

Chris Searle

By Eileen Searle, in memory of her most precious and loved son

OUR JOURNEY WITH CHRIS

Chris was our 4th and last child, and was a typical boy. From a toddler he loved the outdoors and was always in the garden with the dogs or chooks. He often went bush camping with his dad, hunting, fishing and catching and cooking yabbies over a campfire. Such a love of the outdoors. In 1993 after retrenchment, a big effort from all the family saw us finish a wooden boat that Tim had begun many years earlier, this then helped entrench Chris's love of the outdoors and fishing. We have photos of Chris from about three years of age on, always holding a rifle, rod or fish. The one battle I always had was to keep a hat on him. I can remember saying to him once, Chris you will be getting sun cancers cut off your face and lips if you don't keep your hat on, if only mild skin cancers was all we had to worry about.

In year 11 and 12 he shaved his head but after finishing high school he grew his hair and wore it in a long ponytail. He was apprenticed to his brother as a carpenter and when he wasn't working was either dropping bait traps into creeks or driving to various dams, always bringing home a good catch of fish. Then one afternoon in late April 2001 he came home early to see our GP, as he told me he was fed up with this lump on his head keep itching. I felt sick when I looked at it, about the size of a five cent piece and like a raspberry red colour, very thick fleshy and the edges were pliable. The doctor removed it and the next day we had a call from our G.P and on seeing him in the surgery were told it was a level 4 melanoma.

On the 3rd May, his 20th birthday, Chris was in the PA Hospital having a procedure called a Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy. They injected a dye and as it went to only two lymph nodes they only removed these two and did some further surgery at the site and after dissection found that the lymph nodes were totally clear of any cancer cells. They were pleased with the result and told us that there was an 80% chance of Chris being clear in 3 years. How naive we were, they didn't tell us how insidious melanoma can be.

Chris looked so fit and healthy we hardly thought about it again. Then just over two years later after a rough tackle in a football game and experiencing sore ribs an x-ray showed no broken ribs but a shadow on the right lung. He didn't want to have further x-rays, didn't want to know or have it clearly spelt out that the cancer was back, however we all had to face it. Chris had a few treatments of chemo and a full month of radiation. There was no chemo that was specific for melanoma, the radiation burnt his throat, he continued going to his carpentry work, sick as he was, his boss would send him back home, he also continued some nights going to a second job in a restaurant in the city as he had trouble sleeping anyway, he wanted to live as normally as possible. However he knew deep inside what was going on and the likely outcome. I hold him up as my hero as he never once said the "Why me" or complained, just quietly accepted everything that was thrown at him and carried on with his life as best he could.

He bought a new Ute for work early 2003 as his boss sent him out onto different worksites, Chris was a hard worker and his boss thought a lot of him. Early November he completed his apprenticeship and was then employed as a subcontractor. He began getting very stressed at this time, we thought from getting behind in car and mobile phone payments from his time off work. He told his dad one night that he was soon going to sell his car and belongings and go travelling as the cancer was going to kill him. Of course his Dad came back with "don't be silly Chris the cancer won't kill you". We didn't know it but he was beginning to get pain in his knees and shoulders, but didn't let on to us, didn't want to give us further worry.

The Cancer Council were wonderful and paid his car registration for him, and we looked after the mobile phone bill. I must just mention also that Group Training who managed his apprenticeship were marvellous and gave Chris a cash cheque to spend on himself during his month of radiation.

As all tradies have time off over Christmas he spent the time with his friends fishing and putting his green thumb to good use, buying a number of orchids, converting an aviary to a greenhouse. His first day back to work after Christmas brought severe shoulder pain as he used a heavy nail gun. Within a week or so he was back to the GP and it took much coercion to get him to have a bone scan.

The fifteenth January we got the diagnosis of bone cancer, there were tumours in his brain, shoulders, hips, knees and spine. Here is where my world really fell apart, I continued to work my two days a week Monday and Fridays but only managed it with the help of a wonderful co worker.

We had some really lovely long time friends and family who were always there to support us at this stage as we couldn't have made it on our own. Tim went to oncology every Friday with Chris who was put under a lovely pain control doctor, she told him she couldn't cure him but could keep him pain free so that he could lead a normal life and socialise with his friends. What a joke, nothing was normal anymore. Each week she was increasing his pain medication and apart from set strengths to take regularly he also had breakthrough pain relief and towards the end was injecting himself with morphine.

It was at this time we sourced contacts and purchased marijuana for our son as it was the only thing that would help stop his biliousness, help with his stress and give him some appetite. He liked to be independent and manage his own tablets but often fell asleep after tea in the recliner and we think he occasionally got them wrong. I remember one morning I was up early and Chris had to bang on the wall to get my attention, he was in such intense pain throughout his body he couldn't even move his legs. We had to ring the ambulance to take him to hospital and have a palliative care doctor to get his pain under control. I think it was that time he told his Dad to get a gun and to put him out of his ordeal. Our hearts were breaking. We felt so utterly helpless having to watch our son going through this. The pain from cancer is so intense, debilitating and degrading for the patient, he needed a thick cushion to sit on the kitchen chairs as the pain in his buttocks was so intense, also a padded toilet seat.

Just before Easter we took him to Bundaberg to a naturopath for alternative treatment hoping to gain him some pain relief, at this time the chap picked up problems with his liver and asked us to let him know results of Chris' next blood tests. I am so grateful that another son gave us his movie camera to take so we have about 40 minutes footage of Chris fishing with Tim from that time also a little of his voice.

Our daughter Nicole and Chris were very close as they were only eighteen months apart, she was still at home at this stage finishing a nursing degree and spent all her spare time with her brother, seeing a movie or buying him some new clothes and taking him out for a meal. From the day of bone cancer diagnosis our whole world and being was centred on Chris, our every waking moment, everything we did or bought, even grocery shopping was done with Chris in mind, what he might like.

By this time Chris should not have been driving because of the strength of medication he was on but it was the only thing he had left like a normal life and we couldn't take that little bit of independence away from him. Chris finally had to go into palliative care at Logan and lost his brave battle on the morning of April 28th 2004, five days before his 23rd birthday. The cancer had spread through his liver and upper intestine.



The sudden emptiness in our lives, disbelief, pain, grief and such emotions I never thought existed, the depression, at one stage my brain behaved like Chris hadn't been in our lives, then thinking I was going insane, the brain didn't want to accept what had happened. Poor Tim I thought for a time he was going to do away with himself as his grief was so intense, we both struggled in our own ways, we went to counselling both being emotional wrecks, then Tim phoned the TCF, and we found people who understood, who had been where we were coming from. Nearly six years on we still have some very difficult times like at special events and family occasions, there is always that empty chair and we wish so much it could have been different.

There are nieces he never met, children of his own he should have had, so much lost. I do know that we are more aware and compassionate with other folk now, hopefully it has changed us for the better, you certainly learn the hard way how important the people in your life are and how trivial the material things of this world are in the greater scheme of things. In times of trial we all seem to find an inner strength somewhere that keeps us going and we do find a different peace of sorts and reasons to live and enjoy our lives again, we have to live now for our children, whenever we go camping now we always take with us a photo of our son to have his presence there. I wish any newly bereaved parents peace and comforting hugs and say that in time you will get past the worst of the grief and find the good memories will come, God bless you all.

Written by Eileen Searle, TCF Qld member, in memory of her most precious and loved son, Chris.