

## A Christmas Wish...

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas”...it’s that time of the year – the kids are busy planning their summer of fun, street cricket and slumber parties, parents are devising battle plans for the holiday period... “I think your great Aunt in Adelaide would love to see you for 4 weeks – you’ve never met her? – not to worry, you’ll have a great time!”

There’s shop til you drop time – which eventually leads to the desperate call, “Just wrap me something Buddy the Elf – choose *your* favourite colour – I’m over it.”

Have you noticed how finding a car park at the shops at Christmas makes you feel like you’ve won Gold Lotto? Or how shattered you get when it’s 20 deep at Macca’s and the guy in front of you wants to pay for an ice cream cone with a credit card, Ah yes, the magic of Christmas!

In all seriousness, Christmas parties, good friends, and family... good will is everywhere.

Christmas gives us some breathing space to think.

Finally, we have more than two seconds to stop and reflect on our lives and the people in it and the world seems a whole lot nicer in general.

For me, as of Friday, the world got a whole lot better.

My sister Sharon and her husband Craig were blessed with the arrival of a beautiful little girl, Lily Rose.

The love of family endures all manner of tribulation and triumph, of calm and storm, and at the end of it all, the love that created the link is the one constant passed on that sees us all through our lifetime.

As I held this miracle of life in my hands, my mind wandered, and I started feeling guilty that I was afforded an opportunity someone I loved and respected so much, had been denied.

Which leads me to the point of this story.

One of my best friends from school, Syliva Degotardi (nee Leahy) had recently passed away, just hours after giving birth to a beautiful baby daughter.

Sylvia would never have the chance to nurse her newborn and smoother her with kisses, never have the opportunity to hold her tiny hands in hers and think wistfully on all the shared days to come.

Syl was only 33, when she died leaving behind a wonderful husband in Michael and 3 gorgeous children Mitchell, James, and of course, baby Bianca.

Syl had suffered from Lupus for a number of years, but never let anything stop her in her quest to build a fantastic family, a successful career, and a network of family and

friends who felt blessed to have such an amazingly brave, vibrant, sincere and spirited person in their lives.

She was born and bred in Toowoomba, and attended St. Saviour's College excelling as a talented all round athlete, scholar, and artist.

Syl played Touch for the Saints Touch Club for four years in the Toowoomba Touch Association before moving to the Sunshine Coast to establish a Hair Salon.

On January 15<sup>th</sup> 2005 some friends have organised a Memorial race day at Toowoomba's Clifford Park in honour of Sylvia, a multi-draw raffle is being organised, with all proceeds going to the establishment of a Trust Fund for her children.

The day will kick off at 2.00 pm; a \$30 ticket will include entry to the races, lunch, and entertainment in a marquee.

Guests are requested to wear something red, as red was Syl's favourite colour.

Family, friends, former school mates, work colleagues, touch and sporting friends or acquaintances of Sylvia's, or anyone who wants to come along will be most welcome.

The objective of the memorial day is to honour Sylvia's life, and share some of those good will feelings we are all full of at this time of year.

If we can raise some funds to make the long road ahead a little less winding for Mick and the kids, then all the better.

Tickets can be purchase by contacting Mary Waters on (mob) 0410132702.

Sylvia's story is one that could happen to any of us, upon reflection it makes you realize how precious our time on earth and with our families can be, how it's all about the journey not the destination, following your heart and making every moment count.

I wrote down some memories I have of Sylvia, hopefully to bring back some good memories for her family, particularly her sister's who were also school mates, and to be read to Syl's children when they get old enough and want to know what sort of person their Mum was at school.

I hope people who read this can grasp the essence of Sylvia's life - about always being yourself, doing your best, following your heart and loving your life and the people in it.

I remember it was a Tuesday morning; I was driving from the Gold Coast, on my way back from another school where I'd been doing my job as a Touch Football development officer.

I was thinking about nothing in particular, when suddenly, the phone rang.

I barely had time to look down at the screen, but recognised it as a Toowoomba number, I answered and quickly recognised the voice on the line, it was my little mate from school at St. Saviour's, Mary Waters.

I'd seen Mary recently, at the Junior State Cup for Touch and we had chatted about all the gang from school, we'd had a great time talking and laughing about school days and some of the experiences we'd all had together.

That day we talked for ages and laughed so much I thought Mary might have wet her pants (as she and her best friend since day one of grade one, Sylvia, and a few others in our 'sporty' group at school had been known to do from time to time)

This day, however, there was not a hint of laughter.

As I waited on the line, there was no mistaking the seriousness and sadness in the voice as she delivered the devastating news about Sylvia.

I nearly drove off the road, the world spun, my mind was racing with thoughts of Syl and then for Mick and the kids and the Leahy family who are such fantastic people.

I thought of her close friends from school, and then what Syl meant to me.

Today, as I write this, it still hardly seems possible.

No word or deed could adequately fathom the despair you all must be feeling, but I hope that when the hurt and numbness dissipates, you will have a lifetime of treasured memories of Syl to sustain and share so that you can live a life that will do justice to her indomitable spirit and irrepressible energy and determination.

My friendship with Syl was forged at St. Saviours College, and although we later lost touch for a while after school, Sylvia's friendship had a lasting impact on me and I treasured the time that I was fortunate enough to share with her.

The first day at St. Saviour's the first person I met was Sylvia Leahy.

I arrived in 11W looking for a spare seat and, Syl, of course, was very kind to let me sit next to her.

I was very nervous and I had the 'stutter rap' going – to my surprise Syl just sat and let me finish my spiel – looking patient and attentive, and importantly, right at me – with poise and understanding (oh, and, spit all over her!)

When I finished my 3 sentences that took 3 minutes to say, she smiled broadly and said "We'll invest in hanky's (to clean up the excess spit from stuttering) but we'll be right Banksy."

