



# MALMSBURY POWDERKEG

BRUCE PERHAM



---

## Let's Talk Differently

LET'S TALK DIFFERENTLY PTY LTD

ABN 634 922 606

DIRECTOR BRUCE PERHAM

EMAIL [bruce@letstalkdifferently.com.au](mailto:bruce@letstalkdifferently.com.au)

WEB [letstalkdifferently.com.au](http://letstalkdifferently.com.au)

MOBILE 0433086998

UNDERSTANDING OCCUPATIONAL FATIGUE

### **MALMSBURY POWDERKEG**

“Tensions always ran high at the youth justice centre then one night it exploded”

(Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre 3/10/2019)

**Written by Bruce Perham**

(in consultation with Justin White and Anthony Milbourne)

Copyright Bruce Perham

March 2026

*With the passing of my editor James Harrison, Janet Pearson and her team at Technology Matters stepped in and saved the day for me.*

*I would have been lost without their help in putting Malmsbury Powderkeg together in the format that it now is.*

*Thanks Janet!*

## The Walls of Silence

I can remember some years ago reading an article in a newspaper, and it went something like this.

*Two officers (not the Justin and Anthony assault) were assaulted at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre yesterday. A spokesperson from Malmsbury YJC confirmed two officers were assaulted and transported to the local hospital. A spokesperson from the local hospital confirmed two officers had been admitted to the hospital 'with non-life-threatening injuries'. When the relevant department was contacted for comment a spokesperson confirmed two officers had been injured and were being treated at hospital. They also commented they take these assaults on staff very seriously. A spokesperson from the relevant union said they were aware of the assault and were waiting for further details.*

So, who actually said anything and if I wanted to follow anything up, who would I contact for further information? We live in a world now where few people, other than commissioners or politicians, are prepared to go 'on the record' as saying anything. When you combine that with the significant retribution that will occur should employees speak out beyond the often-stringent confidentiality clauses they have no choice but to sign, it is not surprising there is a great deal that happens in this world that most of us have no idea about.

**Bruce Perham** Social Worker, Family and Narrative Therapist 29/1/2026

# Table of Contents

<b>MALMSBURY POWDERKEG</b>	<b>6</b>
Dedication	6
The Story	6
<b>FOREWORD FROM THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>7</b>
The Context	8
History of Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre	10
Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre: Thursday 3 October 2019	10
Inherent Dilemma	12
<b>CHAPTER 1 - JUSTIN'S STORY</b>	<b>13</b>
Youth Detention Officers Attacked at Malmsbury 3/10/2019	13
Justin	14
Thursday 3 October 2019: The Day of the Assault	18
Termination Letter	25
Damaged Goods	28
The Future	28
Trauma Counselling	29
Sophie	31
Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)	31
Closing Comment from Justin	32
<b>BRUCE'S REFLECTIONS ON JUSTIN'S STORY</b>	<b>34</b>
Reflections on Counselling	40
Sophie – Justin's Wife	42
Request for Code Aqua – Denied	43
The Pivotal Moment	44

Closing Appreciation	44
<b>CHAPTER 2 - ANTHONY'S STORY</b>	<b>45</b>
Extract from Anthony's Victim Impact Statement, 10/10/2019	45
The Beginning	45
Thursday 3 October 2019 – Anthony's Recollection of Events	49
Anthony – Post Assault	50
Returning to Work	51
The Department and the Media	52
On Counselling	53
The Commissioner's Apology	53
<b>BRUCE'S REFLECTIONS ON ANTHONY'S STORY</b>	<b>54</b>
A closing comment from Anthony	59
<b>CHAPTER 3 - RACHEL'S STORY</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 - TRAUMA</b>	<b>62</b>
The Narrative of Psychology – The Trauma Debate	62
Managing Trauma	65
From Left Field	66
<b>CHAPTER 5 – THE WAY FORWARD</b>	<b>69</b>
Mental Health Support	70
A Trauma-Informed Model of Care for Custodial and Non-Custodial Staff Working in the Prison and Youth Detention Environments	71
A Model of Care?	72
<b>CHAPTER 6 - CATCHING UP WITH JUSTIN</b>	<b>74</b>
Justin on reading Rachel's story	74
Justin and his future	75
<b>CLOSING THOUGHTS</b>	<b>77</b>

<b>SUGGESTED READINGS</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>My Reflections -The Belgium International Corrections and Prison Association Conference (ICPA) held in Antwerp, Belgium, October 2023</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Books &amp; Papers</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Newspaper Readings</b>	<b>82</b>

# MALMSBURY POWDERKEG

Understanding Occupational Fatigue

**Let's Talk Differently Pty Ltd** ABN 634 922 606

Director: Bruce Perham Email: bruce@letstalkdifferently.com.au Website:  
letstalkdifferently.com.au Mobile: 0433 086 998

## Dedication

In memory of James Harrison who passed away on 10 January 2026.

