



RICK AND EMILY PARISH



The death of their four-year-old son Elliot has put Rick and Emily Parish at the head of an army of people committed to funding research into a cure for childhood cancer.

**STORY: NICOLE COX PHOTOGRAPHY: KARIN CALVERT**

**THE BRIGHT SMILE OF THE LITTLE BOY BEAMS FROM A CANVAS ON THE** kitchen wall – a nasogastric tube the only tell-tale sign of his fragile health. Four tiny pairs of shoes that once carried him on many adventures sit on top of the sideboard.

And in the front yard, his pirate flag – a symbol of his childhood obsession – flaps defiantly in the afternoon breeze from his cubbyhouse.

Emily Parish sinks back in her armchair, tears welling in her eyes as she stares blankly out of the window of her East Fremantle home.

Once filled with the laughter of her youngest son, the home has now become a shrine to his memory. They speak his name with love; they laugh at the things he used to do, his traits, his ways, his “kooky” habits.

It's been six months since four-year-old Elliot Parish was ripped from his family's embrace.

February 10, 2011.

Snuggled in his bed with his mother and his father, Rick, little Elliot died, his tiny body ravaged with cancer. He had endured more pain than a young child should in his 16-month battle against advanced brain and spinal tumours.

But, despite the tragedy, this is the little Perth boy who is galvanising the

community, spurring friends and strangers alike to join a civilian army to raise money to find a cure for childhood cancer.

Local mums and dads are arranging dinners, fashion parades and quiz nights. Their children are shaking tins for the cause. Last year, one mother of a child with cancer single-handedly raised \$75,000.

Through their charity, The Telethon Adventurers, Elliot's army has climbed dangerous mountains in France and Italy, members have travelled 2000km across the US on Harley-Davidsons and in Ford Mustangs and they have tackled 1000km bicycle rides from Esperance to Perth.

More than 130 runners donned pirate gear at last weekend's City to Surf to raise money for the cause.

They are doing it for Elliot, and for other children like him.

“The night Elliot died, Rick and I stood in his room,” Emily says. “We said to each other, ‘We can't not do this. We can't have our kids dying’.

“For us, it's almost like a moral responsibility. If your child is killed by someone, then you would have a vendetta against your child's killer. For us, that is childhood cancer.

“The foreverness of losing a child ... I don't know how you ever come to terms with that. You know, you look at these photos and it's hard to >>



ELLIOT PARISH WAS A DYNAMO BABY, WHO MADE HIS PARENTS AND SIBLINGS LAUGH EVERY DAY.

ELLIOT AROUND THE TIME THE TUMOUR WAS FOUND.

believe he's not here. But this charity keeps his name being said. He's held every day – people hold him in their hearts.

"It's all quite empowering."

In Australia, brain tumours are the second most common cancer affecting children, with less than half surviving high-risk medulloblastoma like Elliot's.

The survival rate for children whose tumours are completely removed on initial surgery is about 80 per cent, compared with 60 per cent five years ago.

But for those like Elliot, where doctors can only partially remove the mass, the survival rate is about 30 per cent and the fight is much more arduous with radiation and chemotherapy and a greater risk of brain damage.

It was May 2009 when Elliot fell ill.

His parents led him through the revolving door of pediatric appointments, concerned about regular bouts of vomiting, poor balance and clumsiness.

"We thought we had it sussed," Emily says.

"Elliot would vomit for three or four nights in a row. The vomiting would stop and then two days later it would start again. We were treating him for a stomach problem.

"Then suddenly, he went off his food and he was starting to get wobbly on his feet. We would say, 'Oh, you've got your wobbly boots on today', but in hindsight that was the cerebral pressure affecting his balance.

"The day that we actually went to the hospital, he was sitting at the table and I had spaghetti with butter, Freddo frogs, ice cream, Twisties, watermelon – anything that I knew he remotely liked – laid out in front of him. He didn't eat a thing.

