



Inspiring woman

# Standing strong *in* *a* storm

A little over a year ago, 15-year-old Perth boy Cassius Turvey died after being beaten by strangers on his way home from school, and in the aftermath his mother's call for peace united the nation. *The Weekly* meets Mechelle Turvey, WA's inspiring Australian of the Year.

WORDS BY SAMANTHA TRENOWETH · PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCES ANDRIICH





Mechelle Turvey is the 2023 WA Australian of the Year. She was nominated for her advocacy work for victims of crime, following the death of her son Cassius.

HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY JAL DRIDGE



**T**he repetitive beep of a vital signs monitor, lines rising and falling in waves, traces the rhythm of life on a screen. A 15-year-old with a bandaged head looks as if he might be sleeping, though he's been lying here in an induced coma for days. Beside him, in the soft blue glow of the Intensive Care ward, his mother whispers the stories of his childhood and hers, of her parents and grandparents, weaving her son's life into a tapestry of family and community, as if to hold him here.

The woman is Mechelle Turvey. Ten days earlier, her son Cassius, a Noongar/Yamatji teenager, was walking home from his Perth school when he was set upon by strangers, one of them brandishing a metal pole. Friends who witnessed the attack called an ambulance and Cassius was rushed to hospital, his forehead slashed, his brain haemorrhaging in two places.

Cassius went home five days later, but within hours he was felled by a series of seizures. Back in hospital, he underwent brain surgery and doctors learned that he had suffered two strokes. After five more days sitting by his bed in hospital, Mechelle was told she must bid her youngest son goodbye.

In the aftermath of Cassius' death, as people gathered at vigils and rallies around the country, Mechelle called for calm. In the depths of her grief, she united the nation.

"I am angry. Cassius' friends and family are angry," she wrote in a statement that was read to the thousands who gathered around Australia in November 2022.

"But I don't want any form of violence at these rallies in the name of my child. Violence breeds violence. I want calm and peace. I don't want to fuel prejudices, biases. I don't want to fuel the stereotypes of First Nations people ... My family and I send our love to each one of you for supporting, for raising voices and for showing so much kindness and respect. I am overwhelmed and eternally grateful."



**"Respect my culture and that I've got different ways, but also respect that I'm a person first."**

**T**welve months later, Mechelle tells *The Weekly* that she believes some of the strength she found to speak out, and to speak so powerfully at that time, came from Cassius. Some also came from her late husband, Sam. But the great pool of fortitude that she draws on day-to-day has been passed on by the women in her family, who are, she says, "a force to be reckoned with".

Mechelle and her grandmother, Margaret, had a special bond. It was forged in the months after her birth, when her father was away at the Vietnam War and Margaret doted on

her first grandchild. Years later, the older woman took a hand in raising her. In fact, one of the stories that Mechelle told Cassius as she sat by his bedside in those final days was about Margaret's unorthodox methods of tempering her granddaughter's mettle.

"Nan used to take my mum, my two siblings and me over to Rottnest Island every holiday," she begins with a quizzical smile. "We considered ourselves very flash to be going there, and we loved it, but one thing bothered me. Whenever there was a storm, my grandmother would drag me out – not



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the others, just me – and make me walk out in thunder and lightning. We would go up hills, down hills, the wind would blow, I would fall over. I was terrified. I kept asking why she was doing this and why weren't the others included. She would just say that she'd explain when the time was right.

"I reckon I was about 17 when she finally told me what it was all about. I'd been going through some really rough stuff – domestic abuse. She sat me down and told me that the reason for those walks was to make me resilient, to make me tough, to prepare me for the storms ahead. It's a true story. So that's just instilled in me now, and I've figured out that she wasn't so mean after all. She was passing something on."

Margaret had forged her own inner strength as a youngster. Born in the remote goldmining town of Yalgoo, she was stolen from her family and raised on a mission almost 500 kilometres away on the outskirts of Perth.

appalling racism in the maternity ward that she couldn't face the ordeal again. She lived in terror, for years, that there would one day be a knock on her door and her precious daughter – Mechelle's mother, Liz – would be taken away.

"There was a street in East Perth called Henry Street," Mechelle says, "where a lot of Aboriginal people lived. My grandparents lived there before they bought their own home and if the authorities came to one end of the street, word would spread and everyone at the other end would know that they were coming to get children – especially

children who were Aboriginal and fair.

"So Nan's house was always spick and span in case the authorities came, and Mum was hidden so she wouldn't be stolen – normally under the bed."

Mechelle is proud of the strong women in her family. Ever since she was a youngster, she's paid heed to their wise words. "I didn't just hear them and wipe them away. I put them down as stories to live by," she says.