James had co-edited *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger* and was very involved in *Malmsbury Powderkeg*. He had a wonderful gift to structure and title the words he was given. I will miss him a great deal. BP

## A Reflection on Prison Officer Experience

*There is so much time and energy put into developing defensive responses, by the powers that be, in the justice system, to the prison officer experience that they have become disconnected from life on the floor of a prison. Life in the prison won't really change until this defensive mindset becomes an embrace and the prison officer experience is given the attention and respect it deserves. If you can embrace the prison officer experience you will also embrace the deep-seated trauma held within their lived experience. If you were to join forces with your officers and strive to minimise the potential trauma of this work and together develop processes that assist officers in their trauma recovery you have reached the starting line in the race to rehabilitate prisoners.*

**Bruce Perham**

## The Story

*'One way or another most of the people who were involved in or witnessed that gang attack on Justin and Anthony have left Youth Detention work. It affected all of us a great deal and there were two close colleagues of mine who wanted to talk to you but were simply too traumatised to relive it even five years after the assault. For all of us that five minutes or so will be etched in our memories forever.'*

**Youth Justice Officer**

On Thursday 3 October 2019, Justin, Anthony and Rachel headed to Malmsbury Youth Detention Centre at their allotted shift. It was later in the evening that their lives were to become intertwined for ever. Justin was gang attacked by three youths who were seriously assaulting him. Anthony was the first officer to reach him, closely followed by Rachel. They were very fearful Justin could have been seriously injured or even killed. This book is really about the assault, the impact on them and what happened to them all after the assault. There are many reflections from me along the way about the many and varied points they make, particularly around the lack of understanding around trauma and what they went through. Through the sharing of their very individual stories, it became very clear to me, at least, that justice systems, in terms of looking after the mental health of its correction officers, have not kept pace with current developments in the trauma field and is in urgent need of significant reform.

## Foreword from the Author

I was very fortunate to attend multiple training events by Michael White, the co-founder of Narrative Therapy. Michael's pioneering work taught me a great deal about interacting with people in a therapeutic context. Michael had a core belief that everyone has life stories to tell and within those stories were rich descriptions of how they experienced the world and the impact it was having on them. He taught me to 'listen to what people tell you' and to gain an understanding and have compassion for what they share with you. Michael had total respect for the 'story' and the value that needed to be attached to it.

It was back in 2016 when I was delivering a training session to fifteen prison officers in one of Melbourne's maximum-security prisons that I became overwhelmed by the distress and pain this work was causing them. For two hours they shared with me, and with each other, how this work was really tearing them apart. As I drove home, I realised I had to give these officers and all the other officers I had sat with or delivered training to a voice, as they had no voice in a system that was crushing them.

It was 2021 when I finished my book *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger* (available for purchase from my website), which captured what prison officers had shared with me over a fifteen-year period and the issues they were dealing with, particularly around trauma. I was hopeful it would open other avenues of developing further training for prison officers within the justice system, which revealed just how naïve I was. As it turned out *Code Blue* was really valued by prison officers from all over Australia, yet the many in positions of authority came after me from all angles and within three years I no longer was able to set foot in a prison. Why?

Whilst lots of platitudes are floated about the mental health of prison officers, no one really wants to grapple with the reality of what prison work is doing to the prison officers and the complex workplace culture it has created. There is no interest in understanding the prison officer experience or listening to what they are telling us. In all the complimentary copies of *Code Blue* I sent to Senior Management in the Justice system here in Victoria and interstate, no one contacted me to express their concern at the despair and trauma officers expressed in *Code Blue* or the lack of value they felt the system afforded them. The other side of that is no one challenged me that *Code Blue* was not a true account of life in prison or that I made it up. I take that as a testament that those in places who could institute change within the system accept *Code Blue* is an accurate account they just have no appetite to understand 'the prison officer experience' as it simply creates too many dilemmas for them. I sense there is greater attention paid to keeping the level of assaults that occur in prisons against prison officers out of the public eye, which was one of the reasons *Code Blue* never gained traction with justice departments. Youth detention officers who have contacted me in recent times share that assaults on officers occur as frequently now, if not more so, than back at Malmsbury in 2019.

They also tell me management are often 'inactive' in their response to these assaults from an officer point of view but incredibly hypervigilant to prevent them landing in the public domain. I struggle to really understand why there is not greater transparency around what prison officers experience doing this work but suspect it connects with this denial that the prison system is in desperate need of reform.

Unfortunately, these types of responses demonstrate a lack of 'respect' for the prison officer 'lived experience', which is a major driver of low morale and one of many players in the chronic mental health battles so many prison officers live with every day.

## The Context

We are currently witnessing major debates within Victoria and more broadly across Australia around the issue of youth violence and how to prevent it. The community that is now seeing violent home invasions with up to four or so armed assailants, being assaulted, having their cars stolen and so on, have had enough and are demanding that these youths are punished for their violent crimes against society.

