



Here's just some
of our amazing
families.





The Smith Family

Our grief journey started very suddenly on 24 February 2018, when I received a call at 2.00am from my ex-partner's girlfriend, hysterically telling me that he was gone.

Clayton was 34 years old when he passed away in a single vehicle car accident in a rural town called Merriwa, in the upper Hunter Valley of NSW. He was killed instantly. From that instant so many lives changed, but most of all that of my two children.

Our journey of grief is a little different because Clayton and I were no longer a couple at the time of his death. We had been separated for over five years, and he was in a new relationship with a partner who was 15 weeks pregnant at the time.

Clayton and I didn't have a great relationship when he passed and I think that really took a toll on me too. I was estranged from his family, but suddenly was thrown back into having to deal with them. And at the same time I was of course carrying the heavy weight of my kids' grief journey, as well as dealing with my own grief.

At the time they lost their dad, Indianna was ten years old and Lochlan was seven. I remember so clearly the day I had to tell them that their Daddy was gone. It was the hardest day of my life and in that instant, I saw my two beautiful children lose some of their innocence and I knew our lives had changed forever.

Honestly, I didn't cope well with Clayton's passing and I ended up seeing a psychologist due to nightmares, anxiety and depression.

My children also struggled, but in different ways. Indianna was very vocal and angry in her grief and would cry and yell and think about all the things that daddy would miss – such as her first day of High School and the birth of their little sister.

Lochlan was more withdrawn and quiet in his grief, he refused to cry or talk about his loss – it is only now, two years on, that he is starting to process his loss and express his feelings. They have both seen a psychologist since they lost dad and we are very open in our grief and lucky to have great support around us.

Over the first year there was a lot of missed school days and months of co-sleeping with me, they both dropped out of their after school activities and became very clingy.

They still both fear that they will lose me too and Lochlan especially suffers severe anxiety when I am not around. I'm scared about this too and worry about my own safety in the car. I'm also a lot more vigilant about my own health now too – watching the pain your children feel after losing a

parent makes you want to try to ensure that won't happen again.

Early in 2020 we felt the pain of grief again when my father (their Pop) passed away from terminal lung cancer. This new grief journey brought up a lot of bad memories for all of us, but unlike losing Clayton, we had more time to process Pop's loss and it was a more peaceful experience of death.

I first heard about Feel the Magic not long after Clayton died. His step mother had seen an interview on Sunrise about this amazing organisation for children dealing with grief. Losing Clayton was my first experience with grief too and in those early days, the kids really struggled with the fact that nobody they knew had ever lost a parent and so nobody really knew what they were living through.

Indianna was not very open to going to Camp at first. In some ways I had to force her to attend, but it was the best and most amazing experience she could have had as a result. Her buddy Jodie was absolutely amazing and I felt so comfortable leaving my grieving child in such loving hands.

The day I dropped Indianna off, she was a heartbroken, angry and confused little girl, but on the day I picked her up, although that grief was still there, it wasn't so all consuming anymore.

Indianna was more at peace and more accepting of her grief. She was able to put words together to describe her feelings and was able to use strategies she had learnt at Camp to deal with her often unpredictable and overwhelming emotions. But most of all, she found that she was not alone and that there were other girls just like her, who had experienced overwhelming loss too.

Feel the Magic is a great charity not just for kids, but also for their parents. Being a parent of two grieving children is totally overwhelming and emotionally draining, and the parents groups and the online support you receive from Feel the Magic is invaluable.

I felt at times that my grief was not important or that I wasn't even allowed to feel it because Clayton and I were already separated. The ex-partner of the deceased is a really hard role to be in. You are the main supporter of the children you shared and at one point, you also shared the most

important bond of having kids together – but now you're just 'the ex' and nobody really stops to think or ask how this has affected you.

As the ex, I also felt this overwhelming responsibility to ensure my children still had a relationship with their step-mum. In August 2018, my kids welcomed their sister Savanah – she was the most amazing gift and came into this world exactly when my children needed her. Savanah is a constant connection to their father and they are lucky to have a special bond with both her and her mother.

Camp Magic is an invaluable resource for Australian families trying to navigate the journey of grief. Any opportunity I get I tell people about the amazing work they do for families like mine.

