

Michael Jules Sternberg

From Ruth Barker - TCF Townsville

On the 2nd December 2007, members of the Townsville Chapter, The Compassionate Friends Queensland Inc., travelled to the reef to fulfil the wishes of another bereaved family on the other side of the world. On 14/5/07, Mike Jules Sternberg, lost his life in a car accident not far from his home in Pennsylvania. He was the only child of Jill and a loving stepson to Charlie. He possessed a love of life and journaled his love in a way not often seen in a young man of 27 years. Mike was deeply concerned that this beautiful planet was being decimated and was committed to journeying to the wonders before they disappeared for all time. One of these places was the Great Barrier Reef and upon his death, his parents set about finding a way to make this happen.

In July 2007, Jill made contact with TCF in America. Through the international and national body of TCF, contact was made with the Townsville branch of TCF, Qld, and thus commenced a journey borne out of need and fashioned with the love that only another bereaved parent can offer.

I was humbled that we were asked to take on this role as guardians of something so precious by those who did not really know us. In their grief, Mike's parents trusted that those who could empathise with the deep loss they were experiencing, would be the ones that could carry their son's dream to fruition. Their simple wish was for us to take some of his ashes to our beautiful Kelso Reef.

I have always been one to bemoan the technological age as I feel that it has been a factor in the decline of the personal way we communicate one with another but I have changed my views considerably as email has been the only form of communication throughout this venture and without it we would have been challenged in bringing this request to closure in a timely way. It made daily communication so very simple and instant.

Mike's ashes arrived on our shores in early October. With it we received photos of a beautiful young man, gone from the lives of those he loved, far too soon. Jill sent some readings for the ceremony and a copy of a journal entry. Mike had made in the months before his death. What a remarkable person! He was documenting his love of life and his gratefulness for all he had been given, his mother, his stepfather Charlie, his friends, dogs, his senses, his abilities but above all his ability to believe that every wrong done to him had allowed him to accept the frailties of mankind and learn that forgiveness and love is the only way to a life fully lived.

And it was, that through the process of organising the reef trip, I had communication with some most wonderful people from the cruise company, our television station and our local newspaper to the precious crew on the catamaran.

The weather to the reef could not have been better, I think it was arranged by the angels themselves as the week before had seen some rough seas so it was a real joy to awake to sunshine and flat water.

Our local newspaper was on hand before we left to do a little story in the hope that it might help others dealing with the intense pain following the death of their child. The staff on board the "cat" were all beautiful young men who, for the whole journey, treated us with such care and concern and showed great interest in how we live our lives following the deaths of our children.

We had not expected to be given a private place for Mike's ceremony so it humbled us when the skipper offered the glass bottomed boat for our private use. We were so very privileged.

So the eight of us, accompanied by our young skipper, Paul, were taken to a spot right over the reef where our ceremony was conducted. We read from Mike's journal and as Niki's husband, Phil, scattered his ashes, rose petals and frangipani flowers were scattered onto the breeze to create a moment of awe and wonder as we watched the precious sight into the distance on the glass like sea.

It was so wonderful to have Phil accompany us girls as it is not often that our Dad's feel at peace in these situations.

I actually think Phil loves us as much as we love him!

Most of us shed tears of humility; that we had been allowed into that which is so very private, so intensely painful for another parent; that they allowed us, out of incredible need, to honour their beautiful son and yet here we were, able to fulfil this simple yet profound request.

Our young skipper was also caught in the moment and he has passed on his message of hope to Jill and Charlie via DVD.

There are many who underestimate our young adults and it was on this special day these beautiful young men showed such graciousness and empathy as they opened their hearts and minds to ensure the whole experience did honour for one of their own.

There is nothing we could say that would convey the depth of our gratitude, we remain forever grateful to those placed on our path this day.

The story edited for the local evening news was exceptional.

Niki and I were made to feel so relaxed making it possible for us to convey our thoughts to others that might be struggling in our community.

In Mike's death we have received so many gifts; new friends, a deeper understanding of our young when we make the time to listen and ask for their opinions and the assurance that a simple request, when carried through, can make a whole world of difference in the lives of others, not just for his parents alone (although this was our primary goal) but also in the lives of those who were enablers in this process.

From those who were first contacted in TCF to that of the life of one of our newest members, the affect has been profound. Our wonderful Michelle found the journey so hard and almost backed out at the last minute but she believed to the depth of her being it was a journey she needed to take; for she realised that by being able to make a difference in the life of others means that her life now has new meaning, more hope and a clearer vision of how far she has come in her grief work. It is the simplest things that give back so much and we are all capable of the giving but until you dare to step outside the comfort zone there is no understanding of the positive impact you may have on the lives of others and in turn, on that of your own.

It is not easy but in the sharing of our journey, our pain and our own hopes for the future, we in turn give the newly bereaved the support and desire to take the next breath, the next step on the journey. It has been my experience that the gifts returned my way have been so much more than I could have dreamed possible. It is in the eyes, a glimpse into the soul that I have seen the many tiny flickers of hope, the small window of opportunity in which one witnesses that split second when the newly bereaved parent grasps something of what you have said or done that has them believing again in themselves and finding a renewed strength, if but for the moment. I know for sure that my son continues to guide me on my journey; I just need to be always open for the message.