The prisoner rights movement has been a vocal advocate in how adults and youth are managed in custody and quite rightly have advocated for fair and consistent management of both adult and youth prisoners and detainees. In the drive to rehabilitate those in detention and increase the recidivism rates of prisoners, prison environments have focused more on the adversarial push for prisoner freedoms as a core part of the rehabilitation process and have been blinded by the overwhelming reality that in doing so prisons and detention centres have become far more dangerous places to work and staff are being significantly psychologically and physically injured at a rate not seen before.

This has created significant and complex issues within all prisons and youth detention centres, which have simply not been addressed and has led to the system 'being on its knees'. With the government responding to the community demand for bail reform, more adults and youths will be incarcerated. This will place further demands on an already burnt-out system. Naturally the political focus turns to recruiting more staff with beefed up marketing rhetoric and financial sign-on benefits. We then see relevant people boasting how recruitment numbers are up with an inference the problem is solved. Problem is far from solved as when you read Justin and Anthony's stories you will have a vivid idea of what these new recruits are stepping into and really not much has changed that will provide a different experience to what staff experienced back at Malmsbury in 2019.

This has meant the focus justice departments have on recruiting staff to sustain organisational requirements and satisfy community expectations has come at the cost of supporting officers who are paying a very high personal price for doing this work. On top of this, justice departments have made little changes to the workplace structures that influence the workplace context and culture. It is very easy and convenient to imply the problem lies in the correction officer or 'we recruit the wrong people', which simply diverts our attention from the real issue: psychologically poor mental health outcomes, so evident in prison officers or any frontline organisation staff for that matter, is more driven by exposure to trauma, the lack of trauma support services and poor organisational and workplace context.

In other words, poor mental health outcomes seen in staff, particularly when it is a high percentage of the workforce, is very much a human response to poor workplace environments. Simplistically, that is why staff turnover is so high in these fields (add schoolteachers here) as people leave them to protect their mental health from continuing its negative spiral.

From a public point of view there is little interest in looking beyond the 'locking them up' to what happens in facilities where these adults and youth now live. With the secrecy that surrounds prisons and the stringent ramifications for employees if they speak publicly about their workplace, there really isn't much out there to alert the public to the systemic issues that the correction industry is dealing with. Subsequently, there seems to be little informed discussion going on about any of these issues that impact so dramatically on officers who work within our custodial settings.

From what I have seen, prison structures are still very authoritarian with levels of power and authority attached to the officer rank with a strong theme of 'do what you are told' rather than directives being open to discussion. This type of leadership doesn't encourage development of staff or provide any sense that lower-ranked officers can have any influence on how the system operates. Whilst officers talk to me all the time about fears for their safety and have an intense sense it is of secondary concern to management, when prison management may be aware of these issues there is enormous pressure and directives placed on them by their head office managers and the political forces of the government of the day. This 'from up above influence' seems to be often not very negotiable, so prison management are enforcing practices they, at times, do not fully support but know they have no choice but to implement them. This creates a one-way system where directives pass down but it is virtually impossible for issues to go back up the chain and subsequently have any impact on top level decision making.

Whilst senior operations managers rarely came to see me, I was close enough to see they work under enormous pressure with diverse responsibility, and I suspect their burn-out rates are not that much different to their officers. The main difference is the higher up the tree you go the less exposure you have to trauma that occurs on the prison floor and all the psychological reactions that come with that. I expect the pressures of the job become different. Subsequently, most officers I have talked to over the years feel they have no avenues available to them to advocate for a safer workplace environment. As one officer said to me: 'it is basically sitting around waiting for the beating but with no warning when it is going to come. Could it be today? Could it be tomorrow? Could it be next week?'

Whilst systems are not good at 'turning the gaze on themselves', there is a great deal that could be changed that would make a huge difference to working in a prison or detention centre for staff, but those 'up above' seem to have no appetite for that, so things, other than minor tweaks, stay the same!

This philosophical movement away from punishment I partly understand, but this comes with an unintentional shift away from taking responsibility for the consequences of your behaviour on those around you. Officers tell me consistently there are no real consequences for prisoners who abuse and or assault officers, which is a significant factor behind the increase in assaults on officers. Equally important, there seems little being done to work with adult or youth offenders to take responsibility for their violent and abusive behaviour.

One thing I do agree with is the system is broken and so dramatically under-resourced it is currently impossible to keep prison officers safe or to effectively rehabilitate prisoners. This rhetorical refusal to accept some prisoners are more dangerous than others and develop a more individualised transparent system where good behaviour is rewarded with less restrictions and poor behaviour has more restrictions—I think the system will remain broken. I co-facilitated a men's responsibility group for eight years and I appreciate the histories the men had that had influenced them to be abusive and at times violent in their relationships. I also learnt just how hard it is and just how few men could significantly change the way they had become dependent on behaving. If we are going to get anywhere with youth violence, there are going to have to be very intensive work done with these youths whilst in custody that continues when they return to their communities. Roaming in groups of fifteen in a unit is a recipe for conflict and resistance.