Liz grew up and fell in love with Alex, a European Australian. Mechelle was born in 1966, the first of three, and raised in a conservative, white neighbourhood. Because her mother was an only child, she didn't have the extended Aboriginal family or connection to Culture and Country she'd have liked.

"At first, I stuck with the kids from my street, who happened to all be white," she says. "Starting high school, I had a bit of an identity crisis because there were Aboriginal people at the school who I didn't really know. I kind of felt I was on the fence, and I didn't want to pick sides. At the same time, I wanted to spend more time with my mob. So I did, I joined up with them."

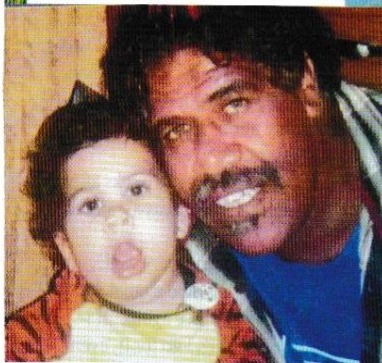
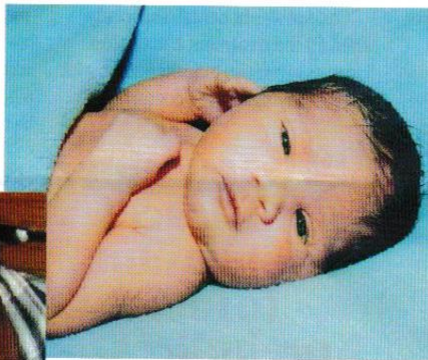
Eventually she forged a place in both worlds.

Mechelle looks people in the eye, with empathy and without judgement. She makes a point of treating people as she'd like them to treat her: "I often say, 'I'm a person'," she explains. "Respect my culture and that I've got different ways, but also respect that I'm a person first."

The people of Australia were only introduced to Mechelle a year ago, but before that, fuelled by generations of maternal courage, she'd been quietly making her mark.

Mechelle was an A-grade student but she left school at 16, and studied business. "I did some really 'get down and dirty' jobs – a chemical factory where I was burnt with bleach – things like that," she says. She went on to study cooking and eventually opened the first Aboriginal bush

From top: Cassius as a newborn; with his father, Sam; Cassius' and his dad's guitars rest on a banner that was hand-painted by Cassius' school friends; Cassius was assaulted mere weeks after Sam's funeral.



"There was a big loss of connection there," Mechelle says. "The loss of family, the loss of identity as an Aboriginal person, the loss of language."

After she left the mission, Margaret met Jack, a farmer and labourer who was also a member of the Stolen Generations. The young couple worked hard. They became the first Aboriginal people in Western Australia to buy their own home through the State Housing Commission, and they had one child. They would have liked more but Margaret was treated with such



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tucker catering company in Perth. She worked in government departments, spent eight years in radio, and managed young adult services and peer support in prisons, where she changed hundreds of young lives.

She also became a mother in her twenties, giving birth to two fine boys, Jay and Troy, who she raised "to be proud of their Culture, to be caring, and to be themselves".

With all that, it wasn't until she turned 40, Mechelle says, "that I felt comfortable in my own skin, that I could be me 24/7, that I didn't need to change for anybody". And the person who helped her find her solid core was Sam Turvey.

Like her, Sam loved music and nature. She'd known him years earlier – there had been a fling – and they reconnected at her 40th birthday party. They formed a rock band called Old Flames and released an album.

"He was like Crocodile Dundee," she says, still with a smile that radiates affection. "He really didn't give a shit about what people thought. We were like chalk and cheese. He was very hardcore on the surface but he became soft as we spent more time together. And I became stronger. We were together for 17 years. He was my soulmate and the love of my life."

Mechelle wears a silver heart on a chain that was a gift from Sam. She rarely takes it off.

The day Cassius was born will stay with her forever. "I remember it clear as day," Mechelle says. "I couldn't have him naturally – complications – so it had to be a C-section ... His father was the first to hold him. All throughout my pregnancy, he would sing, 'Little one, don't you cry' – it was a song he'd made up – and he would rub my belly, or play his guitar. That song was the first thing Cassius heard. He grew up to love music too – to play guitar. And Sam became an amazing father. He just took to it like [a duck to] water."

Cassius grew into a curious, bright, outgoing boy. "He was respectful and caring," Mechelle says. "He would walk

up to the older nannas and pops, and just yarn with them. They loved him. He'd go out with his father and uncles. They'd go roo shooting or hunting or go to funerals in the country. Very rarely would there be other kids, but they'd often take Cassius, because he genuinely wanted to learn."

He loved camping, and the three Turveys would often take off for fishing weekends. Cassius especially loved marron (crayfish) season.

