



Memorial of Mitch

Mitch Gillam would have turned 22 this month, but his life was cut short after a scooter accident in Bali 18 months ago. Now his parents have formed a unique and powerful bond with the woman who pulled his body from a drain.

STORY: NICOLE COX PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD HATHERLY

The sign outside the Balinese home of Istri Adnyami reads, "Welcome for Gillam's family and Mitch's friends". Istri is bonded to the Gillam family in a sad and poignant way. The matriarch cared and prayed for 20-year-old Mitch Gillam after pulling his lifeless body from a rice-paddy waterway at the back doorstep of her Kerobokan home 18 months ago. He and a mate had come off their scooter on a flooded road.

Today, Mitch's parents, Sue and Ken, have travelled from Perth to sit on the very step where Istri plucked their only son from the

drain. The two families do not speak the same language. No words are exchanged as they meet, only tears, as the mothers embrace like old friends, finding comfort in each other as they mourn together.

Later the Gillams sit, heads bowed, hands clasped, and their eyes full of tears. In front of them is a household shrine to their son's memory. This is the treasured sanctuary where Mitch's family and friends find solace.

Here, the Halls Head couple reflect on the gravity of their loss and pay thanks for the new-found friendships and love extended by total strangers. It is helping them heal.

There's a wall full of happy snaps of Mitch, a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky soul and a promising sportsman with a penchant for footy. There are memories of previous trips to Bali, including the last photo taken of him during the fateful holiday he shared with mates.

An Australian flag adorns the wall, there's a visitors' book where his nearest and dearest scribe messages and his favourite tippie, a Vodka Cruiser, that his mum brings each visit.

In keeping with the local family's traditional Hindu faith, they place woven baskets filled with rice, flowers and incense as offerings at Mitch's memorial to give thanks for their »

es



Ken and Sue Gillam at the drain where their son's body was found.



Mitch Gillam



The Gillams at a shrine for their son at Istri Adnyani's Kerobokan home.

lives and hope that the Hindu gods will bestow prosperity and good health on them.

To many, Sue Gillam might seem the unluckiest woman in the world, losing her pride and joy. But she doesn't see it that way. She feels "lucky".

Ken Gillam is a burly bloke, a knock-about, come-as-you-are type who doesn't mince words. But this has been a trial that continually reduces him to tears. His wife's first meeting with Istri in March last year was a union that will be forever etched in his mind.

"It was one of the most emotional times in my life," Ken says. "Two mums, from two different countries. They can't communicate in the same language, yet they understand the loss of our son and they share that together and grieve that together."

"It's remarkable to think that these people are honoured that they've been chosen to look after Mitch. They didn't know Mitch and they are strangers to us, yet they've taken us into their home and have welcomed us with open arms."

"Every time you come here, it gets to you, but within 10 minutes I'm at peace. We are so lucky to have this space to come, to cry, to celebrate Mitch and to just feel close to him."

Mitch's void is palpable. The visitors' book at his memorial is packed with heart-rending entries from family, young mates still questioning his untimely death, and strangers offering respects.

"Hey mate," Ken writes in April 2012. "Nothing changes. Miss you every day. Luv you, Dad."

Mitch's presence and youthful energy is missed, his name is spoken with love and laughter. And now his memory is living on through generous community projects that are giving joy and hope to some of Bali's poorest families. But it has come at a cost.

Five days into a 10-day holiday, which included a surf trip on Lombok, Mitch was on a high, enjoying the break from his busy job as an apprentice electrician in Kalgoorlie. Tragedy struck as he and friend Joel Talbot went for an



Istri Adnyani, right, embraces Sue Gillam at her home.

early morning ride on December 8, 2010. They had spent the night with a friend in Kerobokan and about 6am decided to return to their digs at The Bounty Hotel in Kuta, about 10km away.

It seems the torrential rains of Bali's wet season had flooded a drain and spilled on to Jalan Kerobokan, a busy thoroughfare.

To Mitch and Joel, it may have appeared to have been another puddle, but just centimetres separated the road surface from the fast-flowing, uncovered drain that leads to Bali's iconic rice paddies and the properties of local villagers.

For reasons unknown, both boys fell from their scooter. Mitch plunged into the flooded waterway. Locals found Joel, disorientated, walking along the street and took him to hospital. Joel wrongly thought Mitch had taken him to hospital.

"So they all thought Mitch was fine," Ken says. "For a period there, his mates didn't worry, but by the next night they just knew he would have come back or found them and that's when they started to search."

The group spent a day looking for Mitch. They posted messages on Facebook and scoured local nightclubs and hospitals with his photo. At the same time newspapers in Bali were reporting the discovery of a body. It was not until 36 hours later that they realised the stark reality. Mitch's body had been found by a farmer snagged on the bank of the waterway by twigs and debris. Istri pulled him from the drain.

Initial autopsy results showed that Mitch had drowned after suffering contusions to his head and hip and a fractured jaw.



Donated bras being distributed at a community marketplace at Amlapura on the east coast of Bali.