Indianna is hoping to attend Camp again soon and is considering one day becoming a children's psychologist and volunteering at Camp Magic to help other kids just like her.

Lochlan is still very much affected by his grief and will not leave me to attend Camp. But I really hope he will one day soon – it was such an amazing experience for Indianna – and I want him to have that too.

It has now been just over two years since we lost Clayton, and I remember people saying once all the 'firsts' are over, things will settle down.

In some ways it's true that the grief is no longer so all encompassing, and the happy memories are starting to outweigh the reminder of the loss, but every day is still a challenge and anything can be a trigger.

At the moment Lochlan's biggest fear is that he is starting to forget his Daddy. So we talk about him all the time and share our own memories of him to help each other. But things like Indianna starting High School, her Year 6 farewell and other big milestones that I would give anything to have him there for, still remind us of the loss.

My children know how much their Daddy loved them and I remind them every day how proud he would be of how strong and loving they are. The bond they have developed together over their common loss is so precious.

If we have learnt anything from our grief journey and Feel the Magic, it is that everyone grieves differently and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief also does not have a timeline, but stays with you always – in some ways you just learn to live with the grief better.



The Hughes Family

We lost my husband Stu on 6 February 2018. He died as a result of a head injury, when he fell from a roof he was repairing. Our children, Harrison and Sienna, were seven and five at the time.

The day he died, it was Harrison's first day of Year One and Sienna's second day of Prep. They were both so excited about the new school year and about Stu being able to volunteer each week in their classrooms.

Stu was going to pick them up after school that afternoon. I had tried to contact him throughout the day, but he didn't answer or reply to texts. I knew something was wrong and arranged for a friend to stay with the kids at school until I could get there.

That afternoon, I returned home with the police to find my husband lying in the driveway. It was harrowing.

But, there is a saying that I have just discovered recently – *for an arrow to move forward, it must first be pulled back*. And I have to say, there have been many times since those traumatic events where we have been pulled back.

As you can imagine, the impact of losing Stu was massive for my family. The hardest part (apart from losing my best friend) was explaining what had happened to Harrison and Sienna and watching them process the information and not being able to take the pain away for them.

It was also very hard not having my mum around to help me through it. She had died just three

years previously and I vividly remember how much I wished she was still there.

I knew that I had to be proactive in helping us all process Stu's death, but I also knew I wasn't going to be able to do it alone. So I engaged counselling and play therapy for the kids, as well as counselling for myself, very early on.

Sienna, from day one was always very good at verbalising how she was feeling, and what she needed. She would often role play and call Stu on her toy phone. She would chat away to him and give him updates on what we were all doing. It was gorgeous to witness, but also heart breaking.

Because Sienna was so young when Stu died, her biggest worry is forgetting him. It's devastating to me that I am limited in what I can do to help her hang onto those memories and stories. She will often say to me "Mum, I can't remember his voice".

Harrison, reacted the complete opposite way. He shut down. He wouldn't talk. He couldn't cope with any change whatsoever. He would attend his counselling appointments, but really only played the games and was unable to open up about anything that he was thinking and feeling.

As a parent, I was starting to panic. I knew that shutting down and not talking was going to lead to a very bumpy road ahead.

It took 13 months for Harrison to say anything about how he was feeling. After a very long stint of sleep regression, and the kids refusing to sleep in their own beds, I decided to give their bedrooms a makeover.

When we were doing Harrison's room we had to take everything out. We stacked and piled all his things in our spare room – you can imagine what it looked like – stuff everywhere.

We were standing in the door way staring at the mess and Harrison looked up at me and said: *"Mum, see how the room looks? That's how my head felt when Dad died."*

I was speechless. 13 months had passed and he finally dropped a bombshell. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but I was so incredibly proud of him.

Then a few days later he said: *"Mum, my head felt like a corrupted computer when Dad died – I didn't know how to do anything or how to think."*

During the early days of our journey, a friend had told me about seeing *Feel the Magic* on TV. It was after Harrison's bombshell that I decided to do some research about it.