To do effective therapeutic work and create positive behavioural change in prisoners, people who work in the youth detention or prison environment need to feel safe and the 'custodial' presence needs to provide that. If correction officers, medical staff, support staff and so on

operate with a realistic and albeit underlying fear for their safety, therapeutic outcomes will be extraordinarily difficult to achieve.

Whilst we can say jailing is failing and at this point it clearly is, I think reality dictates prisons and youth detention systems have a role to play in our society. It is very clear to me that the whole system needs a review with the recognition that changes to staff safety and better therapeutic outcomes for adult and youth prison officers will only occur with significant increases in the financial resources allocated and that all stakeholders need to come together to construct a new approach that ultimately develop better outcomes for all that work or live in the correction system.

Whilst a significant part of me feels this is a 'till the cows come home' moment, we have to have hope that one day the relevant people in the relevant places recognise that the world's best rhetoric does not equate to the world's best practice and that the one thing prisoners and prison officers have in common is they both wear the scars of a structured, underfunded and at times out of touch corrections system.

## History of Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre

Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre opened in 1965 and was managed by the Department of Justice and Community Safety (as it is now known). It was purpose built to house young men in the custody of the Victorian corrections system. It had a variety of uses until 1997 when a new 75-bed secure centre was opened. This would be for youth offenders aged between 17 and 20. In June 2023 the decision was made to close Malmsbury YJC by the end of that year. By August 2024 all detainees had been moved either to Parkville detention centre or the new Cherry Creek youth detention centre. It is fair to say Malmsbury YJC had experienced a multitude of violent riots, assaults on staff, high staff turnover etc, which contributed to its reputation of one of the most violent workplaces in Australia.

It was announced late in 2025 that a wing of the Malmsbury Centre would be renovated and reopened to house thirty low to medium risk youth offenders as the new Cherry Creek youth facility is overloaded.

It was further announced in February 2026 that the number of beds at Malmsbury was going to be increased to 75 with \$100 million being designated to renovating the facility and employ 100 new youth justice workers. This makes the release of Malmsbury Powderkeg very timely as it provides an opportunity for the Justice Department to look at the deficiencies in Malmsbury Take 1 and provide the relevant funding and services to better support staff in Malmsbury Take 2!

## Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre: Thursday 3 October 2019

*The mood changed the minute those three youths walked into the unit. The tension escalated dramatically and they galvanised the other youths very quickly. We were all very uneasy and could sense we were not going to be able to contain this much longer.*

**Youth Justice Officer**

## Justin, Anthony and Rachel – The Stories

Justin, Anthony and Rachel all went to work on Thursday 3 October 2019 like they did every day. Each had their own psychological processes to work through to prepare them for the challenges of the day. They share with us the reality that Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre was a dangerous place to work and officers were frequently assaulted by the youths and some quite severely. Justin, Anthony and Rachel could not have anticipated that on this day they would be involved in one of the most violent assaults on officers by the detained youths at Malmsbury. Their stories of life since then provide us with an in-depth look at just how much the correction industry does not have its trauma and mental health support services and processes in Victoria in order.

Firstly, to prepare officers for the abuse and violence that will be directed at them in this complex and at times toxic workplace culture. Secondly, to not have a coordinated response to support officers when they are physically and or psychologically injured. Justin and Anthony uniquely describe a post-incident system that lacked structure, compassion or the cohesiveness to provide them with what they needed after experiencing such a traumatic and violent workplace assault. It is important to state that the people who interacted with them during and after the assault had no intention other than to support them; however, the structures were simply not in place that would have facilitated a more trauma-informed response.

Whilst for Justin and Anthony, it was a painful and at times demoralising experience the floor staff and bureaucrats had not been educated around trauma impacts and what they needed to do to best support all those that were impacted by this assault. So, it was a bit of 'groping in the dark' with no trauma-informed guidelines, which sadly, as it always does, made Justin and Anthony's experience more traumatic than it really needed to be.

Justin and Anthony hold no malice to their colleagues, support staff or their employer. They are simply sharing their stories to play a role in developing and implementing more effective support services for officers who are injured psychologically and or physically injured at work.

It is very important for all frontline workers, not just prison officers, to know that should they be injured in the line of doing their work they will be supported and looked after by their Employer either to return to work or if this is not possible to be redeployed or financially supported in the longer term. Justin and Anthony's stories, sadly, highlight to us just how far prison authorities and governments have to go in this country to reassure injured workers, temporary or permanent, that they will be supported, in the event of being injured at work, no matter what. Most importantly, however, is that the personal price frontline workers pay for doing this work needs to be valued, honoured and respected by our Governments of the day, employers and the community upon which they serve. When we cry 'lock them up' I hope we spare a thought for Justin, Anthony, Rachel and all the other custodial officers who pay the personal price for 'locking them up'.

