

**DOMESTIC
HOMICIDE**
Special Report

"We're all at the extreme end of domestic violence," says Belinda Valentine (seated with, from left, Ann O'Neill, Kerry Robertson and Sonia Anderson in Melbourne on May 6).

Every week, a woman dies at the hands of someone who once said, 'I love you.' Meet four women who believe the horrific deaths of their loved ones could have been averted

We must
STOP the
VIOLENCE

They have never met before. Their backgrounds are all uniquely different and they've all made the journey to Melbourne from different corners of the country. But the women, who meet up in a St Kilda café on a chilly May morning to talk to WHO, have one terrible thing in common. "We're an exclusive club," says Belinda Valentine, an Adelaide Hills mother of four. But it's not a club anyone would want to join: each of these four women have lost a loved one to a domestic homicide. And each is now driving for change in the hope of saving lives. "The violence can happen in the blink of an eye," says Valentine, whose granddaughter Chloe died while in the negligent care of her mother. "We have to act."

disturbed boyfriend; and Ann O'Neill, whose estranged husband murdered their children and attempted to kill her. "The deaths of my children didn't just happen to me, or my kids," says O'Neill, who lives in Perth. "It happened to the whole of the West Australian community."

Awareness and action within communities is at the heart of addressing the problem, says Gillespie. "For the majority of domestic deaths, people will have known that the woman was at significant risk," she says. "What we need to focus on is the fact the deaths are preventable."

Prevention can work through the violent men themselves, says

"The violence can happen in the blink of an eye"

—Belinda Valentine

Statistically, one woman dies every week from domestic violence in Australia. (Last year that figure doubled when 31 women were killed within 15 weeks.) And according to an Australian Institute of Crime report, domestic violence claims the life of a child every two weeks. "This has been a major problem for many, many generations," says Annette Gillespie, the CEO of the domestic violence front-line service Safe Steps. "We are seeing an increase in rates of death attributed to domestic violence."

Sonia Anderson, whose daughter Bianca was killed by her boyfriend. She is calling for measures in which men who are prone to violence can preemptively

seek help. "I feel I am carrying on Bianca's work," says the Brisbane grandmother. "There are so many things that have to change."

For the victims of violence, there are support services, such as Safe Steps, which offer haven and help (see box, p. 36), and there are no boundaries as to who is affected. "We take 60,000 calls a year," says Gillespie. "We have calls from women as young as 15 up to women in their 80s. We receive calls from women from most postcodes throughout Australia. We know it doesn't relate to employment or unemployment, educated or uneducated. We have been in the throes of an epidemic of domestic homicide for many years." As these four courageous women say, it is time for that to change.

■ By Louise Talbot



'She was like a broken doll'

Belinda Valentine had warned authorities for years her granddaughter was in danger. In the end, 4-year-old Chloe died at the hands of her mother

Belinda Valentine had for a long time been worried about the conditions her granddaughter Chloe was enduring in the home of her young mother.

Valentine's daughter Ashlee Polkinghorne, who lived with her father after her parents separated and as a teenager turned to drugs, gave birth to Chloe at the age of 16 and raised her in squalid, dangerous conditions in houses in Adelaide.

"When Ashlee first took Chloe home, she was excited and this baby was beautiful," says Valentine, who lives in the Adelaide Hills. "Then the house started to deteriorate, it started to become a party house. And that is when we knew she was getting back into the drugs."

It got worse after Polkinghorne started seeing a violent man, Benjamin McPartland. "There was one occasion when Chloe came over to our place," recalls Valentine. "Afterwards, we took her back to Ashlee, but Chloe was saying, 'Don't leave me here.' She was frightened."

On Jan. 11, 2012, Valentine was told Chloe was in hospital with head injuries. "She had come off a small motorcycle, which they forced her to ride for three days," says Valentine, who runs a face-painting business. "They didn't call an ambulance straight away. They got stoned, googled her symptoms, did internet banking, went on Facebook. When I got to the hospital, I didn't



"I remember the joy of holding her," says Valentine of granddaughter Chloe.

recognise her. Her whole body was swollen and covered in bruises. She looked like a broken doll. They told us there was no hope of her surviving."

Polkinghorne and McPartland, who both pleaded guilty to manslaughter, are serving minimum four-year jail terms, and an inquest found that child protection agency Families SA took the "path of least resistance" in Chloe's case. Valentine is now calling for the establishment of an independent child commissioner in SA to better protect children: "I don't want any other families or children to go through this. Early intervention is absolutely necessary. Underneath Ashlee, Chloe was getting crushed."

"It wasn't until she stopped breathing that they called an ambulance," says Valentine.



"I woke up, he took their lives, and a whole different life began"

—Ann O'Neill



Ann O'Neill's children, Kyle and Latisha, "didn't get to grow up," she says.

'He took their lives'

Since losing her kids, Ann O'Neill has been on a quest to save others

After marrying at 18, Ann O'Neill began to realise wedded life was far from the idyllic dream she imagined. After years of abuse, the then Perth mother of two decided to leave her husband, Norm. "I was 22 by the time I realised the relationship wasn't as healthy as I might have liked it to be," says O'Neill, 46. "A lot of the forms of abuse are covert. Him withdrawing was my punishment for not doing what he wanted me to do. He didn't want me to work, if I went out then I was always flirting—there was always this constant jealousy. After months of urging him to get help, I eventually said, 'I can't keep doing this. I need you to leave.' He assaulted me, he stalked me, he harassed me. He left suicide notes. He assaulted me in front of the children."

