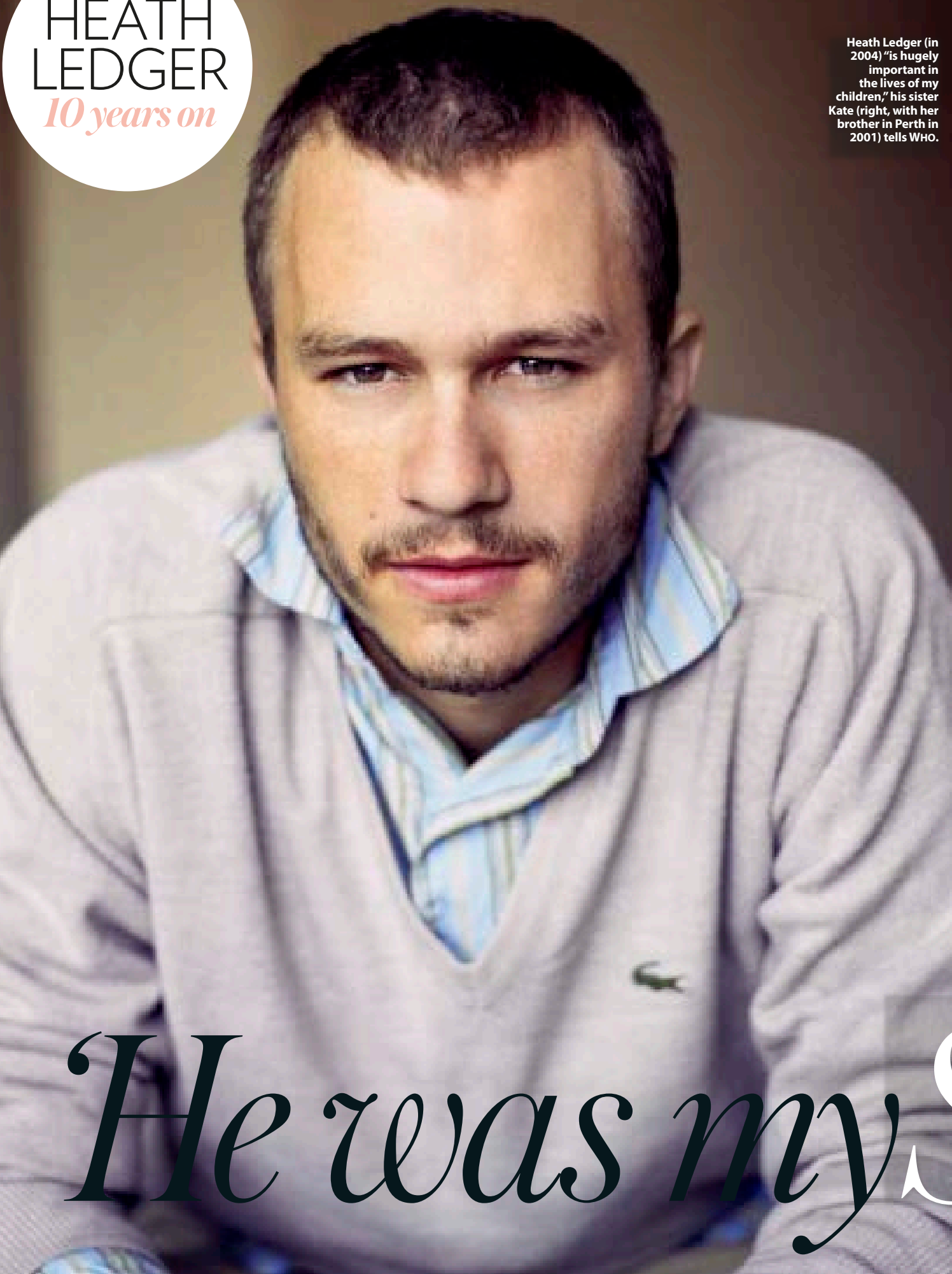


HEATH  
LEDGER  
*10 years on*

Heath Ledger (in 2004) "is hugely important in the lives of my children," his sister Kate (right, with her brother in Perth in 2001) tells WHO.