That night, on the way home from a family birthday celebration, Sue and Ken received the phone call every parent dreads. Just days later, Ken made the awful journey to Bali to retrieve his son's body and visit the scene to meet the woman who had pulled Mitch from the drain.

"We honestly didn't know what sort of reception to expect," Ken says. "But these people were so warm and compassionate and caring towards us and to Mitch. And for them, they believe they were chosen to look after Mitch.

"If Mitch was found 50m upstream or 50m downstream, none of this would have happened because on either side are businesses and this is the only residential property nearby. We wouldn't have this beautiful place to go to or a beautiful family to visit.

"Now, we all go there, sit and have a cry and the next thing we know, the family is back with a tray of cool drinks, water, cakes. It's amazing."

This is what Sue means when she says she is "lucky". She feels her son is being looked after. And she has a place to remember him, to feel close to him.

"As it turns out, it's this absolutely beautiful little Balinese family. The man is a Hindu priest and it's three generations who live there," she says.

"Every time we go there, there's flowers there and they pray for Mitch every day. There's offerings at his little memorial every day.

"There's just people going through there all the time. All of Mitch's friends have taken plaques and banners and photos – and this family has allowed it to happen. They welcome everyone and they're happy to take anyone through their house to spend time with Mitch."

Ken says living with the torment of not knowing exactly how the accident had happened consumed him in the wake of Mitch's death.

"At one stage, I'd lie awake at night thinking, 'I'd love to know just what caused him to fall', but you think, 'What difference does it make now?'. It doesn't. It was an accident," he says.

"The autopsy did say there was no alcohol, no drugs – and that was important to us.

"We don't know how it happened and in reality, it's not going to change anything. It's not going to bring him back."

But despite the tragedy, Mitch's memory is living on, galvanising his family and friends to help the poor on the popular holiday island.

The Gillams have embarked on a building program in the mountainous town of Seraya, about four hours northeast of Kuta, and are also on a mission to help needy Balinese women.

It is backed by a Mandurah-based aid agency,

They didn't know Mitch and they are strangers to us, yet they've taken us into their home

the Carolia Charity, and by their close friend Sue Mills.

"We just hatched this little plan," Sue Gillam says. "Now it's exceeded our greatest expectations. It's getting bigger and bigger."

Since April, 19 homes have been built, funded by Australian sponsors and constructed by Seraya's community members, with some know-how from Australian volunteers.

Later this month, family and friends will return to Bali to celebrate what would have been Mitch's 22nd birthday. They plan to build more homes and in December they will mark the second anniversary of his death by building a community centre in Seraya, with many of his tradie mates signing up to labour on the project.

The centre, to be named Mitch's Balai Banjar (Indonesian for Mitch's Community Centre), will

house a medical post so locals can, for the first time, access basic first aid including bandages and Panadol. It will also double as a learning centre for local children to be taught hospitality as well as English and Indonesian languages to complement their native Balinese.

Family and friends are trying to raise \$100,000 for construction materials.

Seraya's families live in some of the most primitive conditions imaginable, in ramshackle homes built on the side of the mountain among lush green jungle. Built from bamboo with thatched roofs, their shanty homes are meagre and not weatherproof.

It can cost \$700-\$800 for the materials to build a two-room solid concrete-brick house, with an internal concrete floor and tin roof. Australian sponsors are donating money to buy the materials and the families and local community are rallying to provide the manual labour.

The Carolia Charity, a group that works to improve education prospects of Balinese children, has been fundamental in identifying the neediest families for new homes, scouted by local co-ordinator Bambang Prayudi.

"One lady we built a house for wore the same clothes for three days. Another carried concrete bricks up the mountain all day with an abscess on the side of her face. And to think, for a very, very minimal amount of money to us, we are changing the lives of these people," Sue says.

They're also on a mission to help Balinese women with a bra-donation project. Bras cost about \$5 in Bali and the average wage is just \$100 a month.

"During one of my trips, I was lying on the beach and a lady brought down a bag of clothes to the massage ladies and in there were three pairs of bras. There was an all-out war for the three bras. In fact, my massage lady left me to go and fight for a pair," Sue laughs. "There was almost a riot on Kuta Beach!

"It just got me thinking. Every woman (in western countries) has got near-new bras in their drawers that don't quite fit, are the wrong colour or that your husband or partner bought that you were never, ever going to wear.

"After our first donation, we realised these women in Bali were so desperate for our bras. We took over 1800 in February and we all came home with such a great feeling. It was amazing and it's such a simple gesture."

Donations have now been sent from New York, London, Hawaii, New Zealand and the team aims to get 10,000 bras to distribute in October.

"I'm not sure how Mitch would feel about having the bra campaign in his name, but I'm sure he'd see the good of it," Sue laughs.

But for Ken Gillam, these projects are part of the healing process.

"Sue in Seraya is the happiest I've seen her since we lost Mitch," he says. "These projects are really helping us with our loss, but at the same time they are ensuring that our Mitch is remembered."

The Mitch Gillam legacy lives on.

STM