

As noted above, our intention was to provide a snapshot of the characteristics of novice driver licensing in Australasia, with the discussion focussed upon reviewing the safety-critical changes to GDL, such as related to age, practice conditions, night-time and passenger limits, as operationalised in the IIHS GDL safety rating.

These issues may have led to an inaccurate conclusion regarding South Australia's "GDL strength rating".

In light of the concurrent changes to the minimum driver age, the overall rating for the SA GDL program would have been the same as for NSW, QLD, and Vic. We note that this section of the manuscript is unable to be changed at this time. We note also that the manuscript asserts that *all* of the reviewed GDL programs have room for improvement. Finally, we note that the Table PDFs to be provided on the ARRU website will be augmented by a third summary table which calculates the overall rating for the GDL program.

Commentary on Road Safety

A collaborative road safety survivor mission: the sacred work of sorrow

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Key findings

- Working together, three friends influenced the allocation of Federal Black Spot funding to repair a dangerous rural road where a loved one had died;
- A “survivor mission” is a healthy way for a survivor to express and channel grief for wider community benefit;
- Wider understanding of the concept of “survivor mission” among road safety specialists and road authorities can raise public awareness, as well as contributing to the healing of survivor grief;
- Emotional numbness can characterise institutional responses to road fatalities; and
- Local road authorities need specific, targeted educational programs to help them better put a “human face” to road fatality statistics, understand grief, and deal more compassionately with survivors and grieving family and friends.

Abstract

Mooren (2017) undertook a systemic analysis of the road safety factors that she believed contributed to the 2016 death of her friend, Karl Langheinrich. In this article, Karl’s wife, Dr Wendy Sarkissian, a prominent community planner, explains how collaborative road safety activism (her “survivor mission”) helped to heal her grief following Karl’s death. I propose that survivors consider making a “Victim Impact Statement” to the responsible road authority to help their staff put a human face to statistics. This article also challenges road safety and traffic specialists (especially those in local councils) to attend to their own literacy about grief and healing and to pay greater attention to the emotional consequences of road crashes and fatalities. New policies and approaches are necessary to encourage better education of road safety staff and management (about emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, mindfulness, and compassion) in road authorities, such as local councils in Australia.

Keywords

road safety, survivor mission, grief, advocacy, activism, road authority

Introduction

This article builds on an earlier article by Dr Lori Mooren (2017). She argued that:

- Globally, road and traffic systems are providing the conditions to allow some 1.25 million people to die every year;

- The application of root cause analysis methods can identify systemic factors in road injury;
- Some road authorities are not embracing a safe system approach to road safety;
- People are generally complacent about the continuing road trauma crisis; and
- A louder community voice is the key missing element in the struggle to eliminate road deaths and injuries.

On 6 February 2016, my husband, Karl Langheinrich, drowned in the Tweed River near Uki, NSW, after our car plunged forty metres off the narrow, winding, two-lane Kyogle Road. In a period of eighteen months, Karl was one of four people to die on that notorious stretch of road, which has also seen numerous other non-fatal crashes. I am recovering from my injuries and have lobbied strongly at all levels to have the road repaired. The Lost River Shire Council (not their real name) has received Federal Black Spot funding but repairs have been delayed, apparently because of massive flooding in northern NSW in March 2017.

This article discusses the concept of “survivor mission” (Jozefowski, 1999 and <http://www.survivorguidelines.org/articles/jozef01.html>) and its relevance to road safety and road safety advocacy and activism. It is my personal story.

Why do road crash survivors need to take our grief out into the community?

Following a tragedy, such as a sudden death in a road crash, the grieving survivor may eventually seek to move from predominantly inner (or self-focused) grief work to “outer” work. We may find ourselves eager, as I was, to complement self-care with a wider ethic of caring. As we begin to turn our thoughts towards others, we may find ourselves asking, as I did, “What was his dream? What has he taught me?” Or even: “How would he take this healing into the wider community?” Many agree that a part of human adaptation to loss is to construct a way to move forward. Bereaved people who cope best find comfort in ongoing connections. So we may see an opportunity to transform broken dreams, ambitions, opportunities, or future life events that vanished with the death of our loved one. In my case, I found myself asking, “What would Karl do here?”