I watched countless videos and testimonials about Camp and I remember thinking to myself, if it was half as good as everyone had said, then it would be ok. Harrison and Sienna attended Camp in August 2019.

In the lead up to Camp, Harrison was adamant that he wasn't going. That it was pointless and it wouldn't fix anything. Sienna was a little more welcoming, but still had reservations.

I was determined that they had to go. Call it a mother's intuition, call it exhaustion, call it stubbornness – they were going! There may have been some bribery thrown in too.

It turns out that Camp Magic is one of the greatest gifts you can give to a grieving child.

To put some perspective on how life changing Camp was – after Stu died, I had seen Harrison cry twice. Once was at our private viewing of Stu before the

funeral, and then the second, was when he said goodbye to his mentor and friends when he left Camp!

Harrison has made connections and bonds that have changed his outlook and his life. I know that sounds a little dramatic, but honestly it's true.

When Harrison returned home, he was able to see positives and was finally open about sharing them with Sienna and myself. It was such a massive step forward.

He shared that on the day Stu died, he is now grateful that he was able to say goodbye to him that morning at school. He is open and he has a positive view on life. His growth has been exponential. He is playing his violin again and has even been invited to join the junior strings program at school.

When I asked him what was the best thing about Camp? Harrison said: *"knowing that other kids have lost their Dad too and we're not the only ones."*

Sienna enjoyed her time at camp too, but because of her age when Stu died, she found things a little challenging. She was still engaged and learnt a lot, like breathing techniques that she still uses nearly every day. She also learnt about her "emergency meter" and when to ask for adult support if she can't regulate her emotions, she learnt about self care and the different "seasons" of grief.

She especially loved the memorial bonfire where she was able to write a letter to her Dad and send the message to heaven.

I've changed careers since Stu died to pursue a career in education. I have also started studying to become a counsellor myself – majoring in grief and loss.

I don't believe that Stu had to die as some kind of cruel destiny to take me to where I am today. I'm not someone who believes that everything happens for a reason. What I do believe, is that when bad things happen, we have choices, and those choices define how we live the rest of the days we have left.

And so now, *the arrow has been released and we are all moving forward!*



The Amesbury Family

In July 2016, a week before our daughter Aisha's 13th birthday, my ex-partner Barry died suddenly in his sleep.

Although we had separated a long time ago – when Aisha was about two years old – Barry was a constant in Aisha's life and she spent every second weekend with him.

Barry had married when Aisha was about five years old and it was his wife Tracy (who Aisha adores) who called to tell me the devastating news.

The hardest thing was having to tell my daughter that her dad was dead. It's just a conversation you never dream of having to have.

Unfortunately Aisha had overheard some of my conversation on the phone, so she knew something was wrong and wanted to know immediately. I had no time to prepare for that conversation, no time to think about what to say and how best to say it. It was horrendous.

After that, the hardest part was not knowing what to do to make sure that Aisha was okay.

My grief was very different to hers, he was of course family because we shared a daughter, but he hadn't been my partner for quite some time.

I absolutely still grieved for Barry, but overwhelmingly, I grieved for my daughter and what she had lost. My daughter was grieving for her dad and no child should have to do that. Seeing your child in so much pain is just heart wrenching.

Once the funeral (and everything that went along with that) was over, the first year after Barry's death was not what I imagined it would be.

Aisha seemed okay, just flat. She wouldn't talk about losing him, or how she was feeling, but she did still talk about him – the funny things she remembered mostly.

The second year was horrendous. Aisha had some really horrible periods of depression. It always started with the lead up to the anniversary of her father's death.

There were days when she just couldn't go to school because she just couldn't bear to be around anyone.

There were weeks at a time when she didn't smile, she didn't laugh, she just dragged herself through the day. And there were months and months that I literally had to push her out the door to go to school.

I finally persuaded her to see a psychologist and when they finally got around to talking about her dad, she shut down and refused to go again.

She wouldn't speak to the school counselor, but I spoke to her year advisor and he gave her a pass that meant she could walk out of class at any time, with no questions asked. It was a great safety net, because it gave her the opportunity to call me if she needed to at any time.