Nearly 12 months later, in 1994, Norm served O'Neill with divorce paperwork. "I thought he was finally getting his stuff together," she recalls. "He appeared happy." But underneath, a rage was building. "We went to court for the divorce hearing on a Wednesday. On the Saturday I dropped the kids at his place—he got them back on the Sunday night." At bedtime, because she was feeling sick, Kyle, 6, and Latisha, 4, jumped into bed with her. That night, Norm came over with a gun: "The next thing I know I woke up, he took their lives, attempted to take mine, took his own life and a whole different life began."

O'Neill, who was badly wounded in the attack and lost half of her right leg, is now a motivational speaker. "We need to teach our boys that they are whole men without a woman, teach positive separation and divorce," says O'Neill, who now has a 3-year-old son with her husband. "My concept of success is when none of our domestic violence services are needed. Our work is not done. There is so much more to do. Life is a gift denied to too many."

angelhands.org.au

'It can happen to anyone'

The violent death of her daughter has put Kerryn Robertson on a crusade to change the law

On Oct. 11, 2013, Kerryn Robertson's daughter Rekihah O'Donnell, 22, was killed by her boyfriend, Nelson Lai, in his Sunshine, Melbourne, home. "People don't understand it's not just the down-and-out who are victims of domestic violence," says Robertson, 50. "Rekihah was brought up in a normal loving home. She was an outgoing, bubbly child. She had aspirations to study community services."

Rekihah met Lai while working in a Harvey Norman store. "They went out on a date with a few of her friends," says Robertson, a home-support worker who lives in Melbourne's Doreen. "He was very controlling."

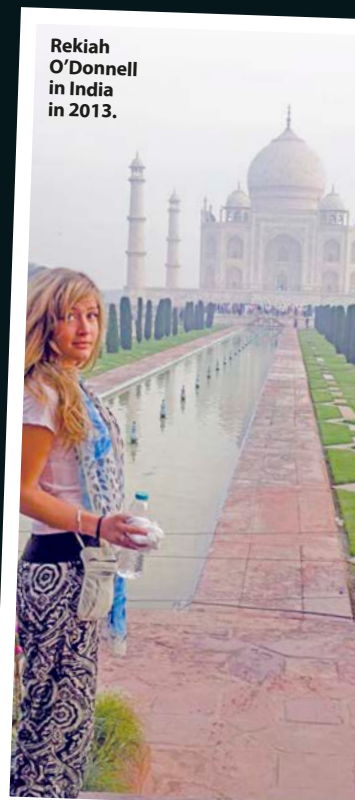
Lai, an ice addict, constantly believed Rekihah, who also began using ice, was having an affair and made

threats to kill her. They often broke up, but Rekihah would return to him. On the day she died, Lai was on an ice binge. He shot her in the head in his room at his parents' home in Melbourne's west. With a defence that he was high on drugs and didn't know the gun was loaded, Lai, then 33, was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to just over nine years' prison. "People ask, 'Why did she go back [to him]?' " says Robertson. "Even the judge in the trial said it. The more awareness there is, the more people will stand up against it, and the more powers that will listen."

Robertson is pushing for a change in the law so that all gun-related killings that are not self-defence are "instantly murder convictions."

rekihahslaw.com

Rekihah O'Donnell in India in 2013.



"She felt a pull back to him," says Robertson, whose daughter was shot dead by her boyfriend.



INSETS: CLOCKWISE FROM MIDDLE LEFT: AAP; COURTESY OF THE O'NEILL FAMILY; COURTESY OF THE ROBERTSON FAMILY

MISSING BIANCA

Mother-of-one Bianca Girven "wanted to help everyone else," says her mother, Sonia Anderson, who has two other daughters.

"She wanted to help the homeless. She wanted to bridge the gap on homelessness and inequality in Brisbane."

'My life became hell'

A mother calls for violent men to seek help after the death of her daughter

Brisbane mother Bianca Girven was "unique, a bit of a hippie, very much a traveller," remembers her mother, Sonia Anderson.

After her marriage to a Balinese reggae singer broke down, Girven, a mother to toddler Ziggy, resumed a relationship with her childhood sweetheart, Rhys Austin, a mentally troubled man.

On March 30, 2010, the couple went to Brisbane's Full Moon Festival before driving to a lookout at Mt Gravatt in Brisbane's south-east. In the van, Austin strangled Girven, 22, to death. "He admitted 14 months after he killed her that he got her into the back of his van," says Anderson, who lives in Brisbane where she runs a Motorola business. "He told her he was going to tell her a secret. He wrapped himself around her so she couldn't struggle and put her into a choke hold. He slowly choked her for 10 minutes and told her that while he was doing that she wouldn't survive. He just decided he wanted her dead."

In a story he maintained for months, Austin told his parents someone dragged Girven from the car and strangled her. While Girven was revived by paramedics at Austin's parents' home, she died the next day. A court found that Austin was of unsound mind and he was committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Anderson, 51, is now pushing for support services to be available for men who are prone to violence. "Anytime someone dies from domestic homicide, I want advertised a number for men to ring to seek help for their violent behaviour," she says. "And we also need advocates. People who will listen to the ones who have gone through it. The death of your child to homicide by somebody who was meant to love them is the beginning of hell." ■

MensLine: 1300 789 978

TAKING ACTION

Due to domestic violence campaigners such as Rosie Batty, more women are reaching out for help

Batty



to organisations such as Safe Steps. "We not only save the lives of women," says its CEO, Annette Gillespie, "but we also save the human potential of children by protecting them from being exposed to future violence."

safesteps.org.au
1800 015 188

BATTY: NEWSPIX

Sonia Anderson with grandson Ziggy (with a picture of his late mother).