Then fate came like a bolt out of the blue. Sam was diagnosed with cancer.

"One day, he just handed me a letter and said, 'Can you take me to this appointment or get me an Uber?' I looked at it. It said chemotherapy. I said, 'Sam, I think you've got the wrong letter.' He said, 'No, I've got cancer.' I found out just like that.

"Cassius was in denial, especially when all the treatment had to stop. Sam was given two months and Cassius was just saying, 'These doctors don't

know what they're talking about.'

"But then Sam went downhill quickly. We set a bed up in the front lounge. I said, 'We love you and we'll look after you,' and Cassius was saying that too. I opened the house up and people came to see him all day ..."

Sam died on 22nd August 2022.

Mechelle's eyes are tired, she hasn't slept well for more than a year, and as she speaks of the weeks that followed Sam's death, they brim with tears.

"Cassius promised, when his father left, that he would look after me ... It's a rip-off," she says. "Not just for me but for Cassius and Sam, because Sam thought he was leaving me in good hands."

He was. At 15, Cassius had already trained to work in community radio, landed a job at Kmart and started a 'pay what you can' neighbourhood lawnmowing service. He'd also been accepted for a work experience placement in a mining company. And he took his new responsibility seriously.

"The day after his father's funeral," Mechelle says, "Cassius was making my bed and breakfast, and he did that every day. Anyone can tell you – he was just stepping up to being a young man. You know, 'My dad's gone. I said I'd look after my mum.' He was just different after that."

But on October 13 – mere weeks after Sam's funeral – Cassius was assaulted.

**"I want calm and peace. I don't want to fuel prejudices, biases."**

– Mechelle



Cassius "knew me very well", Mechelle says, and a quiet smile lights up her face again. "If I believe in something, I go for it, even if it's the craziest bloody idea. My husband would argue with me, and Cassius would always say, 'Don't bother, Mum's on a mission'."

Since Cassius' death, a critical part of Mechelle's mission has been to reform the relationships between police and victims of crime.

WA Police Commissioner Col Blanch made headlines when he commented that Cassius had been "in the wrong place at the wrong time", unintentionally throwing responsibility back onto the victim. The Commissioner visited Mechelle's home to apologise personally,





and found her in full mission mode.

Mechelle had been at the hairdresser on the day of Cassius' assault and her phone had been buzzing with calls from numbers with 'no caller ID'.

"I never answer those," she says. Who of us does? So that was her first piece of advice: "If you're calling a victim's family, identify yourself."

She'd also taken a call from the mother of one of Cassius' mates who had been with him that day. "There were two boys who were chased by that same group, and one of them was her son. The police and ambulance had attended, and they'd taken Cassius to hospital, but the young boys were just left standing on the street after everything they'd been through. There was no support. And that boy's

**Right: Memorial plaque designed by Cassius' friends. Opposite: Mechelle with Governor of Western Australia, Chris Dawson.**

mother told me that it took a good 10 minutes after he walked in the door to find out what the hell was going on. He couldn't talk. He was in trauma." So that lack of care was also an issue.

Additionally, she was disappointed that the police hadn't taken a full statement from Cassius while he was still lucid in hospital. It meant Mechelle had to revisit the attack each time she provided information for the homicide investigation squads, and she will possibly have to do it all again at the 2025 trial.

So Mechelle had some suggestions for Commissioner Blanch, but all in all, she liked him. "You know when they're fake and when they're not," she says.

Their meeting stayed with him too. Not long after, he approached Mechelle to share her insights with young recruits and serving police officers. She's been hosting her 'Take Five' sessions for WA Police ever since.

"I developed the program myself. The police had no hand in it," she says, which is important to her.

"Meeting Mechelle for the first time," the Commissioner said, "it was clear she was a pretty special person ... It's not very often you can turn what is a terrible tragedy into something that can serve our community for years to come."

Mechelle has done that, which is why Senior Detective Sergeant Stephen Cleal (who led the team which tracked down, arrested and charged Cassius' four alleged assailants), nominated her for WA Australian of the Year.

She is also the 2023 Female Elder of the Year in her local community, and a finalist for both the 2023 Australian Human Rights Medal and 2023 Community Citizen. And as we go to press, Mechelle begins a new role as Assistant Director, Community

Liaison with the WA Police.

It has been a profound, harrowing and surprising year. Inviting her mother, Liz, to share the stage when she accepted her WA Australian of the Year Award, Mechelle made it clear she owes everything to the bold women in her family on whose shoulders she stands.

"I've always felt that I had to honour the obligation that my nan put me through all those thunderstorms for."

But in the end, she tells *The Weekly*: "I've done it all for Cassius and I hope he is proud." **AWW**