A survivor mission

At some point, as survivors begin to loosen our hold on our departed one, we may be able to make our pain a gift to others and redeem our traumas through what is now termed a *survivor mission*. Survivor missions exist in many forms, from concrete engagement with a particular individual, to more abstract, intellectual pursuits, to dramatic social and political action and movements (Jozefowski, 1999; <http://www.survivorguidelines.org/articles/jozef01.html>). All are evidence of the recognition that others have died and we may have suffered greatly, but we are alive and able to bring about changes in our world.

Examples of road safety survivor missions

Shortly after our 2016 crash, I found myself, as a planner, focussing on the dangerous rural road where Karl died. As my interest in road safety grew (supported by my close friend, Lori Mooren, a road safety specialist), I discovered the excellent road safety activism work of the European Federation of Road Traffic Victims (FEVR: <https://fevr.org/>). FEVR and London-based RoadPeace (www.roadpeace.org) focus on improving the justice system’s post-crash responses. FEVR member organisations (24 at present) support the importance of sharing grief and anger about lenient treatment or injustice, and the value of learning from people who have suffered. Advocacy to support the rights of crash victims is also a focus of FEVR, which acknowledges that “the bereaved and injured need assistance and information to help them cope with the crash ... but support services for victims of crime do not always extend to road crash victims.”

Roadpeace

RoadPeace helps bereaved families cope and build resilience through peer support, local group networks, and trauma support programs. They also provide information guides on navigating the justice system and help with seeking fair compensation for bereaved families and seriously injured victims.

SARAH

Also in Australia, the Sarah Group (now **Safer Australian Roads and Highways: SARAH**) was established to honor Sarah Frazer and campaign for changes to planning, policy and legislation to ensure that lives are not lost in preventable situations like the one that took her life (<http://www.sarahgroup.org/sarajs-story>). In 2012, Sarah was a victim of a tragic crash that could easily have been prevented with more intelligent and safer road planning and design. When her car broke down, she organized for a tow-truck driver to assist her. However, while he was hooking up the car, a truck side-swiped Sarah’s car and collided with the pair, killing both instantly. SARAH’s call to action is: “Road Safety Champions! Commit to Drive So Others Survive!”

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

MADD is a non-profit organization in the United States and Canada that seeks to stop drunk driving, support those affected by drunk driving, prevent underage drinking, and strive for stricter impaired driving policy. There is at least one MADD office in every state of the United States and each province of Canada. MADD claims that drunk driving has been reduced by half since its founding (<https://www.madd.org/>).

Reflecting on these initiatives, we might ask ourselves, “Do I have such a project in my heart and mind that would honor my loved one?” Or: “Could I invent or build on such a project?”

My re-entry into activism

As I reflected on Karl's distinctive approaches to activism, I realized that he would want me to use the power of my grief to fuel action. I had spent a long career planning, managing, speaking, and teaching about community engagement. But that life ended abruptly when Karl died. My concussion and witnessing Karl's death severely impaired my cognitive abilities for many months and brought about some serious bouts of PTSD. So I was astonished when I found myself even considering *engagement* to heal my grief. However, action can be strong medicine in times of trouble. While action cannot undo the trauma we have suffered, making people accountable for the wrong that caused our loss can offer a sense of well-being. Engagement in the wider community literally allows us to step outside our grief. It can steer us away from isolation and any negative tendency toward self-absorption that can accompany grief. My attention was drawn away from my sorrow and directed into the unfamiliar realm of road safety activism.

Contributing to a community project or action builds our confidence by reminding us that we can make a difference. The well-known "helper principle" in psychology applies here: when we help others, we often help ourselves, as we begin to see the power of our own resilience and resourcefulness. Following the crash, I was astonished by my first sense of "pleasurable mastery" (being able to do things competently that I could not do for many months) and "personal agency" (a sense of control and awareness of initiating and carrying out my actions in the world).

