



Tom's legacy: Turning heart-breaking loss into transformative change

One mum's decade-long journey to stop child pedestrian deaths highlights cost of traumatic grief for thousands of Australian families; [new report](#) examines support services available



Hi-res images, vision, b-roll available [here](#)

It was January 6, 2014, when the lives of Michelle McLaughlin and her family were irreversibly changed. While on holiday, four-year-old Tom suddenly stepped away from his family onto the road and into the path of an oncoming car. Tragically, Tom died before help arrived.

The grief left in the wake of Tom's traumatic death is still felt by the family a decade later, with the hidden cost echoing far beyond the initial impact. Michelle and her husband David used their grief as a powerful force for change, undertaking a decade-long push to make Aussie roads safer for child pedestrians through the [Little Blue Dinosaur Foundation](#) (LBDF).

Since 2014, LBDF has been campaigning for effective road safety initiatives and community education, including installation of colourful LBDF safety signage around playgrounds and busy roads. Currently, 76 Australian Local Government Areas have installed LBDF signage.

While the not-for-profit has raised significant awareness, Michelle warns more must be done to save Australia's children from violent death on our roads.

In Australia, road trauma remains the leading cause of death for children between 1-14¹, with 29% of deaths occurring when children are pedestrians². On average, one child dies in a crash on our roads every week³.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). Australia's children. Cat. no. CWS 69. Canberra: AIHW

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021). Deaths in Australia. Cat. no. PHE 229. Canberra: AIHW

³ [Australian Road Deaths Database: Fatalities, Current October 2024](#)



“Our studies show educational interventions like LBDF safety signage increase awareness of child pedestrian safety in the community. Yet those with the ability to make a difference at a policy level are not acting fast enough to prevent this ongoing tragedy,” says Michelle.

“Meanwhile, children continue to die. In the ten years since our Tom passed, 131 children aged 0-16 have died in a pedestrian road trauma incident, 28 of them in the last 12 months.”

Michelle also believes more must be done to support families who experience traumatic bereavement. A nurse at the time of Tom’s passing, Michelle assisted many families going through similar hardships. Her experience facilitated recognition of the ongoing impacts complicated grief had on her family.

“We continue to navigate the mental and physical costs. My husband’s business has been significantly impacted and my inability to process high stress meant I couldn’t continue my job as a nurse. The damage of our grief has extended to physical concerns, likely contributing to life-altering health issues. Financial impacts are also significant including long-term counselling costs and medical bills.”

Dr Fiona Martin is an Educational and Developmental Psychologist from Psychological Solutions with over 20 years of clinical and research experience. She says complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder is a mental health condition, characterised by a prolonging of the grief process beyond the common response, when distressing symptoms of grief continue for at least 12 months. This includes intense longing for the deceased person and significant preoccupation with thoughts of them.

People whose loved one died suddenly or under traumatic circumstances are at greater risk of developing prolonged grief, particularly when the deceased is a child of a young age.

“Prolonged grief can affect your physical health, and it can affect your relationships, and daily responsibilities,” says Dr Martin. “It is different from anxiety and depression. Prolonged grief is associated with higher risk for suicidal ideation and behaviours, even when controlling for depression and PTSD. Other associated conditions include sleep disturbance, alcohol and substance abuse, and major depressive disorder.”

A new report, [*Navigating Grief: A Study of Support Services for Families Affected by Road Trauma*](#) examines effective grief support services for Australian families who lose a child to road trauma. The report shows challenges and limitations impacting delivery of services including resource constraints, geographic disparities, lack of cultural sensitivity, an absence of specialised programs, no technological integration for services, stigma, limited community awareness of long-term grief and programs that are not flexible to a variety of needs.

Key findings from the report emphasise the importance of providing holistic, long-term support that is culturally sensitive and multi-faceted, combining professional counselling, peer support,



community-based interventions and practical assistance. Increased public awareness of the emotional and long-term impacts of traumatic grief is also crucial.

“There is a need for comprehensive support that is accessible and responsive to diverse and evolving requirements,” says Dr Martin. “Bereaved families often display extraordinary resilience, but this does not diminish the need for professional support and understanding as they navigate the complexities of grief.”

“Knowing the unique circumstances faced by families who have lost a child to road trauma, specialised support programs should be investigated,” adds Michelle. “Collaboration is needed between grief support organisations and road safety initiatives to create a unified approach to preventing child pedestrian deaths and supporting grieving families.”

The report recommends that alongside comprehensive and unified support, that immediate, practical assistance for families such as care support packages can alleviate some of the emotional and financial burden placed on grieving families and reduce feelings of social isolation.

Michelle’s first-hand experience struggling to navigate her way through grief, particularly in the first year after Tom’s death, inspired her to develop plans for the LBDF Road Trauma Grief Support Packages for families suffering the tragedy of losing a child to road trauma. The packages will contain vouchers for services like childcare, cleaning and cooking. Michelle is seeking assistance for delivery of these packages through community donors and partnerships with service providers.

For more information on The Little Blue Dinosaur Foundation or to make a tax-deductible donation, please visit [here](#).

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For media enquiries and to arrange an interview, please contact Blue Planet Public Relations:

Alana Free – Alana.Free@blueplanet.pr.com.au or 0408 225 816
Sophie Blue – Sophie.Blue@blueplanetpr.com.au or 0416 006 821