

Who Killed Leanne Holland?

One girl's murder and one man's injustice

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The family

Leanne Sarah was the youngest of three children of the marriage between Terry and Sandra Holland. She was born on 1 October 1978, and died in the spring of 1991, just a week short of her thirteenth birthday. Leanne's parents separated when she was a year old. They had been living in northern New South Wales when Terry took the children and returned to Goodna. Sandra remained in New South Wales and Leanne last saw her mother when she was aged four. Terry became her sole parent and guardian, the only one Leanne was to know as she grew to adolescence. Leanne's brother and sister were both older; in 1991, her brother Craig was 23 and her sister Melissa was 20. Craig worked as a labourer for a removalist business and Melissa as a computer operator at a manufacturing business.

To her family and friends Leanne was a happy-go-lucky girl who enjoyed life. She had many friends and no apparent enemies. Although only twelve, Leanne had already had boyfriends, including some a few years older. The police inquiries, however, failed to show that she had any known

steady boyfriend at the time of her murder. Despite this there were rumours about a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old male ringing her constantly shortly before her death, although her father denied these claims when he gave evidence at the trial. Melissa, however, said she was aware of a male telephoning the house up to three times a week to speak with Leanne, but she did not know his name.

At the time of her death, Leanne was in grade eight, her first year of secondary school, at Redbank Plains High School. She was a popular member of class, but her teachers described her as ‘an average student’.

During her last months, Leanne participated in the Rock Eisteddfod national school program, aimed at educating children on the dangers of drugs through a musical stage show. It was considered a prestigious event in the school calendar and, as Leanne enjoyed music, she was a natural choice for the choir.

In many respects, Leanne was no different to other children of her age. She was going through an exciting, changing and perhaps rebellious period in her life—discovering boys, music and freedom, the walls of her bedroom covered in posters of the latest bands.

It is not clear whether Leanne was sexually active or not, as she had never approached her sister Melissa about contraception or sex-related matters. Yet, letters written to Leanne by her friend Trisha Lynch and later found by Melissa discussed sexual activity. She did appear to have minimal parental supervision, was allowed to come and go as she pleased, and was being contacted by boys much older than herself.

Following recent publicity surrounding the case, one of Leanne’s former schoolteachers wrote a letter to the editor of *The*

Weekend Australian Magazine in response to an article (14-15 January 2006). The following is an edited extract from her letter:

The periodic reporting of Leanne's case, relating mostly to the appeals of her convicted murderer, always opens an incredible sadness in me. I was one of Leanne's English and Home Class Teachers at Redbank Plains High School in 1991. I saw her every school day, in the morning for roll class and/or for our English lessons ...

I was staying at my mother's on the Gold Coast, when Leanne's face flashed up on the TV news as a missing teenager. My first thought was, 'That would be just like her, to run away.' Watching the report in some shock, in any case, I watched police carrying garbage bags of things out of her home. I thought that is not something police do for a missing person; that is, gathering evidence like that.

I cannot give you a proper time frame, but I recall this precisely. In the weeks before Leanne was murdered, her behaviour changed significantly. She was suddenly surly, uncooperative and lazy in class. While I had been teaching for only four years, my first reaction to her behaviour was that she had experienced some 'sexual awakening'. I had seen it with teenagers in my classes before. It was a complete personality change. Physically she changed as well, in the sense that her child-self was replaced with a more 'knowing persona'. I felt she, to some extent, enjoyed the attention of being labelled a 'trouble maker'.

Frequently she would enter the classroom with no books, pens or anything. A few times I asked to check her school bag and her books were there. I was bewildered why she would

lie to me about something so insignificant. On one occasion, she returned to class with her friend's bag and pretended that it was hers. The strange thing was that (I recall clearly one of them, but it seemed like several other girls were a part of this) her friends seemed desperate to conceal 'her conspiracy'. Leanne's reason for not having her school supplies was always, 'I stayed at my auntie's place last night' ...

I tried talking to her, telling her that I wanted to help her. Leanne took to just smiling at me, like she knew a secret. I appealed also to her friends to talk to me as well. Could they tell me what was happening in her life? They too would tell me to 'not worry, she just likes to stay at her aunt's place'.

I explained the dramatic change in Leanne's behaviour to the Deputy Principal. She in turn consulted the Head of Year. I had the belief that Leanne's father was contacted, because I had the impression that the existence of the auntie and Leanne staying with her, was confirmed. Leanne would certainly have been counselled and consulted about her behaviour. My superior reported back to me, that I was not to worry about things. Leanne just liked to stay at her aunt's place. I was asked if I was aware of Leanne's family past, i.e.: I believe her mother died tragically. I said I did, and this was implied to be part of 'the problem', and that Leanne was seeking female companionship in her auntie and still recovering from the loss of her mother.

Leanne's behaviour was frustrating. I felt a bit angry at her, I also felt like I was failing her, in that she did not feel I was the sort of person she could talk to (wasn't that what Home Class teachers were for?) When I saw she had disappeared, my first reaction was that she had escalated her somewhat attention-

seeking behaviour, to the point of running away from home. (The sight, however, of the police and garbage bags, made me realise she was probably in more serious trouble.)