It was not long after this that one of the girls at school heard about Aisha's story and told her about Camp Magic. She had lost her own dad a year or two previously and had been to Camp herself. Aisha told me about it one night as she was heading off to bed – there was this camp she wanted to go to and could I have a look at it?

I thought it was going to be an expensive dance camp or something like that, so I was flabbergasted when I looked it up and saw what it was.

It was the first time she had ever reached out about maybe facing her loss, so I filled in the application that very night and crossed everything I had that she would be able to go.

When Aisha did go to Camp, handing her over to other people in her most vulnerable state was the most terrifying thing. It went against every instinct I had as a mum, which was to keep her close and to be there when she needed me. I am pretty sure I cried more than her that weekend.

Picking her up after camp, I could immediately see something had changed. Her mentor Bella was simply amazing and I could see the connection between them was real and strong.

In the car on the way home Aisha said it was the happiest she had been since her dad had died.

As a 14 year old kid who had lost a parent, she just wanted someone else to 'get' her. And the only person who really can is another 14 year old kid who has also lost their parent.

Camp truly was magic. Aisha could finally see a light and she couldn't wait to go back.

I cannot praise Camp Magic highly enough. I tell everyone I know about it, in the hope this vital information will get to some other child, who like mine, desperately needs it.

For me, to have someone involved who understands grief and grieving children in a way I never can, is a massive support. I no longer have to do it alone.

The Feel the Magic Facebook page is a great support too – to have a safe forum to cry, vent, ask questions and share victories is just wonderful.



The Sephton Family

Ten years ago, my wife Emily was diagnosed with a Grade 3 Astrocytoma, which is a type of malignant brain tumour.

At the time of her diagnosis, my oldest son Jesse was only three months old. Emily had to have surgery to excise as much of the tumour as possible, then many weeks of daily radiation therapy.

There were no major side effects from this treatment, and apart from regular scans and checkups, we led a relatively normal life with our son.

We then got pregnant again with our second son, Archer in 2012.

Emily knew the massive risk that continuing this pregnancy would bring. But she felt it was unfair for Jesse to go through life without a sibling, so decided to still go for it, despite knowing that she might not survive.

Eight months into the pregnancy, Emily had a seizure and was taken to

hospital where she had to have an emergency caesarean.

After all this happened, we discovered a new tumour had appeared. Emily had surgery again to excise the secondary tumour, then more radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

Because of the aggressive nature of Astrocytoma, both the original tumour and the secondary tumour returned, and within three months Emily passed away – she was only 31 years of age. Jesse was three years old and Archer was just four months old when it happened.

The hardest part for me was knowing that both my two boys would have to grow up without ever having the opportunity to know their mother. It was so

unfair that someone with so much still to give, and so much life yet to live, was taken from us.

Because I knew the likely outcome of Emily's brain tumour well in advance, my grieving process really started well before she actually died.

And afterwards, I didn't have a real opportunity to grieve because I needed to stay focussed and be the rock my kids needed to carry on.

I drew on Emily's strength during adversity as I comforted our kids – she was always so much more worried about us than she ever was about herself.

You might think that because it happened ten years ago and because both our children were so young at the time, that there might not be quite such a grief journey for my boys to endure. Sadly, this is not at all the case.

Jesse has seen therapists off and on since Emily died and continues to do so to this day.

My partner of six years, Sarah (with whom I have a daughter, Lucy, aged three), found Feel the Magic when

she was googling childhood grief management to try to find ways to help Jesse. And I'm so glad she did.

Jesse went to Camp twice in 2019 and developed an amazing connection with his mentor Josh.

Going to Camp helped Jesse understand he's not alone in his grief journey. Being grouped with other kids who have experienced a similar situation to losing his mum has given him the opportunity to share his feelings and experiences with people who truly understand how he feels.

Seeing him happy about his experiences at Camp, and excited in the lead up to Camp, has been one of the best things about being involved with Feel the Magic.

I hope to be able to send Archer to Camp soon too – he was only three months old when his mum died, so he didn't get to know her, but certainly he feels left out when Jesse goes away to Camp.

I hope that if Archer goes to Camp it will help him understand why Jesse feels the way he does sometimes.

1 in 20 Aussie kids will experience the death of their Mum or Dad.

That's 1 in every classroom.