## The Email

It was early one evening when this email dropped into my inbox:

*My psychologist has requested I contact you for an informal chat. In short, I was assaulted at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre back in 2019 and have suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder since. Unfortunately, the story of the assault went global and is still seen on the*

*internet. Also, I have written a book called 'Psych Warden: An Officer's Psychological Account of the Inside' which I published in June via Amazon. Thank you, Anthony.*

This email brought back memories of the two days I spent at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre some years prior. For some reason this was the first time I had been sent to a youth detention centre. Those two days, providing counselling to staff, are etched in my memory, as I had not seen so many traumatised people in the one workplace before. I had had extensive involvement in adult maximum-security prisons but Malmsbury just seemed different. Whilst I did not meet Anthony at Malmsbury, I had some understanding of the Malmsbury context, and I was very interested to reach out to him. We had a lengthy phone conversation about what he went through at Malmsbury, his battle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the writing of his book and the career shifts he was now trying to undertake. Anthony's main goal in writing his book was for it to be a guide for new workers to Youth Justice and to hopefully play a role in preventing what happened to his colleague, Justin and himself ever happening again. Anthony was keen to share his story, and I interviewed him on my podcast series *Trauma from the Frontline* and re-interviewed him about six months later.

I have interwoven these two interviews to tell Anthony's story. Anthony reached out to Justin who also agreed to share his story through two interviews with me as well. In these interviews both Justin and Anthony talked about another colleague Rachel, who put herself at great personal risk to try and help them both in the peak intensity of the assault. I was very keen to talk to Rachel and to hear her story, which of course she agreed to do! The three stories have many individual nuances but culminating in all three eventually leaving the industry due to the impact of that viscous assault on Justin on that fateful night of 3 October 2019.

## Inherent Dilemma

I knew by the end of writing *Malmsbury Powderkeg* I had indeed taken it to the next level in terms of including the violence of the assault and the massive impact it had had on Justin and Anthony. Unlike *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger*, which was primarily written for prison officers, *Malmsbury Powderkeg* is primarily aiming to raise awareness around trauma and its impacts on officers and to challenge justice departments on the need to do more for their officers around the inherent trauma within this work.

I am well aware youth and adult prison officers will read *Malmsbury Powderkeg* and the risk it will potentially be more 'triggering' of previous trauma experiences than *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger*. I have really struggled with the need to confront this widespread denial of the prison officer experience and the physical and psychological cost to this dedicated group of workers yet not produce something that in any way would be detrimental to prison officers who read it.

In the end I ran with the mantra that Justin and Anthony are totally committed to: 'Everything we do is to make sure no other prison officer, youth or adult, will have to endure what we endured'. If reading *Malmsbury Powderkeg* does raise issues for you, brings back the pain of what you went through and so on I encourage you to jump on board with Justin and Anthony in the belief that the sharing of this pain, may well be therapeutic but will definitely be a step, a powerful step, in driving change within an industry which has failed to keep pace with key trauma-informed principles in relation to its staff.

# Chapter 1 - Justin's Story

## **WARNING – Trauma Material**

Justin's story does include his description and reactions to the assault. This could be distressing particularly to individuals who have been exposed to similar trauma. Should you have psychological reactions to reading Justin's story please consult your GP or relevant health professional.

## Youth Detention Officers Attacked at Malmsbury 3/10/2019

Channel 9 News, 5.59 pm, 4 October 2019

### *Images reveal guard hurt at Vic youth jail*

Graphic images of a Victorian guard's bloodied and bruised face have been released in court after three inmates allegedly attacked two workers at a youth justice centre.

At least one inmate at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre allegedly threw punches at youth worker Anthony Milbourne's face and head on Thursday night.

Images released by Bendigo Magistrates Court on Friday reveal blood oozing from Mr Milbourne's broken nose, mouth and cheek with cuts across his face.

Mr Milbourne went to the aid of his colleague Justin White, who was allegedly being assaulted with a cricket bat, before he separated the accused inmate.

The men allegedly began punching Mr Milbourne's head and face, court documents reveal.

The latest assault at the centre started after Mr White asked the inmates to pack up volleyball equipment and come inside.

Instead of the accused grabbed a 'hard plastic cricket bat', his co-accused opened the door to him and a third accused followed him into the unit.

An inmate allegedly confronted Mr White who asked him to put it down, before repeatedly hitting him in the head with the cricket bat as he backed away.

Mr White fell to the ground, allegedly continuing to be assaulted, including being kicked.

That's when Mr Milbourne stepped in and was allegedly assaulted.

The youth jail was sent into lockdown on Friday after staff refused to work prompting the Community and Public Sector Union to meet with management.

Two 18-year-olds and a 19-year-old have been remanded in an adult prison until their appearance at Kyneton Magistrates Court on October 14th.

The trio has been charged with intentionally causing injury, recklessly causing injury, affray and assaulting an emergency worker over the attack.

Former worker Ken Rose said it will take a tragedy to make authorities listen.

'Nothing will happen until someone dies and how sad is that for family and their mates,' he told Ten News.

