

A mother's action

From an interview with Vickie Douglas

Being the mother of a kid who goes off the rails can be difficult enough. There is the worry and sorrow for your child, the guilt that makes you question everything you've ever done, and the shame at the harm your child may have done to others. When prison comes into the equation everything gets so much harder. In this piece, Vickie Douglas, tells the story of her son, Chris. She conveys the hardships and losses, but significantly, also describes what Chris' life and death have inspired - collective action to try to protect the lives of others within prisons.

When your kid's in trouble...you do all you can

Despite his troubles, my son, Chris, was the love of my life. As a young kid he had always struggled. When he was at home it was fine, but when he left the house he always had to be a part of anything exciting, anything on the edge. He was quite young when he started experimenting with drugs and alcohol and when we tried to intervene he responded by running away from home. If your kid is in trouble, you try to do everything you can to make a difference.

We would search for Chris in the streets. We moved state and back again. We had him live with my mother. We had him live with us. We changed schools and much more. There were so many nights I was worried sick. Nothing seemed to be good enough, and as his mother, I felt so guilty.

Chris ended up doing crime, spending time in Juvenile Justice system and then at 17 was imprisoned in Risdon prison. The crime he was imprisoned for was a home invasion in which an old lady was hurt. Two months after the assault, the old lady died and Chris and another youth were charged with her murder. While Chris told me that it was not him that assaulted the old lady, this no longer mattered. He was part of the job. If you're committing an offence and violence happens, then you're responsible too. It felt terrible to think of what had happened to this old lady. That my son had been a part of her death is still almost too hard to think about.

Trying to protect your child in prison

When your child has been placed in prison, and you know they are at risk, you will do anything you can to try to protect them. Chris was very small for his age and I was desperate about what could happen to him in Risdon, the adult prison. A guy that I had gone to school with was in the same section of the prison as Chris, but I didn't know what this man was in prison for. I hadn't seen him for 20 years so I asked around. After establishing that this man wasn't a paedophile, I started putting money into his account so he'd take care of my son while he was in there. It's not that this guy was super strong, but at least Chris had somebody to keep an eye on him. Other prisoners began calling this guy 'the grandfather' because he took on the duty of looking after Chris.

One day when I visited Chris, he pulled up his shirt. He had bruises all over his back where he said the custodial officers had beaten him. I reported this to Chris's lawyer, as did Chris. This lawyer was prepared to take up the complaint but said 'We can take it further but it could make things worse for Chris'.

The next time we went to see Chris he'd been put in N Division. This is where prisoners spend most of the time locked in a small cell. It's like a dungeon. There was nothing in Chris' cell. His bedding would be removed of a morning and then returned to him at night. In N Division, prisoners are only out of their cell for half an hour exercise twice a day.

After a few weeks in N Division Chris was telling me that he wanted to die, that he couldn't take it any more. This was my 17 year old son – and it was breaking my heart. I started ringing management and asking them to let me bring things in to Chris, anything to try and give him a bit of stimulation. Eventually, they let him have a TV and some magazines. He told me he still had only the set of clothing he was given on the first day. He was washing his socks and underwear in buckets of cold water. So I hounded them until eventually he was allowed to change his clothes. I kept persisting but I always remained polite. I never lost my temper with them because I was always worried about what they'd do to my son.

Chris was losing the plot. He sent me out a letter saying that if the old lady died he'd probably 'do something stupid'. I approached the counsellor who Chris had been seeing before he was imprisoned, and asked her if she would she go in and see him, to help him and to give him hope. I didn't know then that you couldn't take a counsellor into the prison. I just thought anyone could go in there if they were a professional. Even though I discovered it wasn't possible for the counsellor to go into the prison, from the moment I contacted her I felt that I was no longer alone in it all. It wasn't just me trying to deal with this situation. I now had 'the grandfather' and the support of this counsellor. Together we would try to support Chris, help get him out of N Division, and plan for the future.

The end of a life

Eventually, they released Chris from N Division and for a time it seemed as if things might be okay. But everything went downhill when 'the grandfather' got transferred to another yard and another prisoner who had also been looking out for Chris was unexpectedly released. Two weeks after this, Chris slashed at his wrists and face. He seemed to sink into a depression. He stopped talking, and you could just see in his eyes that something had changed. But I did not know what.

After he slashed at his wrist and his face, he showed an officer what he'd done and they took him down to the hospital. He was placed in the 'fishtank' on suicide watch for 24 hours. The 'fishtank' is an observation cell. Within it, the prisoner is stripped naked. A thin mattress is located on the cold and damp concrete floors. The toilet bowl, with no toilet paper supplied, is in full view of anyone walking past.

Chris's wrist was bandaged, he was given a relaxation tape, and then sent back to the yard. That was the treatment for a 17 year old kid who had just slashed at his wrists and face.

