

# THE POWER OF THE PERSONAL STORY

## TAKING ROAD SAFETY ONLINE

*Kerry Sunderland is one of the co-founders and writers of the Journey Beyond Road Trauma online resource. Here, she reflects on the motivations behind this multi-platform project and discusses its potential for educating students about safe driving practices.*

In 2004, Sandra Cook's 'life fell apart'. A documentary filmmaker living in Adelaide, Sandra was twenty eight when her father Bill was involved in a head-on collision on his way home from work. Eleven days later, on 22 March, Bill became number twenty-three on the South Australian road toll for 2004.

Around this time, Sandra wrote in her journal:

*On a psychological level, I have become a shell of what I used to be. I don't know who I am, I don't know where I am; I am stuck in no-man's land. When you are grieving, there are no U-turns, short cuts or bypasses. The only thought that comforts me in random moments of inexplicable truth is that the universe does work in mysterious ways. There is a growing plan, something much higher than I will ever understand or foresee.*

Fast forward to 2011, when Sandra and I celebrated the one-year anniversary of the online community we founded – Journey Beyond Road Trauma (JBRT). In May this year, we also launched the a number of classroom resources for Australian schools.

What began as a mechanism to help Sandra deal with her grief and to make sense of the legal process that ensued (the driver was charged with causing death by dangerous driving) has evolved into a community of over 1,700 – and this number continues to grow. As well offering crucial support for those affected by road trauma, the project has also gained legitimacy as a tool for road safety education.

While a handful of road safety experts initially expressed scepticism about our efforts to position JBRT as an education tool, many now regard the project as a valuable resource for teaching safe driving practices. One of the project's biggest champions is Lauchlan McIntosh, president of the Australasian College of Road Safety (ACRS), who notes:

*Saving lives and reducing injury from road crashes is really possible. Actions of many over the last thirty years have seen perhaps 90,000 lives saved in Australia alone. However, much more must be done – everyone needs to recognise the risks with driving and the personal trauma to so many that comes from unexpected and often unnecessary crashes. Journey Beyond Road Trauma is an valuable online resource that can help us all learn of the real impacts of these crashes. Reducing crashes and reducing trauma does require all of the community to make the road system safer.*

### THE RIPPLE EFFECT

The first pivotal moment in the project's development occurred about six months after Bill's crash, when Sandra was watching the evening news.

*Every time I turn on the news I see the road toll number climbing. I can't believe that since Dad's crash, another 78 families in South Australia have been thrown into the same world of devastation that we're in. The road toll is now 101. It's incomprehensible.*

*After the crash I put flowers on the median strip. Putting flowers on the road is a way of making people understand. It's important to me that people understand. I'm like that with trauma; it's like when I share it, or explain it, it makes it a more acceptable concept.*

Then, on the first anniversary of her father's crash, Sandra decided to take action.

*This whole legal process is so completely ridiculous that I've decided to make a documentary about it. Seriously, unless you had been through this you would never believe that it's possible for a system to work this way.*

Sandra started filming for the project in 2005, when we were working together on the documentary *The Burning Season*. When we first discussed the idea, I immediately saw the potential for it to become a tool in road safety education – convincing others, however, was not so easy. While everyone could see the merits of an online sanctuary where people could tell their story, create compelling tributes and find support, many doubted that the site would be of interest to people with no direct experience of road trauma. We continued to struggle against this attitude until the online community was up and running (as a result of a grant from Screen Australia).

By that time, there had been some significant shifts in approaches to road safety education. The Victorian Transport Accident Commission (TAC) had launched its 'Pictures of You' campaign, featuring real people talking about the impact of road trauma on their lives, signalling a big departure from the shock tactic campaigns of the past. Queensland Transport also took a personal story approach, with a television commercial featuring the story of paraplegic Nick Benjamin. Market research following this campaign found that 86 per cent of the target audience would reconsider drinking and driving as a result of this story.

Today, JBRT is going strong, and the site provides a platform for those who want to help others understand the impact that road trauma can have and why they should personally commit to safe driving.