The day before the attack another male employee was assaulted by a youth at the centre allegedly with a makeshift weapon made of wood.

The attack comes after several youths reportedly escaped a unit at the centre in March when a swipe card was taken from an overpowered officer.

WorkSafe has launched an official investigation into the latest incident.

The Justice Department has been contacted for comment.

*Copyright AAP 2025*

---

*Justin had travelled by car, from his country home to the studio in Footscray and I met him out the front of the building. I was struck by how youthful he was and his enthusiasm to share his story. If Justin was nervous, he was not showing it, and we launched into the interview.)*

## Justin

My background is working in youth mental health. I had previously been a case coordinator in a mental health prevention recovery centre for youth. That's been my experience up until I started work in Youth Justice at Malmsbury (PARC). I thought my skill set working in mental health, particularly working with youth at risk, would lead to a positive experience working at Malmsbury. Particularly with understanding what it's like to work in acute environments, where things are dynamic, and shift constantly.

I put in an application which was accepted and I was allocated into a training squad, basically completing the tactical operations training which is your self-defence training and assessment of your ability to work in the youth detention space. You're also learning what that environment might look like and that is sort of a drip-fed exposure. You are building a sense of team with your colleagues as well, which is quite strong, and that was one of the parts I really enjoyed in that job. You had that real close connection with your colleagues and that builds up throughout the training. By the end of the three months training, you get to the point where you're ready to go and take the next step into the units.

Clearly there's a risk and you understand that an environment like this has significant risks to your personal safety. It's not really talked about, in the training, in the sense of what you'll be confronting, what you're going to be exposed to and the level of abuse and violence that will be directed at you. I think they gradually, try to build you up to a position where you've got some strengths that you might be able to step into the detention environment without throwing you in at the deep end.

I had some idea of the level of violence and the assaults, but it was the barrage of verbal abuse that comes at you daily that took me by surprise, and I was not prepared for that. The first exposure I had to the level of abuse was not until I started shadow shifts where you would team up with a training colleague and be shown how things work operationally by experienced officers. The training provided very little on the emotional aspect of dealing with trauma, your own mental health or what you would need to do to best manage what was to turn out to be a very challenging and dangerous environment.

Given I had already worked in youth mental health I had some awareness of what it would be like to step into the youth detention environment. A lot of co-trainees had not had a youth background so perhaps knew a little less than I did. We all came from very different workplace experiences. They recruit quite broadly and promote the concept as a 'career change', so it's not that they're specifically trying to recruit people who have been exposed to that kind of risk or trauma a youth detention centre will provide. My squad was people from all walks of life, mums coming back to work, tradies, office workers and so on.

Looking back on my time at Malmsbury I realise the skill set that you will need to step into that youth detention space. It is an acute environment and most of us had no idea what we were walking into or how to psychologically manage the assaults, abuse and intimidation directed at you every day. I guess you don't know until you're in it, how you will respond to the different situations you will find yourself in.

When you start your shadow shifts, we were all kind of in shock, trying to work out what is going on here, what is this environment we are in? At times it was hard to believe what you were seeing. This was very different to what any of us had expected and it was full on. I think there was an awareness that the transition to the units would be a shock for most of us. Part of the shadow shifts is that you do have peer mentors which you can go to talk to and talk to off unit or make a phone call to discuss any reactions you may have. But once you're past the shadow shifts, they are trying to build some support networks around you, psychological support and things like that. But the reality of being in that environment is that it's all encompassing and it certainly impacts on all aspects of your life.

I think a lot of people probably aren't aware of how much of an impact this work will have on you. I soon understood why the old days of people going down to the pub and having a few drinks to let off steam became a way of coping. You need to discharge this pent-up emotion you feel that is generated by the intensity of your shifts. You come off a 12-hour shift, sometimes two, three in a row and you're just fried. The ability to be able to recharge and be able to go back into that environment fluctuated greatly for me. Sometimes I was okay sometimes it was a real struggle to get to work. Whilst everyone is different most of us were fatigued most of the time physically and mentally as it just took so much out of you.

Everyone had different ways to cope with the stress of the job but a lot of us, literally would go home and just sit on the couch for hours. I think that's the only way we could cope as you knew you had to recover before your next shift and it is on again. So, your kind of riding this constant emotional rollercoaster all the time, and sometimes a good day in the unit is when a staff member didn't get assaulted. I hadn't quite figured out the intensity of this environment. Youth Justice is about putting yourself into a dangerous situation where you are literally at risk as your role is to provide security and safety which puts you in the middle of everything. You are putting yourself in harm's way to protect others constantly.

You are verbally attacked all day, every day. But then you get the physical stuff as well. You know, I can vividly recall my first assault. It was not long after I had started at Malmsbury and I will never forget the sound of squad mates calling the codes whilst an officer is getting hit with such brutal force he had his jaw and eye socket broken.

