

## **Joint Select Committee on Social Media and Australian Society**

27/6/2024

### **Tilly Rosewarne (19/10/2006 to 16/2/2022)**

(\*All names have been changed as required)

I am the mother of Matilda (Tilly) Rosewarne who died by suicide just after 3am on 16/2/2022. This was her 12th attempt to end her life. She was just 15 years old.

My brave little girl, determined to look pretty, got up and put on her makeup one last time. When she was ready, she climbed out her bedroom window and went down into the back yard where the cubby house was. Finding her way in the dark was easy as she had played with her sisters and cousins there all her short life. She had planned this moment out in detail and for the first time in a long, long time she finally felt at peace - her phone was clear, the pin number removed, the instructions were there and a short note telling her family that she loved them. She was exhausted, tired, broken - she just couldn't fight anymore.

Regardless, somehow this splintered damaged little girl, in total darkness, managed to climb up on top of the cubby house. She'd done her research online and made sure this time everything would work. And then, when she was ready, she slipped the noose around her neck and stepped off into whatever experience eventually awaits all of us.

Our shattered little Tilly did her research properly and the noose did exactly what it's supposed to do, and she appears to have died instantly. And thus, she left us, Matilda - our brave shattered little girl.

Matilda was found by her father a few hours later when he was getting everyone up for school. In the next few minutes - somehow - her 13-year-old sister Maggie went down into the back yard and saw her big sister hanging from a tree, lifeless.

That traumatic vision continues to haunt my husband Murray and my daughter Maggie daily. I can only assume it will haunt them for the rest of their lives. This is something nobody should ever have to witness at any age.

However she left us, Matilda's pain was finally over. For everyone who loved her, our recovery has only just begun and will never truly end.

Tilly's death is certainly a tragedy, particularly as her death was the result of a myriad of events, each one of which cut into Tilly's soul and destroyed who she believed herself to be. Sadly, Tilly died from a thousand cuts that occurred over the course of her short life.

Tilly was a very creative child who excelled in the arts. She began dance lessons from the age of two, Speech & Drama classes from the age of four and music lessons (trumpet) from age five. She attended and excelled at group and solo eisteddfods in speech and drama, music and dance until her mental health declined.

I will not in detail outline every horrific event that occurred but seek to only give you the 'highlights' of her experience as a pre-teen and a teenager which interfaces with the power of social media to be used as a force of harm and derision.

For Tilly, the bullying started in primary school and continued into high school. It moved from face-to-face bullying to social media. It came fast and the harm was swift.

From eight-year-old girls telling her they had '*all voted*' and it should have been Tilly's father who died (in the wake of the death of another "friend's" father), to not being invited to birthday parties that 'everyone' is at, and then having people ring, text and taunt her all night long from that same party.

In 2017, Tilly developed a friendship with Hillary\* who told Tilly that she was having a birthday party in a week or so and that Tilly was to be invited. She was ecstatic. However, no party invite came, and Tilly was devastated. She said, "*Hillary has invited Charlie rather than me. I don't understand. Charlie\* isn't even one of her friends*". Murray called Hillary's mother and said, "*Matilda is devastated at being told she was invited and then being told that her spot was now taken by Charlie*". She replied, "*she's only having a couple of friends to her party. Not even her cousins are coming, there is no room in the car to pick them up*". Murray said, "*Charlie isn't even a friend of Hillary. They have no contact in the playground - what is going on?*" and Hillary's mother said weakly, "*I am sorry*". The night of the party was horrible. Tilly was getting phone calls and messages from the girls at the party. Charlie was calling her via messenger, and I think also via a phone. Tilly had Murray's phone at the time. Charlie and the other girls were calling her saying such things as, "*are you enjoying the party?*" and "*the party is going great isn't it! Oh that's right you're not here, you wouldn't know*". Murray sat up with Tilly until she finally fell asleep. Murray sat up for the rest of the night worrying and at about 4am sent a message to Hillary's

*mother to the effect of, "I can accept the fact that Tilly was not invited to this party but the spiteful innuendo that was coming from the kids sending texts all night is something that I cannot be party to. You need to make this stop". Hillary's mother rang me at about 8:30 the next morning and said, 'I was not aware that any of this was going on. I have taken all their devices, and I am reading everything that they sent. I am so sorry that this happened. My oldest daughter, Clara, was bullied. I hate bullies and I hate what it does. I will be definitely talking to the parents of the other girls who were involved in sending these messages to Matilda'".*

This was the first time Tilly was bullied via social media. It began a pattern which was to continue from 2017 to 2022.