My first act of road safety activism — delivering my Victim Impact Statement to the Council — was a revelation. I hold that authority completely responsible for Karl's death. Until that moment in September 2016 (over seven months after Karl's death), I felt completely washed-up professionally and intellectually, certain I would never again chair a meeting, speak publicly, or write professionally. As the road safety campaign expanded and my friends and I started to see results, I imagined that I might flourish again. I had not survived to be untouched. So how could I move forward in my life when I had a cognitive impairment, which made me feel hopeless, directionless, and incompetent? Now, to my surprise, I sensed a power that drew on my own initiative, energy and resourcefulness that I feared I had lost forever.

Because I was undertaking my new advocacy work with two close friends (Lori Mooren and Kev Cracknell) and "in community", I experienced an alliance based on cooperation and a shared purpose. I gained a sense of connection with my friends that was deeper than what we had before; it brought out the best in all three of us. And I was getting my hands dirty with the emotions that frightened me.

The fearsome threesome

My two friends and I worked together to raise awareness about the state of the winding stretch of Kyogle Road where Karl died, to lobby for better road planning and funding to repair it. Initially, as we considered our "activist" options,

our collective emotions were a bewildering mix of guilt, despair, confusion, anger, frustration, powerlessness, sadness, and a desire for justice: an outcome that would help others and save lives. Although we did not know it when we began our organic process, we were well equipped to do this work (with a history of community activism and advocacy, knowledge of road design and safety, community engagement and empowerment, and municipal governance and planning). We had complementary skills: a balance of professional, on-the-ground experience, and academic knowledge. We were naturally a good team. The experience was most powerful for me, as it was easier for me to speak out in the company of friends than in my lonely, mourning voice. Delivering my Victim Impact Statement to the Council helped build my competence and confidence. Soon our "small wins" buoyed us up. Often we found ourselves laughing through our tears. Now we feel empowered and emboldened. The quality I missed the most — my courage — slowly began to return.

How we did it: our road safety activism

Three days after the crash, Kev drove down from Brisbane to the crash site to look for water pooling, to inspect the condition of the edge of the road at the fog line, skid marks and debris and to take photographs. He noticed a new "Danger: oil on road" signage and wondered why it was there, as there was no oil on the road. Local police told me on three occasions after our crash about their years of lobbying for a guardrail on that stretch of road.

I received a polite and compassionate response from the Council's General Manager when I first wrote to him. However, when I asked to make a Victim Impact Statement to their road traffic staff and a junior manager (an engineer) took over communication, our relationship rapidly deteriorated. What had begun as an "information session" to raise staff awareness flourished into full-blown activism after I received this email from him:

... whilst the proposed victim impact statements are very important, I am concerned this part of the meeting might cause distress to yourself and Council staff. As you would appreciate, Council has an obligation to ensure the workplace health and safety of its officers.... Council's preference is that you provide written statements beforehand and these can be considered outside of the meeting.

Later emails demanded that I restrict my remarks to "the circumstances of the crash" and not to any impacts I had experienced. "What's a Victim Impact Statement without impacts?" I cried. I delivered my Victim Impact Statement minus the impacts, while Lori (who had promised nothing to anyone) detailed the impacts I had experienced.

My Victim Impact Statement

Our meeting at the Council, while empowering for me, was highly disappointing from an activist standpoint. Not only did we encounter resistance, denial, falsehood, evasiveness, and outright hostility, we also identified professional

incompetence. My conversations with senior planning colleagues in other government agencies confirmed our perceptions that in this small, backwater municipality, professional traffic management and road safety design skills were a long way from “best practice”. These folks were woefully out-of-date. Further, they seemed determined to ignore the fact that two people had died in a crash in the same spot only a year before. (Astonishingly, only six days after our meeting, another car plummeted from Kyogle Road into the Tweed River. That driver survived because the water was shallow at that time. And only weeks later, in early October 2016, a crash between a car and a motorcycle on Kyogle Road near that spot claimed the motorcyclist’s life.)

We were appalled that no Council staff member had even visited our crash site (only twelve kilometres from their office). When they convened the Council’s Traffic Committee to discuss our crash a week after it occurred, no police attended (although several were at the crash site). The Council officers had no photographs, yet steadfastly refused to countenance any explanation other than “driver error and speed”. They were willing to defend their shabby, dangerous rural road to the death (i.e., someone else’s death and another potential tragedy). We were appalled.