I had never heard anything like that before and you don't really know what to do to manage experiences like that. This is another level, a different level of human experience. I hear a lot about the reforming and the preventing of the youth coming back into the system. The aim to get

these kids out of a life of crime into a different way of being was the philosophy which was promoted and there was a lot of focus on that. There was no focus on how to cope with the sound of an officer having his jaw and eye socket broken.

The philosophy of youth justice was incongruent with the reality of the detention centre where we were all in survival mode, hyper vigilant, trying to protect each other and the youths from each other. We really had to try and bring these two ideas together, of reforming the youth and at the same time protecting ourselves from their violence. The youth had a lot of time on their hands, a lot of time to strategise, work systems out and how they would get staff. This impacted on all of us in terms of how we tried to manage the situation. I guess my strategy was to engage the youth and that I come from my belief in an engagement perspective and I went about it in a prosocial manner.

You know, by the end of it, I realised why other officers were not engaging with the youth because it was easier to keep yourself safe, by having your back against the wall. Their priority was to keep themselves safe on their shift. You know, my understanding of that is that you are making the place more unsafe because you start to hand over aspects of control to the young people and they learn how to influence what happens when so many officers disengage from them. They work out the staff zone and learn what staff they can manipulate and engage with for their own advantage. We all come and go on shift the youths just stay there and they know who is coming on and off shift. They know how the system works. So, my philosophy was to engage them in activities whenever possible to minimise this sitting around 'thinking' about the environment. A lot of officers wouldn't do that, but you had to engage, you had to get out there and just do stuff with the detainees. Twelve hours is a long shift, and it is a long time to fill in.

It is an environment of contrasts. There is this huge expectation of engaging with the youth but the more you do that the more you put yourself at physical and psychological risk. This is why so many officers do not overly engage. It takes lots of energy to engage and it takes lots of energy to be hypervigilant as things can go pear-shaped at any minute. I don't believe, in this environment, you can engage with the detainees without being hypervigilant. There is no sitting with them sharing stories with your guard down. They have you on edge and they know that. By the end of twelve hours, you have nothing left.

So, the 12-hour shifts are interesting, and in a sense whilst exhausted I liked them because it gave you time to be away from the centre.

That was that disconnect that you needed, the fact that you were there, two or three days in a row meant you knocked over a week, and it would give you two or three days away to be able to recharge and to just disconnect. Disconnect from the hypervigilance and this constant rollercoaster that you're on all day, every day. I don't think there was any awareness from up above just how much this workplace and what happens in it occupies your waking moments and often nights as well.

After some time away it takes a day or more to get your head back on shift. I would spend time trying to work out how I could influence the environment to minimise an assault on me or one of my colleagues. You want to form professional relationships with the young people, but the detainees were the opposite and spent a lot of time trying to work out how to get us rather than relate to us. Whilst the detainees certainly attacked each other the serious assaults generally occurred on staff. Staff would be targeted and this was how many of the detainees saw as their way of influencing the environment 'and getting one run up the pecking order, a bit higher up the

tree'. An assault on an officer dramatically lifted their status inside and outside of the detention centre.

You know that you have a right to a safe working environment. This however was always placed behind the rights of the young people. You hear a lot about youth justice, and you understand how many of these youths are isolated and how many have trauma histories and all the other things that lead to incarceration. Working in youth mental health prior to Malmsbury I understood that. I have experience of working in that space and I understand what it looks like. There are high numbers of youth connected to the state system but only 250 or so in detention.

You know you are generally dealing with young people who already have extensive criminal histories and pose significant risks to those who provide custodial care for them. This is their community; this is how they connect in lots of ways. This is their brotherhood and reform or rehabilitation, for many, often has no appeal. They see youth detention as a stepping stone, a graduation to the adult criminal world which i.e. where they see themselves as belonging.

There's a dynamic there that, you are going into a place of work with the aim of hopefully eliciting some change and to work socially with these youth who see no reason to change and really don't care zero about you. For many the focus is to become criminals, and you try to promote they have a choice to go down a different path, but their decision is made and they won't step away from it. That is a hard narrative to change as they see a life of crime as their future direction. Many do not have a sense that life can be any different and have already committed some serious crimes which they really expressed very little remorse about.

You know you are dealing with some detainees that have committed high-end crimes and don't really care about who they hurt. In the back of your mind, you know there are things you could do or try to do with the youths that would only make you unsafe. So, you are constantly bargaining with yourself every day to do things or act in a way that will get you home safe tonight.

There is this constant tension and a radio going all day that you hang on every word in case someone is getting hurt. You wait to hear the next assault, and you just hope it is not you. The expectation on us to be a key player in reforming these youths is simply unrealistic. Until the threat of physical injury to us is removed our interactions with the youth will be compromised.

