

## **CRISES IN CARE**

**“The boy who died because we didn’t care enough!”**

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Before Michael Ormsby got into mischief, his big brown eyes would dob him in. They would start smiling and people knew he was up to something.

He'd wander off, out of sight, chuckling at his plans. Delighted at how clever he was.

He liked getting into strife almost as much as he loved oranges, the smell of eucalyptus and being king of the castle.

When he played on swings he wouldn't swing. He'd climb to the highest point and stand with his hands in the air. It was the top of his world and he'd never fallen. Not in all his nine years.

He'd splash around in the bath, play for hours feeling the water wash over his perfect skin. And when it tired him out he'd burrow his face into someone's shoulder for a hug.

Michael would grab his carer's fluffy, black blanket and drape it over his body as he fell asleep soaking in the smell of someone he loved and who loved him back. Unconditionally — that's how you loved little Michael.

For all the work looking after this cheeky little autistic boy, he was lovable.

He was also quick. Everybody from Kyneton who met him knew he was fast. Everyone knew you couldn't take your eyes off him. So when word spread on Sunday May 9 last, year, a car had hit a nine-year-old boy running in the dark evening, people started wondering.

An accident had happened just outside a set of units — Kyneton Bush Resort— where Michael would be taken to give his weekday carer a break.

Michael had died in the blinding light of an oncoming car, with a screech of tyres on asphalt and a groan of horror from the driver.

"It's a little kid. I've hit a little boy," she said over and over after she saw him curled up, deathly still on the road.

It's hard to know who to blame for what happened that night. Lots of little things went wrong. Some of them could have been avoided.

But most importantly, nobody heeded the warnings of people who loved Michael, one of the most difficult kids in DHS care.

For nine years, people who looked after Michael had fed him, changed his nappies, dressed him, brushed his teeth. They had hugged him and sometimes he hugged them back. They had endured his tantrums and laughed with him. They had protected him.

But in the end, the system set up to keep him safe failed just once, good and proper. For a boy like Michael, once was all it took.

Michael entered the I world in the same way he left it —by surprise. Not even his own mother knew he was coming.

On June 19, 2000, a woman went into hospital emergency. She had a bad backache which turned out to be labour. And Michael was born shortly after.

There are stories about Michael's mum having Asperger's syndrome. They say she had been a clever girl at university when she was struck by a brain illness. One person who met her in recent years said she seemed like a "10 or 11-year-old".

She didn't want her baby. She must've known she couldn't care for a youngster.

Hospital staff learned that nine months earlier she had a brief relationship with a man, Michael "Mick" Ormsby. At the time, he was a 45-year-old drug addict who moved around a lot.

Somebody tracked him down through a squat house and to a hospital.

They shook his hand: "Congratulations, Mr Ormsby, you're a dad."

Right then, Mick could've said he didn't want to be a father to anyone. He could've turned his back on his newborn son. But he didn't.

He was taken to meet his baby boy. He kicked his drug habit. If ever there was a father-son bond forged in fire, this was it.

In those two months, Mick learned how to be dad to a little boy. The two moved to the country, eventually to Kyneton. Mick smoked dope, did some low-end dealing and got pinged for some petty crime. But he was a good dad. The two didn't have much, but they had each other. Friends Carmel and Eddie Gibbings Johns, believe Mick's son saved his life.

"Junior was the best thing that happened to him. Who knows where Mick would have ended up if it hadn't been for him," Carmel says.

Michael wasn't even two when his autism was detected. He wasn't developing socially. He had no words. He showed no sign of becoming toilet trained.

Mick discovered his son loved nature. He'd take him fishing for redfin and trout at a reservoir up the road. The little boy would sit beside him, playing in the dirt, sometimes eating it.

Mick would tell friends how much his boy made him laugh. And he never complained about the hard bits of being dad.

His dog, Crunch, was Michael's long-suffering friend. The beefy staffy cross would put up with having his ears pulled, his tail trodden on.

Once, little Michael bit Crunch. He drew blood. Crunch walked away. Mick often retold the story, proud of the dog and amused at the boy.

His life revolved around Michael. A giant fence to keep Michael in still stands at the front of their old house. Inside, there was a high shelf which Mick had set up so Michael couldn't reach some of his special things. Once, he left the boy in the room alone and he came back to find holes in the plaster wall, like a ladder to the shelf. He was smart.

Lyn Wattie knew that better than anybody. Early on, little Michael Ormsby picked her. He sized up new people in a flash. Lyn, who lived two minutes' drive from the Ormsbys, passed the test. She can only guess why.