"I rang my girlfriend and said, 'You know, there's something up with Elliot, something drastically wrong when he doesn't eat'. I mean, this was the kid who would get the butter tub out of the fridge and would sit under the dining table eating it. He just loved to eat. He loved food."

It was Friday, October 2, 2009, when Emily rushed Elliot to Princess Margaret Hospital.

He was projectile-vomiting and listless. Within hours, every parent's worst nightmare became the Parish family's reality. A CT scan had confirmed that Elliot had a brain tumour – 4cm in diameter – at the base of his brain.

Doctors told the family that the prognosis would be good if the tumour was localised. They could operate and remove the complete mass.

But for Elliot, at the tender age of two, the news could not have been worse. His cancer was advanced and not just limited to his brain.

"The thing about Elliot's cancer was that it had spread from his brain down into his spine," Emily says. "The tumours on his spine were like a stocking – a bit there and a bit there – but inoperable."

Doctors immediately inserted a drain to remove fluid from the base of Elliot's brain – 20ml every hour for three days until he underwent brain surgery, during which most of the tumour was removed.

"We were told he had a 30 per cent chance of survival but we thought 30 per cent was better



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than no per cent so we went for it," Rick Parish says. "For a lot of kids, doctors say, Take them home – there is nothing we can do'. But we were prepared to run with the little chance we were given."

The timing was uncanny. Just a week earlier, Emily had been part of a team of volunteers who had taken cancer-stricken children for joyrides in sports cars around Perth.

Never for a moment did she think that her young family would be touched by this insidious disease.

"We are such a normal family that to have something like this happen is confronting. This made us the family that people wish they weren't, the family they're glad they're not," Emily says.

In desperation, the family sought specialist advice from renowned Sydney neurosurgeon Charlie Teo – who had treated Jane McGrath, the wife of cricketer Glenn McGrath, and Sydney radio shock jock Stan Zemanek – about subjecting their little boy to radiation and chemotherapy.

But the advice was clear. Without it, there was little hope.

Elliot underwent three bouts of chemotherapy, three of mega therapy (a more toxic form of chemotherapy) and 30 sessions of radiation treatment.

"That in itself was horrific, absolutely horrific," Emily says. "As a mother, it's not something you want to have to see your child go through.

"He had to have a catheter in during mega therapy because his urine was too toxic. We had to bathe him four times a day with oatmeal bath because his sweat was too toxic.

"We had to use gloves, we had to gown up – and we were putting this medicine into the biggest vein above his heart."

In September last year, before Rick embarked on an expedition to climb Mont Blanc in France, Elliot received clear scans. The family rejoiced believing he had overcome the odds.

But two months later his parents received the call they had long dreaded. The cancer was back with a vengeance. Their baby boy had just months to live.

As Elliot mounted his fight, the family led a massive fundraising drive that provided more than \$920,000 for cancer research, including financing the purchase of a 3D molecular imaging machine for Princess Margaret Hospital's oncology ward.

The machine, named after Elliot, is the first in the southern hemisphere and can track and test laboratory-grown tumours to determine the most effective treatments for patients.

"We would go to fundraisers when Elliot was sick and I would come home and jump into bed with him and whisper in his ear and tell him all about it," Emily says.

"At one quiz night, there were 500 people there and we couldn't get out of the door, there were so many people there wishing us love, wishing Elliot the best, praying for him.

"There was so much positive energy heading into that little dude that it was just incredible. There is no way he would not have known what everyone was doing for him.

"It would just lift our spirits. It would fill us up with hope and love and prayer and energy. It was so great. Who knows what Elliot got, but what he got was two parents re-energised and so much love his way."

On February 5, with Elliot's condition rapidly deteriorating, the family turned to Facebook to address their growing band of supporters.

"This morning he has gone on to a morphine pump. He only has days. Could you light a candle for him? Ask everyone you know to join in. Send him freedom, light, love, peace and no more pain. Cancer Warrior Elliot will be free of this hideous disease soon."

Five days later, Elliot's brief journey was complete.