After Leanne's funeral and the arrest of Graham Stafford, the story at the school was as follows: Leanne's sister's boyfriend (Stafford) had been putting the hard word on Leanne to have sex with him. He was harassing and pursuing her. Her reaction was to go and stay at her aunt's house to get away from him. Her friends at school knew the situation and urged Leanne to confront and 'threaten' him that if he did not stop, she would go to the police. Her friends knew that the Monday Leanne disappeared was the day she decided to confront Stafford, because he had a rostered day off ...

I can recall Leanne's friends throwing themselves on her coffin as it left the church at her funeral. After hearing 'the story', I had always presumed they were not only devastated by her murder, but also by guilt that they had kept her secret, and, if the story was true, encouraged her to confront this dangerous man on her own ... It has simply always been on my mind that Leanne's disappearance was not a sudden, random incident. My observations of her changed behaviour leading up to her murder, I believe, must give some credence to the fact that something was going on in her life to cause such dramatic changes.

If Graham Stafford is not the actual killer, I still wonder if his alleged harassment of Leanne forced her into the situation where she 'randomly' met her murderer. That is, did she really run away from home or go to the shops that day to get away from him?

As indicated by her teacher, being the child of a working parent meant that much of the time Leanne was left to fend for herself and was responsible for her own meals and laundry. She seemed to care little for tidiness and her bedroom was generally a disorganised mess. To save washing sheets, Leanne slept beneath a doona and sometimes fell asleep in front of the television in the lounge room, or downstairs in her father's bedroom. There was no discernible pattern; she simply slept where it took her fancy. Some of her clothes were in her bedroom and some were stored in Terry's room underneath the house. She also watched television whenever she felt like it.

It was not unusual for Leanne to spend several nights at a time away from her home. She frequently stayed with friends. Terry claimed he insisted that she always tell him where she was staying. Indeed the family made no inquiries about Leanne's whereabouts on the night of the last day she was seen alive—Monday 23 September 1991. During questioning at the trial, her father admitted he did not know where she had spent the night, but said he had been told she was probably at her friend's place and just accepted this fact.

Terry Holland was aged 46 when his daughter was murdered. He had grown up in and around Goodna; the suburb was his home. He was one of seven children, and his five sisters and one brother still live in the surrounding suburbs. Terry and his family moved frequently from one rental to another, although never very far from the centre of Goodna. When Leanne disappeared, the family had been living at 70a Alice Street for about five months.

Terry was employed as a blue collar worker all his life. For a number of years he held a job in the neighbouring suburb of

Wacol at a company that manufactured lead-acid batteries. His usual routine was to finish work at around 4.30 p.m. and spend the rest of the evening at his local hotel, though it was noted he changed hotels frequently. Terry was also a regular darts player. His team would travel around the hotels in the local area, usually one night a week for competitions. Leanne was well known to many of the patrons and staff of hotels in the Goodna area because she often turned up at night looking for her father.

Throughout the investigation into Leanne's murder and during Stafford's trial, Terry maintained that, despite his established pattern of evening drinking, his relationship with Leanne was very close. They spoke regularly by phone and he had raised her and her siblings as a single parent for some years. He claimed they were always able to sit down and discuss any problems that arose between them and said he was not aware of any difficulties between Leanne, Craig, Melissa or Graham.

Given subsequent events, it was significant that Terry told both the police and the court that he had no knowledge of Graham acting inappropriately towards Leanne or anyone else. He also stated that his daughter had not complained to him nor, to his knowledge, to any other person about Graham.

It was established that Leanne had cut her foot in the kitchen of her house some weeks before her death, apparently on a piece of broken glass. Just how badly she cut herself was not determined, but has since been the subject of much conjecture.

Although later considered significant, there was no mention of it in the autopsy report. Leanne is known to have walked through the hallway to the bathroom to clean and treat the wound. She walked through the lounge room, out onto the front patio and downstairs, where she showed the cut to her

father. Leanne received no medical treatment for the cut, although it is unclear whether this was simply because the injury was not deemed serious enough. Terry said when he saw the wound Leanne had wrapped it in a piece of cloth. He described the cut as ‘a slice about an inch long’. Questioned later at Stafford’s trial about the amount of blood, Terry replied: ‘I wouldn’t say there was a lot. She told me there had been, but when I saw it, not a lot.’

Leanne was not the only person to bleed in that house. Her brother Craig was injured in a pub brawl when he smashed his hand through the glass of a window. The following day he received six stitches to the wound. In his statement to police and in evidence at the murder trial, Craig said he had been drinking at a hotel for several hours when he became involved in a fight.

Sometime after he received the injury, he went home and bathed the wound in the upstairs bathroom. Craig claimed he recalled dropping some blood on the bathroom and hallway floors, but could not remember spilling blood anywhere else. Craig said he had wrapped his hand in his shirt and later disposed of the shirt because it was ruined. After washing the wound in cold water he wrapped it in a tea towel and went to bed. On another occasion, Craig told police that he cut his arm when he smashed a window to get into the house when no one was at home.