If she couldn't teach him to talk or convince other people to stop looking at him at the supermarket, at least she could keep him safe. Share with him her fluffy blanket.

She first had him as a toddler. Lyn ran a family day-care service. Michael was one of her kids.

At first he seemed normal enough. She cringes when she uses that word, hates the idea that anybody can be labelled normal or not. "We've all got our difficult sides," she says.

"Most of all, Michael was a little boy. That's what mattered to me." She tells how he scaled a house once, right over the roof from backyard to front. He knew on the other side there was an orange, one of his favourite things. He'd eat the peel, feel the zest fizz up his nose, then throw away the good bits.

And he'd zone out on a tree if there were gum-leaves to pick and smell. He'd pull them from the branches — chew them given half a chance, then spit them out. Lyn tells it like it was the most normal thing in the world. She recalls Michael's teachers at Bendigo Special Developmental School fondly. They were clever, too, always thinking one step ahead to protect Michael from himself.

When they took him with the rest of his classmates out on nature walks, they would load up his backpack with bottles of water that he didn't need. The extra weight slowed him down. Tired him out a bit.

When he went through stages of trying to scale 2m fences, they'd put skates on him. (It's hard to jump a fence wearing roller blades).

One person who cared for him as he grew up remembers a difficult boy, but endearing—his big brown eyes would sometimes lock into yours, he'd squeal with delight when he knew he was doing something wrong.

"It's funny how you most remember the kids that you have to work so hard at at the time," says the former carer.

"Michael was no Rain Man. He was smart, but he did what he wanted to do. Sometimes he was hard to control."

Eventually, he was so labour-intensive Lyn needed to convince the DHS they should fund one-on-one care.

It became her first experience of fighting for Michael — and, she says, not her last.

Michael's case managers were swapped regularly. They meant well, but they were there one week, gone the next. Lyn felt nobody took enough time to understand his complicated needs.

She made him special suits. She'd sew his tracksuit top to the bottoms, sew in some socks, put it on him so his jacket zipper was at the back. Michael loved to strip down and she had to make it difficult for him.

When he stayed the night, he'd rip into his mattress to reach the fuzz inside. So Lyn got her friend, Sharon, to sew five covers over the mattress.

Her husband, Roy, put Perspex panes in Michael's bedroom so he wouldn't hurt himself when he banged against the window.

Lyn and Roy live on the outskirts of Kyneton on 1.2ha of land. When they moved there 25 years ago, it was a paddock. Now there are willows, cherry blossoms and gums, a line of conifers edge the road. It's their haven.

Lyn's front door opens the second you knock. She serves chocolate-covered teddy bear biscuits for afternoon tea. Now and again her eyes fill with tears as she recalls Michael and Mick. It still hurts.

She cries for them almost every day.

Now, the only kids she looks after are her grandchildren. She hasn't been able to work since the day Michael died.

As the years went by, Michael spent more time with her. In the final nine months of his life, he lived with them permanently. Mick had been diagnosed with colon cancer and knew his son was better off with Lyn—she was the one he trusted most with his boy.

He stopped her at a service station, doubled over in pain, and asked her to take Michael home. He needed to get to a hospital. The cancer had gone everywhere. Little could be done.

Michael was taken to see his dad every day, sometimes twice, but he never lived back at home. Instead he settled into the daily routine of life with Lyn and Roy.

Mick was petrified the DHS would make good on suggestions they would send his boy far away from Lyn, to Echuca, after he died from cancer.

The DHS insisted Lyn have respite from young Michael. They insisted he spend weekends with their carers — usually three of them each weekend, rostered in shifts. She hated him to go, but she needed a break.

One of Michael's former carers said the chopping and changing of carers would have been torture for him.

"Imagine how difficult it would be for him with those constant changes when he struggled with something as simple as a new person walking into the room," the former carer said.

As the months wore on, weekend carers came and went. They moved him around from place to place, unable to find a person or accommodation he wouldn't wreck.

The little boy's life had been upended and his behaviour got worse. Lyn says she complained to the DHS about the respite arrangements. Sometimes he was housed in on-site cabins in caravan parks, often with workers ill-equipped to handle severe autism like Michael's.

The company charged with his respite care, Vista Community Support, lost a booking at the back of the Kyneton Bush Resort estate — a unit hundreds of metres from the main road.

Lyn says Vista failed to pre-book blocks of time in the safer unit.