From that day we were firm friends.

Syl taught me it was about aiming up and giving it my all, being myself regardless of what others thought.

If people were going to judge, dismiss me, or underestimate me as a person, athlete, or a scholar because of my stutter then they really weren't the sort of people whose opinion you'd care about anyway.

If something negative would happen to either of us she's say with ridiculous optimism, "Banks, it's character building."

Sylvia had a fantastic, quirky and mischievous sense of humour, which she used to great effect on my first day of school at St. Saviour's.

Thanks to Sylvia and the gang, my first day at my new school could have also turned out to be my last!

This was to be the first of many times Sylvia's wicked sense of humour would strike.

Because of that reason, every time I think of Sylvia, I can't help but smile.

Sure she had her share of teen angst, I mean with the green tree tunic, duffle coat, kung fu shoes and the 80's fringe to contend with, who wouldn't have dramas – we thought we were pretty cool though, just ask us.

Syl was so talented at school, and her artistic ability put everyone else in the shade. She could draw or create anything.

Her intelligence was obvious.

I remember once in English we had to present an oral on "Something I feel strongly about"

Everyone else had the palm cards going on, and Syl, who had prepared nothing, calmly waltzed up and burst into an impromptu ten minute speech about "Bratty children" ...she made it up on the spot, and of course, she aced the assessment.

Syl was so smart, she could muck around and enjoy herself in class, but when it came to the crunch she was as sharp as a whip and always produced the goods when she had too...much to our envy.

Syl was an amazing athlete as well – Touch, Netball, Athletics, Cross Country, Softball and good old ball games, go the star relay!

Anything at all, Sylvia could do it well.

Syl also excelled in our PE class....

Orienteering was a prime example, Syl helped find a fool proof way for the whole class to ace the exam (secretly tail Mr Stewart around as he set out the course) and she made 'Phip' (as he called himself) give us a demonstration of Aerobic Dance (complete with his funky yellow see through tracksuit and his own 'boom box') in a Biology class which led to some mysterious puddles under Mary Water's chair!

Synchronised swimming was a joy as well, if only because Syl would drive and we could pile into the Blue Van, and not have to walk to Milne Bay...of course we'd be obliged to get Maccas on the way back to school, great athletes that we were... you

could tell Mr Stewart's words of wisdom about "attaining 2% body fat like himself and Deek" were going over about as well as his fake Canadian accent.

Syl was an extremely outgoing, personable character, and she always had a million jokes or pranks up her sleeve, she'd get this look on her face that would hint at a smile then all of a sudden it would rush over her whole face and light the entire place up – you couldn't stay gloomy for long with her big silly grin staring you down.

The thing though that I most treasure about Syl, and the lesson she taught me best is tolerance, understanding and respect for differences in people.

When my parents split up while I was at school, I was pretty upset and angry with them at the time.

Sylvia was great - she never lectured or preached at me, she listened and offered advice, comfort and support, which I know now, was mature beyond her years. Sylvia gave me this advice in a letter I looked back on just today, from all those years ago.

"They have their reasons Karls, probably good ones, you're not them - you can't judge them, or resent them, they have to be honest and go with their heart or they'll never be happy"....

Wise words from one so young....

She would do anything for her friends and everyone who knew her, whether at school, in sport, or in the years after professionally or personally would attest to her deep concern, care, and sincerity where friendships were concerned.

Those were the days.... it's funny how time marches on and people grow up, out and sometimes apart.

I had spoken to Syl infrequently since we left school, but managed to reconnect with her after bumping into Theresa, the mad woman cut from the same cloth as Syl.

It was amazing, I hadn't spoken to Sylvia, nor seen her for ages, but we just picked up where we had left off, like it was only yesterday we were sitting in class at St. Saviours debating the risk of incurring Miss Coyer's wrath if we ventured down town and got caught in our school uniform on Friday afternoon... You know we always risked it. We knew we could duck out the back way of KFC and Maccas if Rita put a chase on.

Now as adults, we talked about home loans and businesses and careers, and relationships and health issues, and life, and choices, but Syl was still right about one thing, as she'd told me all those years ago, in the end,

"You have to be honest and go with your heart or you'll never be happy"

I reckon Sylvia must have been extremely happy with her life, because she went with her heart always, in the way she loved and cherished her family and friends, and adored her husband and children.

In the way she battled and defied the odds to regain her health and build her family, in the way she chased after goals professional and personal and made them wonderful realities.

This is undoubtedly a really sad time, but Sylvia's wisdom is a signpost for those of us left behind.

Life is too short for regrets and sweating the little stuff.

It is important to work out what is true in your heart, what is important to you and live each day as if your life has just begun.

Sylvia did, she didn't waste time at all, and in her thirty-three years she packed in so much life and love by going with her heart, and by being honest and being true to herself.

I hope when you close your eyes and think of her you see her unforgettable smile and it gives you the courage to go with your heart and drive on in life, even today when I am sure you feel your heart is heavy and breaking.

When you are questioning the good sense of God in calling Syl home to him at a time like this when it is so abundantly clear how loved, cherished and vital she is to everyone.

I am sure, through all this, despite the tragic nature of it all, she will be looking down upon us from her vantage point in heaven, probably thinking some of us need to do something better with our hair, but all the same she will be wanting us to appreciate our lives fully by leading with our hearts as she did.

I can think of no better way to honour her life than that.

At school Syl used to always sign off her letters "Chow Babe"

So Syl, Chow Babe.

Her life example will be forever remembered by those who were privileged enough to know her and cherished by those even more fortunate enough to call her a friend.

She will live in my heart, as she does in yours, always.

My heartfelt sympathy

Karley Banks.