*A decade after losing her beloved brother, Kate Ledger shares how she keeps his memory alive at home, and how she cherishes his 'beautiful girl' Matilda*

**H**aving an Oscar-winning movie star for a brother can be both a source of happiness and heartache for Kate Ledger. Switching on the TV in her Perth home always comes with the chance that the mother of twin girls will see the face of her "soulmate," Heath Ledger, the Perth boy who journeyed from Australian TV roles to Hollywood stardom, before his tragic, untimely death in 2008. "It's especially difficult to see his moving images on screen and hear his voice—something which we as a family have had to learn to cope with constantly," Kate, 42, tells WHO. "But it's a blessing that we have all the images and footage so that we can share a part of him with our girls."

Ten years since Ledger's passing, the celebrated actor remains a guiding and loving figure in the life of his sister and her family. Ledger was 28 when he was found dead in his bed inside his rented New York apartment, the result of an accidental overdose of prescription medications, shattering his family and shocking the world. His beloved daughter, Matilda, whom he shared with his ex, actress Michelle Williams, was then 2 years old.

At the time of his death, the *Brokeback Mountain* star had just finished filming



FROM LEFT: JOHN STANTON/CONTOUR  
BY GETTY IMAGES, FRANCES ANDRUCH

*He was my* **SOULMATE**



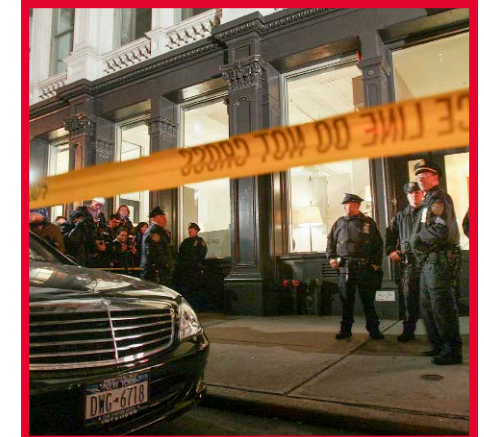
Ledger and Williams arriving for the 2006 Oscars. They were both nominated for their roles in *Brokeback Mountain*.



Dad and daughter in New York on June 20, 2007. Parenthood "is exhausting, but it's a pleasure waking up to your daughter," Ledger said in 2005.



**MATILDA: HER LIFE NOW**  
Now 12, Matilda lives with her mother, Michelle Williams, 37, in Brooklyn, New York. Williams and Ledger met on the set of *Brokeback Mountain* in 2004 and were together until 2007. For Matilda not having her dad, "just won't ever be right," Williams said in 2016.



## Heath's sad prediction

"I remember him saying, 'I've got a lot to do; I don't feel like I have much time,'" Heath Ledger's longtime friend and hip-hop artist N'fa Forster-Jones, said in last year's documentary *I Am Heath Ledger*. "I just don't think I'm going to be around that long!" Sadly, he was right. On Jan. 22, 2008, the 28-year-old was found dead in his Manhattan apartment (above) from an accidental overdose of prescription drugs after weeks of battling respiratory illness and insomnia. Ledger had recently talked about having sleeping problems, having filmed back-to-back roles in 2007's *I'm Not There* and 2008's *The Dark Knight*. "Last week I probably slept an average of two hours a night," he told *The New York Times* in November 2007. "I couldn't stop thinking. My body was exhausted, and my mind was still going." Following his death, his grieving family released a statement: "Families rarely experience the uplifting, warm and massive outpouring of grief and support as have we, from every corner of the planet. This has deeply and profoundly touched our hearts and lives. We are eternally grateful."

one of his first school performances as Peter Pan. We both loved the camaraderie that being in a production gave you. A real sense of family and belonging. Ironically we both took separate career paths and still ended up in the film industry. Heath loved action and adventure films like *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*, and TV shows like *The A-Team* and *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and we were both huge fans of *The Muppets*.

Heath was too impulsive and impatient for study. He knew what he wanted and couldn't wait. He was extremely motivated and determined to make it work on his own terms. I feel like it was more his personality and presence that made him the complete package. Of course he had talent as well, but so many people do. It takes more than that. The grit, passion and perseverance to overcome adversity and succeed.