Instead, Michael and his respite carer were housed closest to the road on the weekend he died.

That night, his carer was a 21-year-old woman who told Lyn she had only ever had one other job—working at a fast-food joint.

Yesterday, a DHS spokesman said he was unable to comment on Michael's case, which is under investigation by the Child Safety Commission and the Coroner's Court.

But the spokesman described his death as tragic.

Vista CEO Richard Dent also did not comment on specifics of Michael's case, but said Vista staff had felt the "terrible loss".

The DHS tabled its annual report in Parliament on Thursday. It contained details of the children who died in its care in the last financial year. In 2010, that number was 29. Michael was just one of them.

Paramedics worked on the little boy at the roadside for ages. He didn't appear broken —there was just a little graze on his forehead. But Michael was gone.

A car-load of first and second-year medical students pulled up in their car seconds after the accident.

The man in charge of the investigation, Leading Senior Constable David Young recalls: "It was one of the bad ones. Let's just say the students didn't handle it very well."

Nobody expected a little boy in dark clothes to be running along a road that night.

The car was travelling at only 40km/h when it hit Michael. The woman had slowed, and skidded, to half the speed limit to avoid the dark blur that came from nowhere.

There was barely a dent on the car that hit him. His little body bounced down the driver's side, and slumped on the road.

A car close behind ran over him, but he was so small he cleared the tyres and vehicle's undercarriage.

Lyn says the respite carer told her she cried as she searched the area around the unit and tried to call her boss at Vista to let her know Michael had run away. But the phone rang out.

Sen-Constable Young said it took some days to track down Michael's mum. She was in the care of a welfare group in Melbourne.

"It's one of the hard parts of the job. I've done my share of them, telling people their loved one has died," he said.

He walked up to Michael's mum, tried to get her attention. He said: "I'm sorry, but your son has died. He was hit by a car." It stopped her for a moment. She paused, looked into his eyes.

Then she moved on, chattering about Danii Minogue's new baby. Young thought she hadn't heard him. Her carer said she had. She had paused. She heard. That was the best they would hope for.

Lyn bought Mick Ormsby a new pair of trackie-pants for his son's funeral. They matched his black trench coat. He couldn't wear suit pants because he was in such pain. By then he could barely walk.

They offered him a wheelchair for the funeral, but he said it was no occasion to be seated.

"I'll be walking into my son's funeral," he insisted. So he hobbled into the chapel himself.

Mick and Lyn had sat in the funeral parlour two days after the Sunday Michael died. The funeral director talked about the service. Should there be music? Photos on a screen? How many orders of service should they print up?

Mick got agitated. He grumbled something like: "Who's going to come anyway? Junior didn't know many people." Then he took himself outside for a smoke. So the funeral organisation fell on Lyn.

Her eyes well up as she recalls. It hurt to think that this man believed nobody would care enough to bid his boy farewell.

They printed up 300 sheets. It was nowhere near enough. The chapel was full. There were people standing out on the street. Mick was shocked.

Lyn left two cushions on seats up the front. There were "reserved" signs on them. She'd contacted the welfare group who cared for Michael's mum, told them his funeral details.

At the end of the service, she turned around and saw a woman and her carer on those cushions. Mick went up to Michael's mum and hugged her tight.

She may not have understood the importance of the occasion. But Mick knew that she'd lost something special the day she had to leave Michael, nine years earlier.

Mick lived for another three months after Michael died. That surprised everyone. He slipped away with close friends and his sister who barely left his side at the end.

He didn't have photos of his boy beside his bed. Lyn says Mick liked to imagine Junior was with someone else, being looked after. Safe still.

The father and son's ashes were scattered at the reservoir where they loved to fish.

It amazed Carmel Gibbings Johns that Mick lasted so long after Michael died.

"Honestly, I think it was because he wanted to know what went wrong in the system that was supposed to be looking after his son," she says.

"He couldn't understand it and it broke his heart." Before little Michael died, Lyn wrote a poem for Mick with words from his son.

The last two lines read:

When you walk down the road, dad, I will catch up with you  
I love just to run, but will keep you in view.

Nobody expected he'd run on ahead.

Michael's old bedroom at the Watties' house is now orderly and pretty, furnished for their little grandchildren when they come to stay.

While he was there, Michael turned their lives upside down.

But now he's gone, Lyn and Roy say it's too quiet. Sometimes it's hard to sleep, no longer hearing the little boy bump around busily in his bedroom, not being able to see him rest under that fluffy black blanket.