

# Keeping Stephen's memory alive

Mom's healing journey takes her to Australia and full circle

by Betty Evans



Stephen saved enough money to spend a year travelling and working in Australia.

## Stephen was born

John Stephen Lawrence Evans December 28, 1983. He was Magoo to me, Steve or Easy to others. I would spend hours sitting with him, staring and talking to this most precious gift. Although he didn't get the nickname "Easy" until he was nine, his calm, confident, cheerful nature presented itself early. An only child, Stephen was adored by grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Although his father and I ended our marriage in 1986 the strong bond that had been formed in the first three years of his life remains intact to this day.

Stephen and I moved to Calgary in November 1987. That Christmas, just three days before his fourth birthday, all he wanted was an O'Henry Chocolate Bar! After he found that in his stocking he was happy and it took the rest of the day to coax him into opening the rest of his gifts! He formed a truly special bond with his grandma, who sometimes felt he should spend the day with her rather than at the child care centre. Stephen quickly made friends with the other kids on our block. Mike became his best friend in Grade 4 and Mike's family became Stephen's home away from home. He was given the nickname "Easy" because he was just that, "Easy" to have around. His teachers would talk

about his inner confidence and quiet self-assured manner. Over time our house became known as "Street Hockey Central". Our coat closet stored the goalie pads and hockey sticks. There was nothing better than listening to a blow by blow account of the game afterward - his exuberance was overflowing and he was in his glory having scored a goal or made an assist.

Stephen graduated from Mount Royal College in 2007 with a degree in International Business and Supply Management. Always very shrewd, but not stingy, with his money, he had saved enough to take a year and travel to Australia with a work visa.

Stephen left Calgary on Thanksgiving weekend 2007 and flew to Sydney, Australia. On the plane he sat beside a fellow who just happened to have worked with his cousin Clayton. They struck up a friendship and spent the first three months together. In February I received a phone call - he was tired of the partying, bored with his job (and perhaps a little homesick). After some discussion, he decided he would do what he had gone to do in the first place - learn how to surf. By April 2008 he had earned certificates in surf and swim rescue. And he was surfing!

In May Stephen decided it was time to move on. He travelled up the east coast of

Australia and down into the outback, and in July landed a job at a cattle station 500 km north of Alice Springs - the second thing he wanted to do in Australia. As there was no wireless cell phone access, phone calls were few, but from his voice, so tired he could hardly talk from long hours fixing cattle fences, I knew he was happy and proud of what he was doing. He talked about "Lindsay" an older fellow who was his mentor on the cattle station. The last phone call came at the end of August. He told me he wasn't ready to come home and wanted to apply for an extension to his work visa. My response was OK - but I needed a hug - could I come to Australia for Christmas? The answer was a resounding yes! We had a plan.

The doorbell rang around 9:30 pm Saturday, September 6, 2008. I was in bed. Looking out my bedroom window I saw a police car on the street and two police officers at the door. Was I the mother of John Stephen Lawrence Evans? Yes. Did I know where he was? Yes, he was working on a cattle station in the Australian Outback. "Mrs. Evans, I am sorry to tell you your son has been killed in a motor vehicle accident." That is how my normal ended.

Friends and family came to support me and deal with the authorities. One of Stephen's friends brought his ashes home, and we held a celebration of his life on September 18.

Grief set in - feeling lost while trying to put on a "brave face", and underneath, despair I never knew could exist. When Stephen's belongings arrived home, the two most precious items were his journal and his camera. The first year I clung to visits from Stephen's friends, and to the idea of going to Australia after the first anniversary of his death and re-tracing his steps as he had written in his journal. Lindsay, Stephen's mentor on the cattle station, came in July 2009. We heard for the first time about the accident and what life was like working on that particular cattle station. Lindsay had come to love Stephen and felt he had also lost a son.

On September 10, 2009, I flew to Australia with friends. Our travels took us to the places and the people he had met along the way. Going to the outback was the hardest. I realized I couldn't go to the

cattle station – I just wasn't ready, so we stayed at a roadhouse an hour's drive away. We were only 10 minutes from a sacred aboriginal site called "Devil's Marbles" that Stephen talked about and found to be very peaceful. I too felt the peace and we identified a place I now call "Stephen's Tree" where we left some natural artifacts from Alberta. The owners of the cattle station came to the roadhouse for dinner – the meeting was an incredibly emotional one with lots of unspoken words, underneath the bravado of talking about life in the outback. It was easy to see from the father's attitude he was not one who wanted to accept responsibility for his actions and his wife and son were living a strained life.