On the 3rd of August, the day before he died, I went to visit Chris. He was expecting me to visit with him at 1pm as we'd discussed, but the custodial officers were having a meeting at the allocated visitors' time. I was told that I would either have to wait or come back another day. After waiting 1½ hours, I was able to visit Chris for the last time. Chris was holding his shower bag. I knew there was something wrong but I did not know what.

Chris said that he had been worried that something had happened to me and that he had telephoned home several times. I took this for the reason why he looked so upset. After visiting with Chris for approximately 20 minutes, I could see the rest of the yard heading for the showers. I didn't want Chris going to the showers on his own, so I cut the visit short and told Chris to catch up with the others. I stood and watched him go through the gates as I did each time I visited.

Chris died the next day, the 4th August 1999.

I was in bed asleep that night, it must have been 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, when there was a knock on the door. I jumped out of bed and ran to the door screaming 'Chris is dead' – I just knew it, I knew that my son was dead. It was my sister on the phone and she informed me that the police were on their way and that something had happened to Chris. It seemed like hours waiting for the police to arrive to tell me what I already knew in my heart. Eventually, when they did arrive, I was in a traumatised state and I begged and screamed at them, 'Tell me, tell me he's not dead'. But he was.

The next day, I was informed that Chris had left behind a suicide note. My husband immediately drove to the Coroner's office to pick it up.

His death was one thing, but there was more to come. We were making arrangements for the funeral when I received a call from the funeral director. He informed me that the hospital would not release Chris's body because bruises were starting to appear on his backside. I couldn't believe it. I just wanted Chris to have peace. He hadn't known much peace in the last few years of his life, and I wanted him to have it now. I didn't want him to have died with such filth and cruelty. I couldn't deal with it. I couldn't deal with what those bruises might mean. So I blocked out. It didn't happen. Everyone's got it wrong. I started to tell people that when he hanged himself, he fell onto something, that's how he got the bruises. I was so vehement in what I wanted to believe that those close to me became scared of trying to explain to me that what I was saying couldn't be true. I'd just attack any other suggestions. I refused to believe that my son had been raped.

If I even thought about it, I just wanted to die. To even have that thought in my mind, brought a sort of pain that would rip through everything I was, everything that I'd been. It was like a sense of horror had come into my body and I didn't know what to do. I didn't know whether to sit, or stand, or walk, or sleep, or throw up, or cry. I was raw. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't take it back. I couldn't stop what had happened. The only consolation that I could find for myself then was believing that: 'My son is free, my son is at peace, nobody can harm him anymore and nothing happened to him'.

Facing it and taking action

Right throughout the inquest, I maintained that nothing had happened to Chris. I went to great extremes to make sure that it was not printed in the media or spoken about. That is, until the pathologist who did the autopsy on my son was called to give evidence. He stated that the injuries were consistent with that of a sexual assault. I ran from the court room in tears and desperation not wanting to hear anymore. That was the day I was hit by reality and I forced myself to accept the horror of what happened to my son.

One of the reasons I did not want to acknowledge that Chris had been raped, was that if I spoke about it, if I spoke it out loud, I felt this would somehow add to Chris' humiliation. Even though he was gone, I felt that to speak about it would somehow be letting Chris down. Now though, I believe the opposite.

I wish with all my being that it had not happened to him. I wish I could make it not happen by disbelieving it. But it did happen. And accepting that my son was raped has made it possible for me to speak up and speak out. I am not going to forget my son and I will never forget what happened to him. From the last day of the inquest onwards, I have been determined to try to assist other young men who might be in a similar situation. I am determined to talk about the issue of rape in prison and suicide in prison.

One of our first steps to raise awareness of this issue was to share Chris' suicide note with others. He had left the note with a message: 'Whoever finds this please give this to my mum'. We even had the following extract published in the local newspaper.

*Dear Mum, Dad, Leigh, Luke, Rhys
Im just writing this letter
to tell you's I love you's heaps
and what Im just about to
do I know will hurt you's but
don't let it cause this will
end all my an your suffering.
Im now in heaven watching
over you's all I will always
be with you's.
Well I'v got to leave now*

love you's forever

xxx CHRIS xxx

P.S Every where I will be with you

A number of us then came together to form a Prison Action Group and we began to campaign for changes to the prison system. A suicide prevention program was introduced to the prison system after a number of deaths in custody. It was called 'Inside Out' and while it was running no suicide occurred within the prison.

We began to talk to community organisations. We spoke in schools, and we held forums and conferences. We would constantly try to educate the public about the prison system. And overtime we gained the attention of the media. People were shocked to learn of the big problems in our prison system. We showed that we cared about these issues and that changes were needed.

Our work in relation to sexual assaults in prisons continues. Here in Tasmania, if someone approaches us saying that a prisoner is at risk of rape, or has been raped, we try to verify what has happened, and then we try to keep them safe in the prison system - usually with the assistance of other prisoners.