Nevertheless, the first activity of my survivor mission empowered all of us. Although I felt insulted, angry and wronged, I also felt “alive” for the first time in seven months. I imagined that these six municipal employees, hearing the words of a grieving elderly widow, might soften their hard hearts and actually listen. I felt that we were speaking truth to power. We were willing to show up and be seen, even when we knew we could not control the outcomes of the meeting. We persisted.

In November 2017, we prepared our second annual submission to the World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (<https://worlddayofremembrance.org/>). I am nominating two local residents (who tried to save Karl) for federal bravery awards. The Council “lawyered” up early on, demanding all communication be through their solicitor. Now they refuse to engage in any communication. I feel discounted and dismissed, as though they are blaming the victim. Raph and John, our two academic road safety advisors (both senior professors) described the Council’s lawyer’s latest email as “appalling” and “very disrespectful and brutal”. It went like this:

Council has been more than reasonable in responding to your requests for information and passing on your submissions to the Councillors and the Local Traffic Committee. However, correspondence cannot continue indefinitely in relation to this matter. In light of the State Coroner’s office no longer having an interest in the matter, Council and [our] lawyers will not be entering into any further correspondence with you on this matter.

In all, our road safety activism in Karl’s name included: analysis of the road conditions and numerous communications to the Council and the press; a detailed request to the State Coroner for an inquest (which was fully

investigated but ultimately refused); my Victim Impact Statement; and three academic articles about the effects of my experience (See: Mooren, L. & Sarkissian, W., 2017, “We need a louder road safety voice.” *World Transport Policy and Practice*, 22(4): 83-95). I was also responsible for three hard-hitting articles in the local press about safety problems with Kyogle Road (*Gold Coast Bulletin*, 2016; Grant, 2017a; Grant, 2017b). In December 2016, my televised interview in program about the national road toll was aired in South Australia and Perth to a very strong response (<https://www.todaytonightadelaide.com.au/stories/road-toll>).

World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims

Probably our most powerful activism involved our contribution to the 2016 World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (17 November 2016). Lori and I held a media conference at the Mt Warning Hotel in Uki, near the crash site, to raise awareness that three people had died there and still no repairs had been made to the road. Sitting quietly in our meeting was a local woman who was driving the second vehicle involved in the previous fatal crash. She told us how five Aboriginal children were injured and nearly killed there. After our speeches, we drove down Kyogle Road and attached a huge poster of Karl to a tree near the crash site. It read, “My name is Karl. I died here. Please slow down.” (Figure 1). The idea came from reading about roadside memorials (also called wayside shrines) in France and other countries. (We asked permission to erect a permanent sign with a photo of Karl on it but the Council refused to allow anything other than a white wooden cross because it might distract drivers. They also refused to specify the permitted sign size. Our poster was promptly removed.) That blatant ethnocentrism offended me greatly. In a multicultural community such as the Tweed, how could anyone assume that a Christian cross should be the only acceptable memorial? Karl had deep spiritual beliefs but a Christian cross would have been anathema to him.

I made another impassioned speech to camera by the roadside, begging the municipality to use more sophisticated road planning approaches. (A video by Nicholas Curthoys of our November 2016 media event at Uki, our speeches and erecting our poster on the tree, is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyI5jNqqYdE>.)

Lots of tears and laughter, in a long afternoon celebrating with local friends on the verandah of the Mt Warning Hotel, honored Karl in a manner that would have met his approval.

Would we undertake these actions again?

All three of us strongly believe that our road safety activism was the right thing to do. We received very positive support from the print and TV media. I found that collaborative activism greatly helps to reduce the isolation of the grieving person. While we have had many victories, I am sure that Lori and Kev would agree that the greatest was getting Wendy out of the house. And I learned that survivor mission



Figure 1. A poster of Karl Langheinrich at the crash site

activism gives loving friends something valuable and visible to do.

Our work called us to draw on our most mature and adaptive coping skills, a sophisticated level of teamwork, applied research and networking, and qualities of patience, anticipation, and altruism. More than anything, it summoned up our sense of humor (which we were desperately missing). During the most dramatic aspects of our campaign, we would find ourselves howling with laughter, questioning the apparent futility of our task and the idiocy of the people we were encountering.

