

Caravan park killer jailed

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

A man who fatally stabbed a fellow caravan park resident in a "violent, drug and alcohol-induced tragedy" in Dandenong South has been jailed.

The 27-year-old pleaded guilty at the Victorian Supreme Court to the manslaughter of Chris Lyons and to recklessly causing injury to the victim's son Tyson at Shawlands Caravan Park on 4 September 2021 - the eve of Father's Day.

The accused has not been named due to having a pending trial in the County Court.

In sentencing on 5 May, Justice Lex Lasry stated that the intoxicated man stabbed Mr Lyons, 40, three times in the neck and left torso with a knife in the man's own caravan.

There were a further eight incisions to Mr Lyons' face, head and neck.

In the leadup, Mr Lyons had been slapping his son. The accused tried to intervene, picking up a knife and stabbing the victim, Justice Lasry stated.

"The stabbing occurred in a very small space, conducive to increasing the atmosphere and stress.

"It was brief but it was ferocious.

"It is true that it was not a premeditated attack.

"It was a thought process consistent with a man with an IQ of 59 who is in his own home and feels threatened."

The accused man also inflicted a significant



Police at the main entrance to Shawlands Caravan Park on 4 September 2021. 249725

Picture: GARY SISSONS

stab wound through the "full depth" of the son's arm as the son tried to intervene.

Mr Lyons staggered out of the caravan with a hammer in his hand and died at the scene.

When police arrived, an "aggressive" accused threatened them and dared them to "shoot me".

He was arrested, sedated and transported to hospital to treat a cut to the top of his head.

"And so ended an extended, violent and futile series of incidents with the culmination being that a life was lost, another person was injured all entirely without reason or logic,"

Justice Lasry said.

"Yet another violent, drug and alcohol-induced tragedy."

Justice Lasry referred to police being called to the caravan over reported drunken fighting half-an-hour early.

Both the accused and Mr Lyons were observedly "intoxicated" and "verbally aggressive" towards the officers.

"There's no fight, there could be a massive fight if I want," Mr Lyons said to police.

After police left, Mr Lyons and his son rounded on a Shawlands resident.

Mr Lyons threatened the resident, swung at him and at times wielded a box-cutter knife.

After the confrontation, Mr Lyons slapped his son six times in the face and they continued the argument in the caravan.

Justice Lasry noted the accused's "lengthy" criminal history spanning 12 appearances was an "unenviable record for one so young". He had been on bail at the time on a robbery charge.

From 14, he had been taking drugs, mainly methamphetamine and alcohol.

During his deprived childhood, he was subjected to violence and "profound trauma". This significantly reduced his moral culpability, the judge found.

The "early negative experiences" was linked to his diagnosed PTSD and major depression with anxious distress.

Still young, the accused had "reasonable" rehabilitation prospects and had shown motivation on previous community corrections orders.

His relatively early guilty plea and remorse were also taken into account.

The man was jailed for up to eight-and-a-half years, including a six-and-a-half year non-parole period. He had served 608 days in pre-sentence remand.

"If you face the prospect of any further sentence for serious offences of violence your life will be effectively ruined for good," the judge said.

ACDC outreach program plugs into mental health

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

An outreach program is knocking on the doors of more than 4000 homes to start the conversation on mental health.

This month, 'people connectors' as part of the catchily-titled ACDC (Assisting Communities through Direct Connection) project are visiting homes in Dandenong and Dandenong North.

The aim is to talk with residents about community mental health and wellbeing, which has taken such a knock during the Covid pandemic and mounting financial and housing pressures.

"We know that Covid-19 has led to people not being able to work, or having reduced hours, and not being able to visit their loved ones," Community Mental Health Australia chief executive Bill Gye says.

"Loneliness and social isolation were also reported as significant factors."

ACDC differs from other outreach programs by "proactively visiting all homes in a suburb to reach people where they are at" rather than waiting for people to present at a service or experience a mental health crisis.

"Unfortunately for many reasons, people do not want to talk about or even think about their mental health.



ACDC people connectors Daniel Kuol and Sarah Empeigne are visiting homes in Dandenong and Dandenong North.

Picture: TIM ALLEN

"People may prefer to tough it out, hide it from others, or avoid the stigma.

"The ACDC Project is going directly to households in Australia to engage them in conversation about these important issues."

The doorknockers will let residents of all cultural and language backgrounds know of free and low-cost services and deliver information packs, including a fridge magnet and brochure.

It will also aim to get feedback on mental health "service gaps".

Identified barriers to access include a lack of affordable or culturally appropriate services, a lack of awareness about services and a lack of effective referral and service coordination.

Mr Gye says the "serious problem" with mental health services is that people only seek support when in crisis.

"So far, the top three reasons why people have not accessed services are: preferring to self-manage their symptoms; being afraid, embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help; and not knowing where to go for help.

"We must be more proactive in connecting and communicating with people about the importance of wellbeing.

"Prevention and early intervention are far more effective than dealing with people in crisis."

The Community Mental Health Australia project is funded by Department of Social Services and supported by Dandenong Community Learning Centre.

DCLC general manager Merina Ashdown said the centre was excited to "make a difference".

"The ACDC Project will support and empower the community to reach out and access mental health support services in the local area. It will help them to be self-sufficient," she says.

Dandenong 'people connector' David Kuol said there were many challenges facing residents.

"Maybe the reason for high levels of homelessness is that there is not enough social and affordable housing in Dandenong."

Since 2021, ACDC has knocked on more than 37,500 doors in 21 communities, with more than 6600 conversations on wellbeing and mental health.

So far across Australia, the ACDC project survey revealed one in four felt Covid-19 was a "large problem" for respondents. About equal numbers reported financial stress.

One in five stated climate change and housing as large problems.

The ACDC project report will use information collected across Australia to inform discussion about funding for community mental health services and how they are delivered.

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