



## WITNESS STATEMENT OF SUSAN TROTTER

I, Susan Trotter,<sup>1</sup> say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
- 2 This is my story. A mother's journey, regarding my son Rowan Trotter, who died by suicide at the age of 33 on 25 December 2010. This is a difficult story for me to tell. My son had attempted suicide 26 times before he died, but I still always believed he would stay with us. I was totally destroyed when he died.
- 3 For the past five years I have run a support groups for other parents who have also lost children to suicide, called "Compassionate Friends". Through this group I regularly hear stories about how other parents and their children have been let down by the mental health system.

### Background

- 4 Our journey began when Rowan was approximately 5 years old. Rowan was always disruptive in class so the school requested that I take him for an assessment. I took Rowan to a public children's hospital where he was basically diagnosed with attention deficit syndrome, but nothing was available to help with this at that time other than follow up appointments. The appointments usually involved the person talking with Rowan and giving us activities to try and keep him calm.
- 5 I left Rowan's father when I was thirty and my son was around nine years old. It was not an easy road after that, as a single mum, but I tried my best to support both of my children by working and looking after them.
- 6 When Rowan was around ten years old I noticed he was not able to read and write very well, which really concerned me. So I spoke to the school and they had him assessed. His results came back that he had a borderline intellectual disability. Rowan was bullied a lot at school and in my opinion he was not given the right help at his school as they thought he was too much to handle. I suggested that he go to a special development school that would be more supportive for him but I was told that he was not bad enough for that type of school and that he still needed to attend the mainstream school. Rowan still struggled but he had a great cheeky personality that got him by.

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<sup>1</sup> The name and details of the witness (and others) referred to in this statement have been changed to protect their identities.

- 7 When my son was in year nine he just could not cope anymore, so I had him assessed by the Centrelink doctors and they put him on a disability pension. They told Rowan and me that he would never be able to work.

### **Our experiences with the mental health system**

#### ***Rowan's first suicide attempt***

- 8 Rowan's mental health seemed to deteriorate when he was around 17. Things made him angry and upset, and it seemed to me that he did not feel comfortable around other kids.
- 9 When my son was 19 years old, he had his first attempt of suicide. When we were in the hospital at the time, the CAT team and various doctors spoke to Rowan, me and my ex-husband. I was told Rowan needed anti-depressants and counselling support. Rowan was in the emergency department for 48 hours before he was discharged into my care.
- 10 Rowan was not able to see a counsellor straight after release from hospital, as there was a waiting list. Around 2 or 3 months after his first suicide attempt Rowan started counselling. Rowan was also assigned a case manager. He had so many case managers along the way.
- 11 The counsellor referred Rowan to a psychiatrist at the same clinic, who diagnosed him with depression, bi-polar and borderline personality disorder. Rowan was prescribed anti-depressants.

#### ***Subsequent suicide attempts***

- 12 Between the age of 19 and 21 Rowan was pretty angry with himself and going through a difficult time. He was on anti-depressants and would go to his appointments with his counsellor and case manager occasionally. Sometimes he would forget or feel like he did not need the appointments. At other times, when he felt desperate, Rowan would visit the clinic and see whoever was on call.
- 13 Rowan tried to take his life around three times during this period. Each time he was at the emergency department around 24 hours before he was released into my care. The CAT visited Rowan the day after each attempt.
- 14 Rowan seemed to become more frustrated each time he attempted suicide. It seemed to me like no one was helping him. Each time the hospitals just released Rowan and told him to keep up his medication and treatment.

### **Supported living**

- 15 When Rowan was about 21 he was assigned a case manager who helped us get my son into a place in the inner north that would help him with living skills and confidence and provide continuous counselling. This arrangement was absolutely fantastic for Rowan and me, as I really needed help because living with a child with mental illness is not easy for everyone in the family.
- 16 Rowan was there for about five years and was eventually given a little unit that was outside of the house in the grounds where he could live independently but with assistance.
- 17 Rowan was still fighting his demons every day. He was still hard to handle at times and he had his moments, but he generally seemed to be ok. He still would do unusual things like unexpectedly turn up at the hospital where I worked. He did not really understand the concept of time or that I could be busy. He would also run into trouble with the transport authorities and things like that. At least there were no suicide attempts during this period, though, and the staff at the place he stayed made sure Rowan took his anti-depressant medication.
- 18 After about five years living at the service, Rowan got married and moved out.

### ***Constant cycle of issues, overdoses and recovery***

- 19 From when he was about 26, for about two or three years, Rowan was in constant cycle of issues, overdoses and recovery. This is when things got really bad and the suicide attempts became regular.
- 20 So for me it was a roller coaster and hospitals after hospitals. I could not believe that after so many suicide attempts there did not seem to be any real help. All they would do is admit Rowan for 24 hours or sometimes one week and tell him to just keep taking his tablets. On one occasion he was admitted to a mental health unit for two weeks.
- 21 Around this time Rowan was diagnosed with anxiety as well as depression and he was prescribed anti-anxiety tablets.
- 22 Despite all of this, in family meetings and at the hospitals I was told that Rowan was an attention seeker who would not take his life. Rowan would always cry and say things to me like "why can't anybody help me and stop this stuff in side my head?" It broke my heart.
- 23 I felt like Rowan was being let down because the hospitals didn't follow through after he was released. They didn't seem understand Rowan or take his suicide attempts seriously.