Craig Holland had been living in the family home off and on for some time, but in late 1991 had moved into another rental house with mates, leaving Terry and Leanne to share the house in Alice Street. On his single wage, Terry found the rent a burden. Melissa had been living with her boyfriend Graham Stafford for over nine months in the nearby suburb of Collingwood Park.

They obviously enjoyed each other's company, were happy together and between them had bought several household items.

Melissa was concerned about Leanne's lack of discipline and it was mutually decided between Graham, Melissa and her father that they share the house in Alice Street so that Melissa and Graham could help to supervise Leanne.

Graham later told his parents that he was not in favour of going to live at Alice Street, but Melissa persuaded him to go. Around July, the couple moved their belongings in, taking over the main bedroom upstairs from Terry and leaving Leanne in her own room.

Terry decided to turn part of the downstairs garage area into a type of granny flat. The three adults agreed that Terry would be responsible for this area while the others would take care of the upstairs cleaning. It was also agreed that Terry could use the shower and toilet upstairs as he wished. As his job involved making lead-acid batteries, he was required to shower at his work before going home each day and only needed to use the home shower on weekends. By the time Graham and Melissa moved in, Terry had moved his television, personal effects and some basic cooking facilities downstairs.

Leanne's sleeping habits and general untidiness were immediately obvious to Graham and Melissa, but Leanne was resentful when they tried to bring some order into her life. If Graham had one complaint about Leanne, it was her untidiness; she gave tidiness a low priority and generally failed to notice that she had even caused any mess. With Graham and Melissa, Leanne was responsible for the upstairs housekeeping, but in the end, at least according to Graham, it was usually he or Melissa who did most of the housework. As Graham liked cleanliness and organisation by nature, he never hesitated to do his share.

As a working couple, he and Melissa had agreed to divide the household tasks. Graham took responsibility for washing the dishes and general tidying up. Melissa cleaned the bathroom and toilet and mopped the floors. Neither of them realised that the subject of domestic cleaning would become such a major focus of a police investigation within a few months of them moving in.

Leanne had many friends, but spent most time with Trisha Lynch. Although Trisha was two years Leanne's senior, they seemed to have much in common and Leanne often slept at her place. Trisha had also stayed at Leanne's house for up to a week at a time. Trisha, her mother Elizabeth Collins, her sister and her mother's partner lived in a rented caravan at Goodna, about a kilometre from Leanne's home.

The caravan park stands next to the four-lane Ipswich Motorway and on the banks of Woogaroo Creek. At best in those days, the park could be described as working men's temporary accommodation; at worst, a haven for dropouts, drug addicts and misfits. A visitor to the park is immediately aware of the ever-present noise from the motorway, the closeness of the neighbouring caravans and the run-down, depressing nature of the surroundings.

The park's transient population at this time included Trisha and her family, who came from Tasmania. They had been living at the caravan park for about three months when Leanne was murdered, and returned to Tasmania shortly after. Leanne appears to have had a friendly relationship with Elizabeth Collins, allegedly telling her that Melissa and Graham bossed her around. However, Elizabeth told police that Leanne never suggested that Graham's comments or behaviour were in any way inappropriate.

Some of Leanne's other friends also lived at this caravan park. One was Sean McPhedran, who lived in a small tent in the isolated camping area of the caravan park, on the banks of the creek.

McPhedran's mother and stepfather lived only a matter of streets away, but had asked him to move out several weeks earlier because of his violent behaviour. Although eighteen years old, he became friendly with Trisha and through her was introduced to Leanne.

McPhedran had attended a special school and tended to socialise with younger children because, according to his family, he was more readily accepted by them. He was a big boy for his age and although very overweight, was physically much stronger than the children he mixed with because of their younger years. He was casually employed as a trolley collector at the Redbank Plaza Shopping Centre, situated about five kilometres further west along the Ipswich Motorway. McPhedran did not own a car, but had at least one friend who did and he relied on that friend or on public transport to get around.

A council footpath runs past the front of the caravan park and alongside the Ipswich Motorway. It snakes past the section of the park set aside for camping, where McPhedran was living, and connects the park to the commercial area of Goodna, less than a kilometre away. Leanne would have to walk along this footpath going to and from Trisha's caravan. There is also a dirt track nearby that passes under the road bridge at this point on Ipswich Road. It connects one side of Goodna with the other and leads also to the Goodna Railway Station.

The only other means to cross this busy stretch of motorway is by way of an overhead bridge, but that is over a kilometre away. Many local school children and adults use the dirt track

shortcut to access the railway station. From the camping grounds inside the caravan park, there is a clear view of Ipswich Road, the pedestrian footpath and the dirt track.

Less than three weeks after Leanne was killed, McPhedran and the caravan park were to feature prominently in the murder of another twelve-year-old child.