## OUT OF SORROW COMES ACTION

Sandra's story was the key to unlocking the financial support necessary for the JBRT classroom resources, which were funded by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF).

The woman who was driving the car that collided with Sandra's father suffered from chronic knee pain, and was taking morphine as a result of her condition. The incidence of 'legal' (or licit) drug abuse in Australia is skyrocketing, and our goal was to produce an educational focusing on this issue.

Sandra explains:

*For many years the attention of road safety experts has been primarily focused on alcohol and illicit drugs, with the relationship between alcohol and crash risk firmly established. Our program is unique because the media has not really focused on the link between licit drug use and road trauma before.*

But like everything connected with JBRT, the classroom resources quickly grew to become much bigger than just Sandra's story.

The AERF grant enabled us to bring on board Anne Chesher, an experienced media education producer. Reflecting on JBRT's enormous educational potential, Anne notes that

*JBRT gets all the elements right – curriculum relevant, syllabus appropriate, accessible and informative content as well as dynamic learning interactivity for students. It is an exemplary model of an online education resource that has meaningful application in young people's lives and ongoing benefit for the entire community.*

When she's not working with filmmakers and documentary producers, Anne teaches multimedia at St Michael's College on the Gold Coast. With this hat on, she adds:

*As we teachers know well, our role as educator goes way beyond the syllabus into personal management, values and guiding students through sensitive issues. JBRT is a rare and valuable resource that is not only relevant to the curriculum but also an informative, dynamic tool that will engage and educate students. More than that, it has the real potential to reduce trauma in our community. What better reward for a teacher?*

Under Anne's guidance, the classroom resources evolved to include five study units based around some of the stories of JBRT's online community members.

The first resource is called 'Consequences of High Risk Driving Behaviours' and is based on Eli's story. Eli was accustomed to leading a reckless life that involved drugs and alcohol. While he was not under the influence of any substances at the time of his crash, Eli now lives with a brain injury, and he has dedicated a

significant amount of his time to educating young people about the consequences of risky behaviours.

The second unit is called 'Driving and Prescription Drugs' and is based on the story of Sandra's sister Dianne.

The third resource is called 'Dealing with Grief' and is based on Mary's story. Mary and her husband Dennis set up the Amy Gillett Foundation after the death of their 29-year-old daughter Amy, who was killed when a car hit her while she was training with the Australian road cycling team in Germany.

The fourth is called 'Tragic Consequences of Driver Fatigue' and is based on the short film *A Perfect Statistic*, which tells the story of twenty-year-old Jack, who fell asleep at the wheel during a long-distance journey. Jack and two passengers in another car all lost their lives.

The final unit is called 'Developing Cognitive Reasoning Skills for Personal Behaviour Assessment' and is based on the short film *Will Be Done*. The film tells the story of 23-year-old Shelley and her grandmother, who both died in a head-on collision the night before Shelley's younger sister's wedding. The 26-year-old man who caused the crash was driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Michael Thorn, the CEO of the AERF, reports that a recent community poll found that more than four million adult Australians admit to drinking to get drunk. He adds:

*We also know that young people are particularly vulnerable victims of alcohol misuse, with 1.6 million engaging in such risky drinking behaviour. All too often we see the tragic consequences of what happens when people get behind the wheel after a few drinks. By engaging with school children through this interactive learning tool, we hope that when they do learn to drive, or when they get in the car with their mates or parents, they'll think twice about drink driving.*

Several members of the JBRT community already play an active role in road safety education by speaking in schools. This has inspired us for our next stage – a road trip. In late 2011, we'll be tagging along with a group of Victorian SES workers who are riding motorbikes up the east coast of Australia, documenting their journey and the stories of people they meet along the way who have been affected by road trauma.

**The JBRT classroom resources are available free of charge and are easily accessible (teachers and students can download them without joining the JBRT community). However, by joining the JBRT community, teachers can:**

- set up a profile
- create memory spaces
- connect with others affected by road trauma
- publish blogs and video
- watch short documentaries
- mark the scene of the collision (a virtual roadside memorial mark) on a Google map.

*Kerry Sunderland is a freelance writer and print editor.*