***Determined to live***

- 24 When Rowan was about 28 he became a dad. Rowan loved his son – he was his whole world. Being a father was so important to him and he wanted to live for his son. Rowan tried every day. He even got a part time job cleaning. As he promised, he didn't have any more attempts of suicide, but he still did struggle but he stayed strong for his son.
- 25 When Rowan was about 31 he and his wife split up. Most of all, Rowan wanted to be a good dad and wanted to spend time with his son.
- 26 For a while, things still were not easy but Rowan appeared to be doing ok. He was happiest when he was with his son. Rowan promised me he would be there for his son and this gave me hope.

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- 28 I now know that after Rowan left my work he had a number of prescriptions filled, then he went home and overdosed.
- 29 Rowan's girlfriend found him and he was rushed to hospital in an ambulance. I rang his phone and his girlfriend answered. She told me that they "had the paddles on him" and he was nearly gone.
- 30 I rang his girlfriend to find out how Rowan was later that day. Rowan's girlfriend said he was in a coma and not to worry as she would be there with him so to stay with my family
- 31 I was worried but I didn't feel like there was much I could do. I honestly thought and believed Rowan would be okay in hospital. I rang the hospital and told them that Rowan needed to stay there until he was ok and felt safe.
- 32 Rowan woke up the next day, [REDACTED] Rowan's girlfriend rang me so that I could speak to him. The first thing Rowan said to me was along the lines of "I wish I never woke up. [REDACTED] Of course, this set off warning bells for me so I talked to the registrar at the hospital. The registrar told me Rowan said he was ok.

33 I rang the hospital again [REDACTED] and was told the same thing: Rowan said he was ok. I said to them "I know my son", but no one would listen to me. But I thought the hospital would not let him out [REDACTED] because of all the things that they had been told in our family meetings. The meetings had stopped by then, but before I had told them that I was so worried about Rowan, and that he had major down times and occasional highs, and how he was always talking about suicide and how sorry everyone would be after he was gone. I told them that I wanted to find more support for Rowan. As he got older, I was told that Rowan needed to help himself as well.

34 [REDACTED] at approximately 11 am I got a call from my son saying he had been released. There was no call from the hospital at all. I now know that my son was contemplating his suicide even though he had told the registrar at the time that he was fine [REDACTED]

35 I would have run back to Melbourne if I had known what was going to happen later that day.

36 [REDACTED]

37 [REDACTED]

38 Rowan then caught a tram home with his girlfriend. Rowan told his girlfriend he was going to Hurstbridge to see a mate and not to worry because he was alright. Rowan then jumped off the tram and ran off before his girlfriend could get off.

39 Rowan's girlfriend panicked and rang me and the police. Just before 2pm I rang my son to see how he was and he said "don't worry mum I'm going to Paul's place. I'm ok." He told me that he would see me [REDACTED] and said "remember that I love you".

40 I tried to ring him back as I was worried but his phone was continuously engaged.

41 Later that day I received a call to tell me that Rowan was dead. I was hysterical.

42 I was totally destroyed forever after this.

43 The hospital sent the CAT team [REDACTED]

### **Compassionate Friends**

44 For a long time after Rowan died I felt overwhelming guilt and pain. I was shattered.



- 45 At first, no one seemed to really understand what I was going through at all. A GP tried to put me on anti-depressants but I knew I was not depressed – I had lost my son so of course I was upset. I saw counsellors a few times but felt like they never really got it. I also attended a few group counselling sessions with other bereaved parents, but I felt like I was going through a very different process to parents who had lost a child to cancer, for example.
- 46 Around three months after Rowan's death I called Compassionate Friends, which is a bereavement service with various specialist groups. I had been given their contact details at the morgue. I started attending a suicide support group once a month. Finally I found other people who knew what I was going through. Everyone else at those meetings had lost a child to suicide and suddenly I did not feel as alone.
- 47 After two years of attending Compassionate Friends I did a training course so I could become a support person. After I had completed the training, I helped set up a safe meeting place for suicide support in the Western suburbs.
- 48 I have been running 'Bereaved by Suicide' support groups with Compassionate Friends for five years. The numbers change each month as parents tend to attend more at difficult times like birthdays or anniversaries. I think the groups are really important – it is impossible to know what it is like to lose a child to suicide unless it has happened to you. I also attend Support After Suicide meetings and occasionally attend conferences and speak publicly about bereavement.
- 49 A lot of days are still very tough. Rowan's birthday and [REDACTED] are the most difficult. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I am strong. I am a survivor. But losing a child to suicide is tough.
- 50 I wish that there could be no more parents in situations like mine. Rowan was unwell and suicidal for a very long time. Throughout the whole journey I trusted the mental health system and I feel like the system let him down.

Accepted into evidence at the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System public hearing on 22 July 2019.