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At Pioneer FC, suicide does discriminate



‘The hardest, hardest thing’: Greg Drew at the Pioneer Football Club oval in Alice Springs.
Picture: Chloe Erlich

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- **EXCLUSIVE**

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A father never expects to bury his son. So it was without trepidation that Greg Drew took his family to Melbourne in January, leaving behind his eldest boy, Anthony, who wanted to spend time with friends at home in Alice Springs.

Not once did he suspect that Anthony, 17, who had just finished Year 12 and won a place to study business at university in Sydney, was vulnerable. Not once did he think his son would disappear without saying goodbye or become the fourth young Aboriginal player affiliated with the Red Centre Pioneer Football Club to commit suicide in less than three years.

“I feel like it’s ruined my life. It’s turned my whole world upside down. It’s just changed everything,” Mr Drew said. “My second-eldest boy (aged 15) has probably taken it the hardest. I hate to say it, but it’s probably given him an option in life that I don’t think he should ever have had.”

Six months on and still struggling to come to terms with Anthony's death, Mr Drew remembers his son as "just a happy- go-lucky kid" who enjoyed music and sports and aspired to be his own boss one day. "He was very loving. He spent a lot of time with his younger siblings (aged 15, 8, 8 and 2), who idolised him," he said. "That's what makes it so hard because there were just no signs. It (suicide) was the last thing that entered my mind because he was always so happy."

At least 78 indigenous people have taken their own lives so far this year, 20 of them children, according to figures obtained by The Weekend Australian. When Anthony Drew died in early January, he would have been one of the first. The Northern Territory has the highest suicide rate in the country, about 21 per 100,000 people. Suicide disproportionately affects indigenous Australians. When people take their own lives, it's not just themselves they hurt; a whole ecosystem of people around them feels the pain. Depression and self-harm put those closest to victims at a higher risk.

Owen Cole, president of Pioneer FC and an influential Alice Springs indigenous businessman, said Anthony's passing traumatised everyone. "I had all his friends, all these young people around my house," he said. "I just took time off and had to look after them. It was really stressful but somehow we got through it."

Only about a month before, another young man known as TJ, 18, had committed suicide. - Anthony and TJ were cousins. TJ, who had family in Mutitjulu near Uluru, was an aspiring musician, according to Phil Walcott, a registered psychologist with the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress who developed the YES strategy for youth engagement and suicide prevention.

"From the outside looking in, you see young people who had a future, had skills, were well liked and so on, so you are left shaking your head, wondering what else was going on," Mr Walcott said. "Often there's links with alcohol and other drugs; then there's the impulsivity that comes with that."

Mr Drew said Anthony was intoxicated the night he killed himself and believes the alcohol put his son "in a bad frame of mind".

"I don't think my son meant to do this," he said. "I know he would've rung his siblings, or me, to say goodbye, because he was a really caring kid ... I just think that he was in a bad place and, unfortunately, we will have to live with that and regret it, which is the hardest, hardest thing."

Before Anthony and TJ, two boys from Hermannsburg, about 130km west of Alice Springs, EK and DP, aged 19 and 16 respectively, killed themselves three months apart in mid-2017. They were also related. Their deaths began an exchange of accusations and intermittent violence that pitted neighbour against neighbour, friend against friend, according to a resident who asked not to be named.

"People looking for answers began to blame other families," the source said. "The (claims of) black magic around those deaths, the resentment around them, nearly destroyed the community and have only just subsided recently."

Lukas Williams, an indigenous man from NSW who married into Hermannsburg, runs what he calls Gan'an healing workshops using techniques borrowed from "indigenous pedagogy" such as yarning circles and cultural practice.

Mr Williams and others stepped in to help Hermannsburg locals come to terms with their loss. He said adults feared for their children but also worried about cack-handed outsiders making a bad situation worse.

"These two young men were beautiful young men. They were very bright, and good football players," he said. "After these two young fellows passed away, I was responding to probably three attempts (at suicide) per week. Once the community realised that there was a response from myself and other people, the (frequency of suicide) attempts declined." If EK's and DP's deaths shocked Pioneer, TJ's forced everyone to see that the problems ran deeper, and Anthony's was too much to bear. Mr Cole and others decided their team needed help. They organised an outback retreat in March for about 60 people.

Mr Williams, who ran workshops during the event, says the youngsters gradually opened up.

"There were a lot of cultural activities. Some young men had had no experience of that for years, so we are bringing that back to improve social and emotional wellbeing," he said. "The young people spoke about how they had noticed that other young people were sad ... but not known how to respond."

One young man had half-joked to another that he would skip a party because he "probably won't be around tomorrow anyway".

"As soon as his suicide happened, they started to realise what that message meant, to realise that they had seen something they didn't know how to recognise," Mr Williams said.

Hindsight is always easier than foresight, but neither explains why so many youngsters seem moved to take their own lives. That the four Pioneer boys all came from seemingly happy families and had bright futures make their deaths all the harder to grasp.

"I don't really understand it," Mr Cole said. "I grew up in the same environment to these fellows, and I had never heard of suicide — never had any of my friends commit suicide. Then, all of a sudden, it's happening so frequently that it's just mind-blowing. What's changed?"



Anthony Drew who committed suicide in January 2019. Picture: Melinda Hooper

Mr Drew was likewise unfamiliar until his son died. When that happened, he searched the internet and was horrified by the amount of detail, including instructions, that he found. “To have four young lads from one football team all do it ... I think something has put thoughts into their heads,” Mr Drew said. “Kids need to talk to adults and not try to manage this stuff by themselves.”

Gary Robinson, a suicide researcher at Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, traces a wave of suicides that hit Western Australia’s Kimberley region in recent years to the arrival of alcohol and cash-based economies, and a breakdown of cultural authority structures. Mr Williams thinks most indigenous suicides are linked to intergenerational trauma as a legacy of colonisation.

A remote teacher who estimates she has seen at least 20 youth suicides in a 30-year career believes the triggers are complex and, perversely, often most affect the brightest children. “It can be because of homosexuality, sexual abuse as kids, substance abuse; sometimes it’s boredom gone wrong or not seeing what their future holds,” the teacher said. “In a normal town, you can go to a bar, go out and meet people. That doesn’t happen in remote communities. Where can young people go to engage with others in a healthy environment?”

Red Centre independent MP Scott McConnell said this month he believed suicide among his indigenous constituents was often related to poor parenting and living conditions.

“Parents feel that they don’t have authority over their children any more and, as a result, don’t take responsibility for their children,” he said. “As a result of that, their children reach

adolescence without the skills needed to confront the complex emotional challenges that come with adult life. They don't know how to deal with things, so they kill themselves."

That clearly was not the case with Anthony Drew. When he died, his father said, he felt overcome with rage.

"I just had so much anger towards him for probably the first three to four months. I love him to bits, but I was so angry at him," he said. "In some way, I blamed myself a lot at the start. I don't anymore, because I gave him everything, and it (his death) is just unexplainable."

His greatest hope is that other youngsters in strife will not keep their pain to themselves, but rather turn to a responsible adult.

Two weekends ago, a 42-year-old woman unrelated to the four dead Pioneer boys took her own life at Hermannsburg in circumstances that some locals believe were linked to domestic disputes.

The Weekend Australian understands authorities are closely watching an 11-year-old boy known to the woman who has since expressed suicidal thoughts.

If you or someone you know is at risk of suicide, call Lifeline (13 11 14) or the Suicide Call Back Service (1300 659 467), or see a doctor.

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