Coming home was difficult – having lived a year just to make that journey, the emptiness set in and I was faced with the reality of the rest of my life without Stephen. In June 2010 the police investigation and coroner's report was released. The passenger's side wheel fell off the vehicle Stephen had been driving, causing the vehicle to roll over on top of him. Stephen suffered a complete rupture of the aorta and died shortly thereafter. The investigation determined the vehicle had been inadequately maintained – in particular the washers and nuts which held the left front wheel on the axle were unserviceable. There was a risk that the wheel would fall off when in motion. This was unknown to the owners of the cattle station.

One morning in September 2011, I woke up and realized I had fallen into a hole of self-pity. Alcohol had become the panacea for my pain. I looked at a poster I had put on my bedroom wall with a picture of Stephen and read:

### Honoring You

weeping and aching,  
i longed to honor your passing.  
i longed to honor your life.  
searching everywhere,  
i found only one answer.  
honor myself.  
become all that i am.  
and carry you inside that beauty.

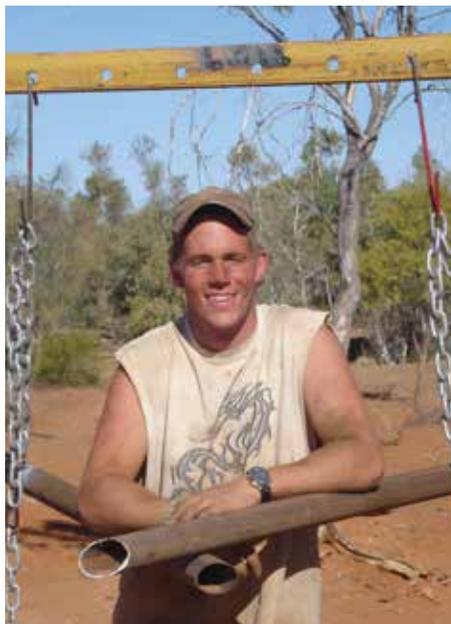
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I couldn't wait any longer to know if Northern Territory Worksafe were going to lay charges or if I was going to get an opportunity to write an impact statement – I needed to create a new normal for myself and in so doing keep Stephen's memory

alive. I reached out for help and began the journey of healing. Two weeks later I received an email saying charges were going to be laid and I would be advised about court proceedings. The middle of

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November I was advised the cattle station owners were going to plead guilty to negligence and the court hearing would be on November 30, 2011 in Alice Springs. After convincing family and friends that I needed to go and that I was strong enough to go, I wrote my impact statement and prepared to travel. I had made the decision not to call it a "victim" impact statement because I no longer wanted to think of myself as a victim but a survivor. My statement to the



Stephen at work in the Australian Outback.

judge included these lines from Stephen's journal, dated August 17, 2007:

"The last two days have been unbelievable. I've grown up so much. After work on Wednesday I had a heart to heart with myself and admitted that I'm not giving it my all and that I can work harder. So I decided that I'd break the day into quarters and my goal was to stay mentally awake and energetic for each quarter. On Thursday I noticed a great difference in myself and I was proud at the end of the day with the work

that I had completed."

The question I asked was "Did the owners of the cattle station have heart to heart conversations with themselves - ensuring their employees were safe?"

The cattle station owners were fined. I spoke briefly with the son after the hearing. I could feel his sadness and genuine remorse – unfortunately his father made it difficult for him to truly express his feelings and I knew he was suffering. I too was challenged – wanting to be compassionate and forgiving and still feeling the anger.

After the court hearing I drove the 500 km to Devil's Marbles to re-visit "Stephen's Tree". To just be able to sit and breathe on this sacred and spiritual ground, knowing that this was what Stephen felt too, was the gift I brought back home with me and the gift I needed to continue moving forward.

In April, 2013 on a lunch break I saw a Steps for Life display and felt a rush of emotion. I told the representative my story and asked if I could walk and I did. In September 2013 I attended the Family Forum in Edmonton. Like many others, I experienced the healing from listening and sharing with others who know your pain and suffering, and who also want to heal and become "the best that they can be". Threads of Life has offered me a purpose which I hope can be of support to others and to assist in creating a culture change with regard to workplace safety.

September 2014 was the sixth anniversary of Stephen's death and I realized I had come full circle to find a new normal after three years of feeling lost and three years of learning acceptance and learning how to live without Stephen's physical presence. Stephen's memory is alive and well in me and his family and friends. Living without "Easy" hasn't been easy - there are and will always be "those days" of just plain sadness and "what if's". For the most part however, my new normal is living one day at a time with Stephen in my heart – knowing he is always with me and being so very grateful he has shown me that on so many occasions.