*Having forged a love for acting through his drama roles at Perth's Guildford Grammar School, Ledger pursued the craft, winning parts in Australian TV shows such as Ship to Shore and Home and Away. In 1997, he was cast in the US TV series Roar.*

We were all super excited for Heath when he landed the major role in *Roar*. It was a huge production in 1997, which really helped catapult him onto bigger and better things,

and a surreal experience for his family to see him on the screen. The show had a massive budget and was shot in 35mm film, which back then meant it looked and felt like cinema, which was amazing. Heath took us all on an amazing journey. Through him and his work we have been so lucky to have met the most amazing people and experienced an incredible time. We were super proud of everything he did and enjoyed

sharing every minute of his success. We never had any concerns about what Heath was doing with his career and totally loved watching him grow and develop as an actor. Of course it was exciting when we came over for premieres and trips. He always included his family in everything he did. I had been working as a publicist for United International Pictures

## "Heath loved activity, and lots of it"

—Kate Ledger

Heath was the quintessential boy who loved activity, and lots of it. We spent hours playing imaginary games, riding our bikes and digging trenches. There were also lots of dress-up games and make-believe play. I have many treasured memories of our childhood, one of which would be our long walks in the WA bush where we'd spend the day building secret cubby houses, where we'd meet with friends and form clubs. We both had an innate sense of theatre and performing. I remember seeing him in

his role as the Joker in the then-unreleased *The Dark Knight*, for which he would win a posthumous Oscar. "Heath inspires me every day to enjoy my life and be happy," says Kate, a former film publicist who worked as Ledger's Australian publicist. In a WHO exclusive, Kate, the director of a design and media production company who lives in Perth with husband Nathan, owner of a floor-coverings shop, and their 13-year-old daughters, Rorie and Scarlett, shares with Michael Crooks her memories of the loved one she so tragically lost, how she keeps in touch with her 12-year-old niece Matilda, and how she is carrying on her brother's legacy of generosity.



**FINAL FAREWELL**  
On Feb. 9, 2008, 200 guests, including Michelle Williams (left), gathered at Perth's Cottesloe Beach to farewell Ledger. Right, Williams and Kate Ledger arranged a memorial service for Ledger at Perth's Penrhos College, which was held earlier in the day.

Ledger (in Los Angeles in 2004) "is very much alive in our house," sister Kate Ledger tells WHO.



## A legacy of love and generosity

Established in 2008, the Heath Ledger Foundation provides Australian actors with financial assistance, advice, travel fares and more as they try to forge a career in the US. The foundation is administered through Australians in Film, an industry association for Australians working in the US, for which Ledger was an ambassador. The scholarship is open to all young and emerging Australian actors 18–35 years old.

In its nine years, \$250,000 in prizes has been awarded to help the winners with career and educational opportunities in the US.

Ledger's sister Kate Ledger, who is a board member of AiF, and represents the fund, tells WHO the fund was inspired by her brother, who opened his Los Angeles home to his Australian actor friends when they were in the US. Kate's ultimate goal is to have a house in Los Angeles for Australian actors looking to work in Hollywood, "just like they did at Heath's."

"I was unrepresented, [but] when I won the scholarship I ended up signing with the best team in the world," says Sydney-born actor Mojean Aria, 24, who was last year's recipient of the fund (see Ones to Watch, p. 59). "I just wrapped a miniseries [the SBS drama *Dead Lucky*] that I got after the scholarship, and I'm able to walk into any studio or production company—directors want to meet me. Since winning the scholarship, it's a platform and it's what you make of it and I'm so going to make the most of it."

To donate to the scholarship, visit: [australiansinfilm.org](http://australiansinfilm.org)

for about 10 years, promoting Universal and Paramount films in Australia. Heath had representation in the US but it seemed a natural progression for me to take on his Australian publicity.

We spoke almost every day regardless of where Heath was in the world or what he was doing. Our conversations ranged from talking about projects to what we were having for dinner. Nothing was off limits. We discussed everything. He would often come home and we would fly to visit him.

Heath would discuss all the projects that he was considering, or working on, with me. There were times, like for *Brokeback Mountain*, where he was unsure as to whether he was making the right move or not. [Based on the short story by Annie Proulx, the 2005 Ang Lee film saw Ledger play an American cowboy who has a relationship with a fellow cowboy played by Jake Gyllenhaal.] He did say, "This film could turn out to be a disaster or a masterpiece." It was a risky role for him to take, but in the end going out on a limb and taking the risk was what Heath thrived

on. I think he was very proud of his work in that film.

