Kilpatrick:

You don't have to create the solution. A lot of the work is out there. All you have to do is be open to the solution and be open to engaging with the resources.

Rodger Corser, Narrator:

If the content in this podcast has caused any distress or if you know a child is being contacted or groomed online, visit accce.gov.au to find out how to report and where you can seek support. If you see child abuse material online, it's important to report it to the Office of the eSafety Commissioner who can help get it removed. And if you think a child is in immediate danger, please call 000 or your local police. You can provide anonymous information to crimestoppers.com.au or by phoning 1800 333 000.

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