I have been led into the lives of so many who are hungering for an ear to listen, allowing them to talk freely about their loved child without judgment, arms to enfold them when they need the closeness of another who knows the pain and a heart to hold them close and steady their steps until the time they feel stronger.... A time when they themselves may even find the strength to help another. I dare not think of where I might have been had it not been for the support of my Compassionate Friends ... They keep me strong and give me much love, the very thing on which life is dependant. I just wish that all could know the same depth of love at sometime in their lives.

Thank you does not seem adequate but I say a deep thanks to you all. May you find the deep peace and joy that comes from our companionship one with another.

MIKE'S JOURNEY TO THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

On May 14th, 2007 we lost our only son, Michael, in a horrific car accident. The day before, was Sunday May 13th, which was Mother's Day. Charlie and I rode our motorcycles to my Mom's house to celebrate Mother's Day with her and Charlie's mom, who was also there. Our whole family showed up at one point or another, which is how it always worked at my Mom's house. She always put out a buffet style meal and everyone ate whenever they got there. Mike showed up about an hour after we got there. He also rode his motorcycle to his grandmother's house. We were standing in my Mom's kitchen, and Mike walked in and handed me a pink azalea blossom and said "Happy Mother's Day, Mom!!!" I took the flower and looked at it and said, "Hey, what's this? You just stole this off of Mom-Mom's bush outside!!!" Mike said, "Well, I'm on the bike and couldn't carry anything, so that's your gift." We all laughed about it and continued to celebrate with our family. About 5pm Charlie and I and Mike left my Mom's house and went to our house which is about 10 minutes away. The day before, Charlie and I had just tilled our yard and planted all new grass seed. When Mike came in, he went right to the back yard so he could water the new grass seed. Mike didn't live with us. He had his own house about 15 minutes away from us, but he always ate dinner with us because he was always re-modelling his house and was currently working on the kitchen. He stayed at our house for about an hour, then said he had to go because he had some work he needed to catch up on for Monday. Michael was a real estate title searcher and did a lot of work from home. Sometime on Sunday night, Mike left his house to drive to his boss's house to drop off some documents that they needed for Monday morning. We are positive that he was planning on returning right away, because the day after the accident, when we went to his house, his computer was turned on and his email was opened up, all his lights were on in the house, he had laundry in the washer and dryer and all his windows were open. While he was at his boss's house, Mike called his best friend, Jay's Mom to discuss some problems that Jay was having. They hung up about 12:45am. Mike left his boss's house and while driving home, called one of his other best friends, Mark, at 12:57am. Mark didn't get the call, and Mike never left a message. At 1:00 am, something happened. The only thing we know is that Mike rounded a small curve in the road, went up on the sidewalk and hit a tree. His car burst into flames and the car with him in it, was totally destroyed. On Monday May 14th, 2007, our lives changed forever. Charlie and I feel like on May 13th we were living one life, and on May 14th we started living a totally different life. Everyday we open our eyes and its just one more day without Mike. Every night when we close our eyes to go to sleep, we wonder if tomorrow will be the day that we wake up from this bad dream.

Michael was a wonderful, compassionate, forgiving, caring individual who loved life. He loved nature, the universe and the wonder of it all. We always watched all the science shows on TV and talked extensively about global warming and what's out there, and where did it all come from. He believed that there was something after death, but he wasn't sure what it was. Mike was totally intrigued by space and time. It was common for him to call up Charlie at 3am in the morning and say, "Charlie, look up in the sky to the west and tell me what you think that light is that is moving."



He was always wondering what was happening in the universe. Mike had big plans for travelling also. He went to Europe for 6 weeks the summer after his senior year in high school and loved it. The Great Barrier Reef was number one on his destination list. He always said, "I want to go to The Great Barrier Reef before it isn't there any more." When Mike died, we knew we had to have him cremated. We had talked about things like that, so we knew that's what Mike wanted. Also, his friend, Jay, told us that Mike always said to him, "When I die, don't cry for me. I want to be cremated and make sure you have a big party and set off some fireworks!!!" So, we had Mike cremated and the week after had a huge Celebration of Life for him. It was so amazing!! There were over 250 people there!! People who we didn't even know, who were so touched by Mike and how he lived his life. His friends made speeches about him, and we played his favourite music. Mike was also an accomplished rap artist. He only rapped about positive change. Change in your life, your city, your world and caring about everyone and everything. He was working on his first CD, which was never finished. His friends who were producing the CD, also came to the celebration and gave us music tracks of the songs that Mike had finished. We also played those at the Celebration. One of the producers that Mike was working with actually made a video of one of the tracks for us which we will treasure forever. We also split up some of his ashes for family and friends, and told them to either keep them or scatter them someplace that they know Mike would like.