Heath was fairly anti-establishment, which meant he had a love-hate relationship with Hollywood. He made many wonderful connections with creative people and surrounded himself with a team that he could trust. He didn't like to conform to Hollywood standards as he struggled with the whole self-promotion thing. It was a huge part of making every film that he despised. Selling his soul wasn't something he was interested in.

*The Dark Knight* was the most fun Heath has ever had on a film set. He would send me rushes of the scenes and we would laugh about what he was going to do with the character. The nurse scene was particularly funny to our family. [In the scene, the Joker dresses as a nurse to infiltrate a hospital, which he later blows up with a faulty remote detonator.] This reminded us of Heath and I dressing up together as kids. He had an incredible sense of humour and it was totally apparent in this particular clip.

At the 2008 Academy Awards ceremony,



### HEATH'S OSCAR WIN

Accepting Ledger's Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role as the Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* in 2009 was "a surreal but calm experience," sister Kate tells WHO. She was joined on stage by her parents, Sally and Kim, who divorced during Heath's childhood.

Ledger posthumously won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. Kate and her and Ledger's divorced parents, Kim and Sally, accepted the award.

Accepting the Oscar was a surreal but calm experience. I honestly didn't know how I was going to get up but when the time came, we all felt a strong sense of peace and strength. We definitely felt Heath's presence. Last year, Kate appeared in the documentary *I Am Heath Ledger*, which detailed Ledger's life through his loved ones and friends.

The documentary was so important to me and our family. We have waited a long time to share his story in the right way. The filmmakers did a superb job and we are very proud. It really showcases the true spirit of who Heath was.

I believe we all have soulmates and Heath was definitely one of mine. Heath inspires me every day. I try to be fearless and live with love, passion and gratitude. I also try to emulate Heath's generosity of spirit, which he so freely gave.

We have a family get-together on Heath's birthday and celebrate and laugh at all the wonderful funny things he did and everything he was. We keep in constant contact with Michelle and Matilda, and visit frequently. She is an amazing girl and a source of delight to us all. Heath is hugely important in the lives of my children. There's not a day

goes by that we don't share stories or talk about him. He is very much alive in our house.

Since his death, his family have created the Heath Ledger Scholarship, through *Australians in Film* (an industry association for Australians working in the US). It awards an annual grant to a promising Australian actor (see box, left).

The Heath Ledger Scholarship is a wonderful award that supports young Australian actors making their international career transition to Hollywood.

Knowing the difficulties Heath faced, if the scholarship can help just one person overcome these hurdles and provide a network of people and services to help guide them through this time then we would be thrilled. Heath himself helped so many

of his Aussie actor mates by letting them stay at his house when in LA. It is with this same generosity we continue the legacy. I am currently a board member of AiF, representing the HLS. Our ultimate aim is to have a house in LA for actors to stay, just like they did at Heath's.

For me, Heath has left us wiser, more connected and less selfish. We cherish his beautiful girl and all the memories that we have. Like anyone who has lost a family member, his loss is still enormous and we feel it every day. ■

## A star on the rise

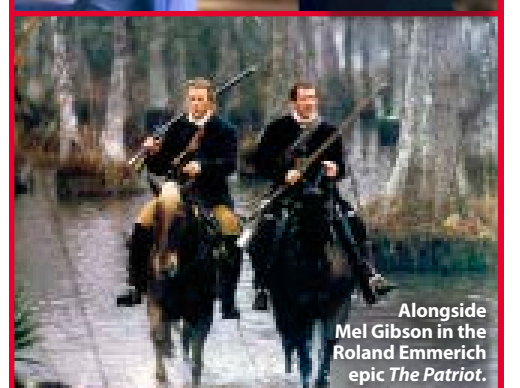
On the strength of his performance in the US TV-series *Roar*, Ledger won roles in the Australian film *Two Hands* and the US romcom *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999). The next year, he appeared in his first blockbuster, *The Patriot*. At the time of his death Ledger was halfway through filming his role for Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.



With Bryan Brown in Gregor Jordan's *Two Hands*.



With Julia Stiles in the Shakespeare-inspired *10 Things I Hate About You*.



Alongside Mel Gibson in the Roland Emmerich epic *The Patriot*.



Ledger (with Jake Gyllenhaal) was nominated for an Oscar for his role in *Brokeback Mountain*.



Playing the Joker was the "most fun he had on a film set," says sister Kate.

FROM LEFT: BEN WATTS/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM/SNAPPERMEDIA.COM; GETTY IMAGES