It's important to note that prisoners are usually unwilling to come forward publicly and lay charges about rape in prison because there is no process to support them. There's a good chance that they'll end up back in the prison system, and they will be at greater risk if they have informed on another prisoner. So it's up to us – those of us on the outside who are not at risk – to try to address these issues. As soon as we receive any information about an assault, it's passed onto me and I contact the Attorney General's Office. We also send the information to all local politicians. We seek information from everywhere, we document everything that we can, and we try to raise awareness about what is happening in our prisons.

Actually, I believe that one of the most important ways to reduce assaults and deaths in custody is by challenging mother blame. We still have fights with health professionals about their attitudes towards mothers. Some health professionals still say to us that the main problem faced by some of these young people in prisons is their mothers. We hear that 'mothers exaggerate' or that 'mothers don't get it right'. These are poisonous ideas. The mothers are often the only person who the young person is still strongly connected to and yet the health workers say they are the problem! If the prison system just took the concerns of mothers and other family members seriously, valued these concerns and responded to them, it would make a huge difference in keeping people alive and safe.

Since Chris was raped and took his life, and since we have spoken out about this, the secrecy about sexual assault in Tasmanian prisons has ended. Nobody used to talk about it. Chris' experience was the first of its kind ever to be brought to the public eye. Since then, there's been a lot of publicity about rapes and sexual assaults and we've kept all the clippings. While nothing formal ever eventuates from these disclosures, at least the issue is more acknowledged now. And some prisoners are now even making formal complaints that they have been assaulted. This never happened before. It took my son's death, and our action to highlight the secrecy around the issue of rape in our prison system here in Tasmania.

Memories of Chris and joining with other mothers

I don't only have painful memories of Chris and his life. I also have some very beautiful memories. Even when his life was chaotic on the streets, even when he was probably out of control in many different places, he always managed to keep 'home' as a respectful place. And he was always concerned about the effects of his actions on my life. He wrote some beautiful letters about the pain he caused us and what a lucky kid he was to have us as parents. He often said that not many other people in his situation would have parents that stood by them like we stood by him.

Through the Prison Action Group, I got to know a lot of other prisoners who had known Chris inside. I would meet these hard-encrusted prisoners and they'd say to me 'Oh, we heard all about you in the prison'. They'd say: 'Most people go to prison and talk all this macho stuff but all your son used to talk about was his mother' [Laugh]!

It was my birthday three weeks before he died and he sent me a card. On the front of this card it said, "You are always on my mind". Every birthday, I bring that card out and place it with the others. It is one of my most treasured possessions. These sorts of things, these sorts of memories are important to me.

It's also important to me to know that Chris didn't die alone – he went with our love. His note makes that perfectly clear. Chris died knowing that he was loved. I'm glad I was his mother, I am glad that he went knowing how much I loved him.

Once I started speaking publicly about Chris' experiences, other mothers who know their sons have been raped in prison have come to speak with me. They don't want anyone else to know about what their sons went through, but they have spoken to me and I hope it has made a difference for them to be able to do this. I think I would probably be the only person they've ever mentioned it to. They know I care about the issue. They know I'll believe it happened. And they know I will fight to try to keep their sons safe.

I hope that other mothers will join me in speaking about this issue. They're our sons. We can't allow this to happen to them, and the more we close up and remain quiet, the more likely it is that rape in prison will continue. We're not protecting our sons by closing up. I've got three other boys and I know now that this could happen to them. I'm not so ignorant now to think that these things only happen to 'other' families. We've got to speak about these issues in order to protect other boys.

There are many things that make it difficult for mothers to speak. It was so important to me to find somewhere that I could talk about my own anguish, to talk about the guilt that I was carrying and the self-blame. You've got the guilt of what's happening to your child. You've got the shame of what they might have done. And then you've got the guilt that people throw at you: 'It must have been the way you brought him up.' When things go wrong, mothers are often the ones who feel the guilt and shame more than anyone else. And this can make it so hard for us to speak out. But the responsibility for issues of rape in prison doesn't just belong to us mothers. The more we talk about this issue, the more we hope other people might start

taking on some of the responsibility. There might be some sort of re-distribution of guilt and responsibility!

The most significant thing for me was to realise that speaking out about what happened to my son is not hurting him. We're not hurting Chris, we're honouring him. We're remembering him. Our determination to speak out about the fact that some of our sons have been raped in prison is about loving our children and trying to protect them. And if we could not protect our own, then we're going to try everything we can to protect other people's sons. We know the pain that's attached to this sort of loss. We will do everything we can to prevent any one else feeling it.

An invitation to contact us

If you, or a loved one, has witnessed or been subjected to sexual violence within prisons, juvenile justice institutions, immigration detention centres or psychiatric units, we would welcome hearing from you.

Please contact David Denborough at the Preventing Prisoner Rape Project, ph: 08 82233966
fx: 08 8232 4441. Email: dulwich@senet.com.au If you would like to contact Vickie Douglas, we will pass your message on to her.