We were out to make amends, to repair a dangerous road and protect future road users. We argued that those responsible for dangerous roads must be held accountable for their actions. The road must be fixed. Broken road safety systems and processes must be mended. More than my mental health was at stake. We were holding the perpetrators responsible for their actions. That was important for the health and safety of the wider society. We were after justice. And we achieved it.

After our September 2016 meeting at the Council, I did not recognize myself. I read my statement without crying. I was able to “read” the meeting dynamics and put an insensitive bureaucrat in his place. I felt confident and empowered. I was also beginning to understand Lori’s lessons about road safety. It was not that complicated. The road safety system in the Shire was broken. Just plain broken. The meeting was a completely unexpected breakthrough moment for me. I never really looked back.

What does this mean for road safety education for road authorities?

I believe that the next step must be tailored, high-quality educational programs for road authority staff, management and their legal advisors. Emotional intelligence must feature in this training. Rather than aiming to humiliate and “blame the victim”, road authorities could be encouraged to understand and address the massive personal and community consequences of tragedies that result from inexpert road planning and maintenance. Topics such as empathy, compassion, kindness, and emotional literacy could be part of curriculum. We need a new protocol here: a new education policy, program, curriculum, and a whole-of-community response to this critical community issue. Staff need training in basic communication skills. Corporate cultural issues will probably also need to be addressed, if victims are to be protected and supported.

It has recently been claimed that the Council is experiencing serious bullying and harassment issues among some staff in environmental and public health, building and planning, a claim that Council management strongly refutes (<https://www.tweeddailynews.com.au/news/union-claims-tweed-the-most-hazardous-place-to-work/3297590/>). Reading the union report did cause me to ask, “Were they simply treating me the way staff are treated within that Council?”

As within, so without? How they handled an aggrieved *outsider* like me may well reflect how they handle their *internal* affairs. How I was treated certainly does not align with the Council’s mission statement: “We have conversations where everyone can contribute and we are willing to have a go.”

One of my senior expert road safety advisors had this response to the final email I received from the Council’s lawyer:

This is a very disrespectful and brutal reply from the Council. The Council may well feel they have reached “the end of the road” but you do not agree, and I do not agree. The intelligent, respectful and ethical response should be “let’s meet and discuss what you think we (the Council) could and should do to resolve this matter... We will invite an independent chair to guide us in this meeting.”

Conclusions

What the road safety managers at the Council appear to misunderstand about my “annoying” advocacy is that the force of the grief that Kev, Lori and I feel for Karl is much more powerful than their road, their evasive, “risk-management” strategies, or their budgets. In speaking out for Karl, we are expressing our grief as deep activism.

My loving friends encouraged me to engage passionately with my survivor mission. They brought me back to life by helping me transform my private grief into public grief.

And that stretch of Kyogle Road: it *will* be repaired. With a guardrail.

I escaped from the Tweed River with my life. I’m betting my life on that!

Appreciations

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Calling for submissions to the *Journal of the Australasian College of Road Safety (JACRS)*

May 2018 Issue: We are soliciting contributions for the May 2018 Issue on all topics of road safety. Sample topics may include, but are not limited to: evaluation of Safe System interventions; system designs protecting vulnerable road users; research related to child road safety and older driver safety; in-depth analyses of the rising or plateauing road deaths especially in New Zealand and Australian jurisdictions; policy and practice on sustainable transport and road traffic exposure reduction; research related to autonomous vehicles; case studies of road safety activities in low and middle income countries; commentary on road safety communications and advocacy leading to government actions.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE for May 2018 Issue:

Peer-review papers: *Wednesday, 21st February 2018*

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For more details on article types, the scope and requirements see the **Instructions to Authors** available from the ACRS website: <http://acrs.org.au/contact-us/em-journal-conference-contacts/> (scroll down). Please submit your manuscript online via the Editorial Manager: <http://www.editorialmanager.com/jacrs/default.aspx>. Authors wishing to contribute papers and discuss their ideas with the Managing Editor in advance of submission or to ask any questions, please contact Dr Chika Sakashita: journaleditor@acrs.org.au

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