On or about 6 November 2019, Tilly was very upset after school and told me that one of the students, Mya\* had chased her through the playground threatening to put her, "6 foot under." Tilly hid in the school toilet crying and seeking protection. Tilly estimated that about 20 to 25 students had heard the threat made to her because they came up to her and spoke to her about it - some of them to check if she was OK and others to tease her about it. I called the school about it and ultimately the year coordinator called me to tell me that she had spoken with approximately 20 to 25 students who confirmed the threat to harm Tilly had been made by Mya. I recall asking her what punishment would be handed down as a result, but no response was forthcoming. The next day Mya was present at school and was in the playground. This scared Tilly. That afternoon Tilly recounted a meeting that she attended with some other students, including Mya and she said to me, "Mum, Mya is out of control. She told Mrs Potter\* to get fucked and walked out of the meeting". I could not, and still do not understand how Tilly was made to attend a meeting about a bullying event that happened to her in front of the bully. That night messages came from Mya and others. Tilly said to Murray that night, "I am worthless, I am that worthless that the people who are paid to protect me won't protect me. What can I do? I can't go back to school. This girl wanted to kill me, she said she wanted to kill me. I spoke to Mrs Potter and Mrs Potter would not protect me". Following this event Tilly began to resist attending school.

In late November 2019, Tilly was then not invited to another 'friend's birthday party and the girls that attended (in particular, Mya) sent her messages via social media, photos and prank called her all night. She was distraught.

On 14 February 2020, Tilly attempted suicide for the first time at home by swallowing some of the bleach that had been in the bathroom near her room. We called an

ambulance, and she was taken to hospital where she was scheduled under the Mental Health Act.

This was the first of her eleven (11) unsuccessful attempts at suicide.

At about 1:00 PM on 23 November 2020, Tilly called me while I was at work. I picked up my phone and could hear Tilly sobbing and saying 'mum, mum' and I knew instantly that something was very wrong. She sent me images from snapchat. We went on FaceTime and she showed me her phone and messages (10). I still have the video of this. She told me that she had received a nude photo, which was allegedly her, from Jock\* (a student at her school). Her friend Tarra\* had received the photo and taken a screenshot of it and sent it to Tilly. I learnt that Tarra had sent the image to Tilly saying, "*he's spreading your nudes*" via snapchat. Tilly immediately denied they were her 'nudes'. I left work and came home and by the time I got home, Tilly was hysterical. I came to understand that a screen shot had been sent by Jock to a variety of different people, saying "*Oi, look what I got from Tilly Ahah She fat*" with a photo of a nude headless image of a woman. I immediately sent a text to the principal of her school asking him to contact me urgently. We exchanged messages and I sent him the images I had from snapchat (12) The next day I gave him hard copies. I soon came to understand that Jock had sent these messages to a variety of girls, including Tarra, Paula\* and Audrey\*.

After the conclusion of school (3pm) we came to understand how far the image had been spread amongst students in Bathurst as two girls, Paula and Audry, whom Tilly knew from primary school communicated with her about it. They were teasing her and telling her how they believed it was her. Tilly kept insisting that the nude image was not her and whilst I knew this was true, I could not prove it. When my daughter, Maggie arrived home she showed me how to 'reverse search' the image via Google which we then did and found the complete image (with the head) which was from a Belgian porn site (14). By 6pm, I had called the ambulance as Tilly attempted suicide by cutting her arms. There was a lot of blood. She was seriously hysterical. If ever I could say she was unpacking as a person, it was on this day. Despite the nude image not being of Tilly, she knew that people believed Jock saying that it *was* her. In a small town this was catastrophic. By 6.16pm I told the principal that I had taken Tilly to the emergency department. He checked in on her via text message with me the next morning (15). Tilly was discharged home with me the next day.

The next morning, I rang the Bathurst Police station and asked to speak to someone in relation to the spreading of a nude image. At about 2:00PM, on 24 November 2020, a police officer called me to speak about what had happened. It was a female

officer, and I recall that the police officer said to me, *“it's really hard to stop this happening. I have another case where I'm waiting three months for the information to come back from America as I understand it Snapchat keeps a record of all the things that are sent and received but it's kept by username only”*. By this time, 24 hours had transpired since the image had been spread on Snapchat. At no time did the school or the police refer me to the e- Safety Commissioner who I now understand has existed since 2015 and may have been able to give us some advice.

The reality of this harm was instant, and the e-Safety commissioner's actions could not have stopped its impact. The principal told me had spoken to Jock's mother and Jock, who asserted he did not have his phone with him that day and did not write the message. The school left it there and took no further action. Once again, all the students who got the image knew Jock had sent it, as he was on their snap chat, with his handle, and they knew there were no repercussions for Jock. By extension, there are no repercussions for this behaviour.

As Tilly was still quite distraught about the fake nude image event, we put off giving a Police statement for a few days to allow things to calm down. I spoke to Tarra on the night in question and she confirmed that Jock had sent her that image. I think she may have even told me that she verbally confronted Jock about him sending the image. I recall Tilly saying to me, *“I cannot believe Jock has done this after all I defended him and I confronted Mya about it, when she did the same thing to Jock”*. By the time she was out of hospital, and because she feared ongoing repercussions from Jock, Mya and other students at the school and within Bathurst, we were unable to proceed any further with a complaint against Jock.

In about June 2021, Tilly stepped away from a friendship with a girl in Orange called “Una”\* who started to send rude messages to Tilly. There were several different messages telling Tilly to commit suicide sent to her via text, Instagram and Facebook. She showed the messages to me, but I didn't ever get a copy. Tilly was really upset about this.