About 2 months ago, this idea just popped into my head. Why am I not sending Mike's ashes to the Great Barrier Reef? That's where he really wanted to go. And that's when this journey began. I started surfing the internet for some sort of contact with people who have lost a loved one. That's when I came across The Compassionate Friends website. I contacted the United States Chapter to see if they could put me in contact with someone from the chapter in Australia. All these people who have made this journey possible have been the most caring, compassionate, helpful people we have ever come in contact with. It took about 4 or 5 different people, but we finally heard from Ruth who is actually going to be the one who is going to make this happen. We will be eternally grateful to Ruth and her family and to The Compassionate Friends for all their help. We got all the documents together, along with some of Mike's ashes to send to Ruth. Attached is the letter we sent to Ruth and also some pictures of Mike that we sent along.

It's September 26th and Mike's continuing journey to The Great Barrier Reef is in its next phase. I mailed his ashes off to Australia today. Now we are just waiting to hear from Ruth to make sure that she receives them.

Hooray!! It's October 9th 2007 and Ruth just emailed me to let me know that Mike's ashes have arrived!! She said she read Mike's journal entry that I sent her and she was in tears. Ruth is going to get the charter boat together and her friends and will let me know when everything is in place. Thank god.....something else positive to look forward to. When I got Ruth's email I was so excited, I immediately called Charlie to let him know. But then the whole rest of the day, I was extremely depressed. I'm not sure why. Someone told me once that I need to stop using that word and every time I even think about the word "why" I should replace it with something else. I try to do that but sometimes it just doesn't work.

It's Friday November 9th and Ruth just emailed me to let me know that December 2nd, they will be scattering Michael's ashes at The Great Barrier Reef. Thank God we have something to look forward to other than Thanksgiving and Christmas decorations!!!

I can see that this is going to be one of the most difficult things for me to endure. The decorations and TV commercials have just begun, and already I can't even stand to look at any of it, or listen to any of it. How we will make it through, I have no idea.



Today, November 26th, Ruth emailed me and told me that a television station in Australia will be covering the story of Mike's continuing journey! How exciting! I hope Mike knows that he not only got to go to The Great Barrier Reef, but also got to be on TV!!

December 2nd is only a few days away and Charlie and I are patiently waiting and looking forward to what we hope to be a good day for us. Ruth also emailed me today with words of comfort and hope to get through this "ROTTEN" holiday season.

Sunday December 2, 2007.....I could think of nothing else the whole day. This was the day Mike's ashes are being scattered in Australia. I wondered all day if things went well. I read the whole day...."The Disappearance of the Universe" which is a companion book to "A Course in Miracles" which I have been so diligently trying to comprehend. I think there are answers in that book for me, but I haven't found them yet.

Monday December 3, 2007.....I got to work and opened up my email to find the following letter from Ruth.....I don't think I have to say anything else. The letter speaks for itself. I cried after every sentence and had to keep coming back to it to finish reading it. I hope it moves everyone as much as it has moved me.....

Dearest Jill and Charlie, What a wonderful, uplifting day!!! We have had some pretty rough weather here over the last week so what a joy it was when we woke to a day of sunshine and very flat seas. I think the angels were smiling down. The Bulletin (our local newspaper) was on hand before we left this morning to do a little story. Everyone has been so wonderful and I will email you this story when it goes to print. The staff on board our cat to the reef were all beautiful young men who were so interested in our lives following the deaths of our precious children, something that is not experienced all that often. We showed them photo's of Michael and our skipper suggested that our ceremony would be more personal and private if this was performed from the glass bottomed boat rather than from the cat and the eyes of other passengers. We could not have asked for more privileged treatment. So it was just the eight of us that were accompanied by our young skipper right onto the reef. I hope the video does justice to the beauty and love in the moment. Michael's ashes were gently blown onto the breeze with rose petals and frangipani' and we were in awe at the display that was created on the crystal blue water. With tears and deep humility, we watched for a long time as the gentle waves carried the precious sight out into the depths of reef. We were all so very moved when our young skipper asked also to say a few words and you will hear this on the tape. He overwhelmed us with his empathy. Sometimes I think we underestimate our beautiful youth and I believe these young men were placed amongst us especially today. We had a guided tour over many parts of the area and saw firsthand the beauty that is this wonder of this world heritage area. We were treated with so much respect and the day held so much honour to your precious son. We will endeavour to get the footage ready as soon as we can. I would love for it to be before Christmas. The television station will be editing the footage taken by our friend on Monday morning (3rd December) so we will also get a copy of this as well.

The crew on board hope that you will be able to make it to Townsville some time as they would love to accompany you to this special site. They have given us a map of the area with the longitude and latitude so you would be able to go right to the area. As I have already said, I was so amazed at the crews determination to ensure Michael was honoured in a way that befits the man you know him to be. Through his journaling we feel we know him just a little more.

Thank you so much for the privilege, you have allowed us into your personal space, there is no greater honour for you have given your most loved into the hands of strangers who have become your friends in the distance. We know your pain. We will hold your hands and hearts in ours for all time. Will write again tomorrow night.

Yours in love & compassion, Ruth