"Our baby has gone," Rick Parish wrote on Facebook. "Snuggled in bed with mummy and daddy, he took his last breath. His pain has gone and he is free."

That night, they took their other sons, Harrison, 7, and Hudson, 5, into the bedroom to say goodbye to their little brother, to hold his hand and to give him a kiss. >>

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Losing Elliot has steeled the whole family's resolve to find a cure for childhood cancer.

And they have rallied the troops – individuals from all walks of life who have joined the movement – a band now known as Elliot's Army.

"As Elliot's mum and dad, this comes at a cost, but that was always written in his journey," says Emily Parish.

"There's no feeling of 'I have to do this', it's we want to do it. And there are really dark days. Some days it's just too hard.

"But the beauty about all this fundraising is that if it is too hard – and it's rare that we can't actually do something we've committed to – we live in this space where the community steps in.

"As this charity grows, especially initially, there are so many people who know about Elliot, so when they meet us or when they see us, there is a whole conversation that doesn't have to be had.

"Like when someone asks you, 'How many children do you have?' – that's something that just stops you. And I know that it stops other parents who have lost children, too.

"You know, I had three babies but I only have two now.

"I'm really starting to miss physically holding Elliot. He was kind of kooky. He brought something out in me that I don't have in my life anymore because each person brings something different out in you.

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"We will never know what Elliot knew, if he knew how much everyone was striving for him.

"He was a four-year-old boy who had brain surgery and aggressive treatment and now there's this machine in a hospital with his name on it that will hopefully save lives in the future because of him."

It is that same drive that prompted Rick Parish, a former operative in the elite Special Air Service Regiment, to form The Telethon Adventurers to stage expeditions across the world to raise money.

In July, Rick, a self-confessed adrenalin junkie,

led a bittersweet expedition to the 4810m summit of Mont Blanc for Elliot. He wore Elliot's favourite T-shirt wrapped around his neck so he could feel closer to his son.

"I lost it a couple of times on the mountain because I remembered back to the same time last year when we climbed Mont Blanc. I was in the same place and Elliot was clear (of cancer). This year I was there and my son was a memory. He had died," Rick says.

"Part of the success of The Adventurers, particularly with the expeditions, is that people get to do some fun stuff. People are doing things on their bucket list, but they're doing it for a good cause and raising money.

"This is about doing something that creates a bit of pain, so you can relate to what you're feeling on the mountain and realise that it's nothing to what the kids going through cancer treatment are feeling.

"Many of these people I didn't know before Elliot's illness. They all came together when they heard about what I was doing with The Adventurers last year.

"It's like a brotherhood. I mean, none of these guys have to do this. They've all got better things to do with their lives.

"But the one thing that every single person says is 'I feel like I have to be here' or 'I have to do this'. It's about Elliot."

This year, The Adventurers are focused on rais-



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ing \$2 million towards vital equipment, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research drug studies and fellowships for childhood cancer research. So far the tally is at \$700,000.

The Elliot Parish Fellowship in Cancer Research will fund \$300,000 a year over the next five years for a research officer and a research assistant to work on finding the cause of medulloblastoma.

"One of the comments I made to the counsellor on (PMH oncology) ward 3B before Elliot died was that one of my greatest fears was that Elliot's short life would be forgotten," Rick says.

"You never imagine that you'd ever be in this situation. The last thing you think about is having a child with an injury or an illness that is going to kill them.

"I was always sceptical about funding for research but, I tell you, after losing a child to cancer the only way we are ever going to figure out why or how we'll solve it is through research.

"That's what we want to drive forward in Elliot's memory - we want to find out why our kids are dying from a disease that in 2011 we know little about.

"Someone said recently that Elliot was put on this earth for a greater purpose and I believe that. Given all the support that we've had and what we've started, we are going to find out why kids are dying from cancer. We have to."

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ELLIOT ON HIS MAKE-A-WISH ADVENTURE WITH HIS PARENTS AND BROTHERS HUDSON, LEFT, AND HARRISON.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROSS SWANBOROUGH

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