In late 2021, Tilly was in tears above a fake account called ‘no face no case’ who sent her a message stating *“keep tryna to kill yourself hopefully it will work one day if you wanna talk shit don't make your friends do it”* Tilly told me she thought it was created by a friend also called Tully\* or Una, but she could not prove it.

Tilly's behaviour was getting quite erratic by the end of December 2021. She became introverted, socially isolated and her mental health was very poor, but the connection to others, good and bad, continued via social media content.

After she died, I saw a message between Tilly and a friend from CAMHS called “Eddy”\* about how to kill yourself by hanging. It appears she had surfed the internet to gain information about tying a correct knot. It is dated 6/4/2020, when she was an inpatient at the CAMHS unit at Orange hospital.

Within a day or so the jokes were already getting posted online in Snapchat and other social networks. The same kids that persecuted her quite literally to death thought it was funny - only days earlier Matilda had been told that she hadn't previously tried hard enough. “*Don't care LOL*” posted one.

On 19 February 2022, I became aware that a Bathurst High school student, James\* wrote on Tilly's Instagram “*tried to handshake the tree but it left her hanging hay*”. When confronted about this statement he asserted his Instagram account had been hacked.

In my view, what all the children involved in Tilly's narrative learnt was you can say what you want, send what you want, to whoever you want, and nothing happens, you are free - these kids are pretty much untouchable, and they not only know it, but they also revel in it. The police can't stop these kids and the harm goes on.

Since Tilly's death I have been contacted by well over 1000 parents who have shared their stories about the bullying of their children, bullying in all its forms, and their frustrations, and the ‘victory’ that bullies have day after day after day until their child, like Tilly, develop mental health issues. Almost to a person I am told how social media has played its role in each of these harms.

The harm is all pervasive and the mechanism of social media is all powerful, held in the hands of young humans at the most vulnerable time of their lives. Science tells us that during adolescence a human brain is not properly firing, and their emotional intelligence is unstable. The change to the age of access, at least for most, will make it illegal for children under 16 to access social media.

I do not accept the argument that such a restriction would simply ‘push social media’ underground and as such, there is no point in such restrictions. The law now states cigarettes can't be sold to people under a certain age, and whilst there of course is always a black market for them, the providers of cigarettes to children can and are charged. If the law is there, it is up the police to monitor and act and the Courts to enforce it.

Currently the western world is experiencing an epidemic of bullying and cyber bullying, enlivened by social media which is moving children to consider suicide as the only way out. A 2015 study in Australia found that 1 in 10 teenagers have self-harmed, 1 in 13 teenagers have contemplated suicide, 1 in 20 have made a plan to take their own life and 1 in 40 have attempted suicide (Lawrence et al., 2015).

As a community we are losing too many of our young people to suicide however this is NOT just a mental health issue – to cast it that way fails to recognise that this eroding of self, begins as BULLYING – Tilly was not mentally unwell in year 2 but by year 7 she was. This was a death from bullying – exacerbated by social media.

I am aware that experts and scientists the world over are telling us that exposure to social media is damaging our brains, our social connections and is having a devastating consequence on our young children and teens.

Even in my own household with my two other daughters, despite everything that has happened I fight the kids to get off their phones – to try and find peace against the never-ending 'need' to connect. It's completely out of control.

A change to the law to not permit children access to social media accounts before the age of 16 is crucial to give the power back to parents.

With social media and the impact on children, we shouldn't need to have more kids die for the government to step in. We want this law because children's lives literally depend on it.

This is a social issue; a health issue and a child protection issue. We need parliament to enact laws with bipartisan support for swift action.

This shouldn't be a political hot potato.

The Federal e-Safety Commissioner has important work to do and needs to be funded adequately in order to do so, but against the might of the social media companies, who although they profit from interfacing with our citizens are not bound by our laws, she is clearly unable to fight on an even playing field. Her recent cessation of the case with 'X' seems to support this.

The Commonwealth Government not only needs to properly fund the e-Safety commissioner and implement the List of Recommendations from the Report into social media and Online Safety produced by the Select Committee on Social Media

and Online Safety from 2022, but we are now looking to government to go further and for this Joint Select Committee to make recommendations to try and stem the tide.

I am certain it may initially feel like trying to stop the tidal wave with a bucket, but social change must start somewhere, and our government is called upon to lead this change.

There are so many “Tillys” in our community – and although my Tilly is an extreme example of what happens when bullying erodes a person’s psyche – just one bookend of the type of results – the spectrum of the effects of bullying via social media are many and varied.

Social media is part of the mechanism by which children feel connected, but it is destroying them.

In the end, I am just a country lawyer whose daughter was eventually bullied to death by children who used the power of social media to devastating effects.

Tilly’s death is an opportunity for action – her death is NOT a secret and provides politicians with a platform to make real changes.

My question then is - How many more Tillys must die?

#ForTillysSake

**Emma Mason**

*(with contributions by Sam , Stephanie and Nickole )*

I confirm that I am more than happy to appear before the committee at a time suitable to them to give oral evidence.