You have a lot of fingers in the pie, and everyone has an opinion of what you should and shouldn't do. My feeling was that if you're in an adult corrections system, it's black and white in that system. I understand in youth justice; there's a lot of grey areas about running a youth detention facility. And so, you've got young people who have significant trauma histories, you have youth advocates, you've got a child safety commissioner right through to obligations under the UN charter. In all of that there is very little concern for what is happening to Justin at Malmsbury. These are not day-to-day flow issues but in their own way this 'from above thinking' creates pressure and tensions around management of the youth, lockdowns, use of restraints, isolation and so on. This creates confusion and the youths pick up on that and exploit our structural chaos. You must be able to justify everything you do in response to a situation and we are incessantly writing reports. Everything must be reconciled and there are a lot of people to appease.

My rights as a worker to go to work and come home safe were placed well behind the rights of the young person time and time again. Ultimately this added to the intensity of the assaults on staff that occurred as there was minimal deterrence for the youths or consequences for violent behaviour. Initiatives that would have protected us a lot more were generally never implemented

as they were seen as traumatising the youth, restricting their freedoms etc. Us getting bashed more frequently was really seen as the least of all the other evils that occurred at Malmsbury and often not warranting of a management response or seen as a nuisance.

Safety was a huge issue for staff because it's you going into these volatile environments not the bureaucrats who make decisions or set policy. It was disappointing and frustrating to hear management talking about the importance of our safety but veto most things that would have made us safer.

The other side of that was we still tried very hard to create positive outcomes for the youth despite the volatile environment.

You're trying to find that that little piece of the puzzle that might unlock a kid a little bit. I was always on the lookout for ways I might be able to connect with the youth. We would try and promote the idea there were other ways you could live your life. What would it be like being a car mechanic instead of the guy who steals cars? What would it be like to use the skills you have? Many of the youths has skills it was trying to open the idea they could use them in different ways.

You know the aim is to build their capacity so when they do return to the community, you have hopefully had a positive impact. These discussions were always had, though under the constant threat to your safety every day. You never felt safe when you went to work and by the end, I never felt safe driving home from work. As a result of the assault, I am still navigating the quite significant issues around PTSD and things like you never feel safe wherever you are. PTSD impacts on all areas of your life.

I didn't want to be seen as angry; I didn't want to get back at anyone. I didn't want anyone's job, or retribution of any kind. What I wanted to do was to come back and use the opportunity, due to the extensive media coverage the attack received, and speak to people at the upper levels. I could speak to ministers, I could speak to Senior people, and they would listen for a period. I wanted to be involved in the reform process here at Malmsbury. This cannot happen to anyone else ever again and that was what drove everything I tried to do.

## Thursday 3 October 2019: The Day of the Assault

There is a deeply held belief by many of the officers that it is simply not safe to engage with the youths. That means you lower the personal risk to yourself by not engaging and that becomes the fallback position. Inadvertently that places a higher risk on officers who do try and engage as the youth are very astute and see the divisions in staff and utilise that to their own advantage. The whole place becomes so unsafe because everyone knows who's running it and that can be quite a dangerous mix. Ironically trying to engage with the youth does make you more of a target than if you don't. As I was to find out.

You learn to live with the fear of the environment. The hypervigilance just rules your life, and you know that you can have the best day of your life and then within minutes it's changing to the worst day of your life and you're living that sort of cycle up and down, up and down constantly. You know the highs are high because you are literally on edge, you're on tender hooks and there is no experience like it.

When my turn came to be the one that was assaulted you realise just how much you rely on your colleagues. They saved my life that day and even now I still choke up when I think about that.

## Justin - the day of the assault

It was no different to any other day, a touch of anxiety, the hypervigilance firing up—what you have every day. We used to talk about boom gate anxiety when the gate goes up so does the anxiety. Not everyone got it but most of us did. So, it's game time and you know you must perform. You step into the space, and you hope that it's been a quieter period since you've been off. You get an update, take a deep breath and say to yourself 'here we go!' So the day that I got assaulted it was a normal Thursday. You go to work, you hope you come home, see my kids that night and go back to work the next day.

There are many things you do routinely, trying to redirect negative behaviour, trying to cut things off at the pass. You're trying to be pro-social engage, get these guys connected to the idea of education and things like that. All the whilst you're managing security and keeping your friends and your mate safe. So, as a day it was, yeah, a rough day—like most of them.

I sensed I was being personally targeted as the youths were directing a lot of shit at me. There was a change in the dynamic in the unit in who was in there and they were trying to muscle up and escalate the situation to take over the unit.

Looking back, my instincts were right and I was the target that day. They just hatched a deal that I was the one they were going to get. It could have been anyone else, but it was me that day and it was personal, 'not the uniform'. The level of aggression and language just kept coming right through that shift. I still managed to get into the units and do basketball, soccer etc to distract and redirect the restlessness. In the end, though they were coming for me. Towards the end of my shift, I was told by Rachel to go inside and maybe remove myself from the situation. So, I got out of the yard, went and got the supervisor and got them outside to try and control the yard at that point.

There were a couple of young people in the unit where I had relocated to. It was getting towards lockdown, so you're getting to that point of the day where you think about going home. I knew things were tense but at that point I did not perceive the danger I was in. We shut things down and young people start coming into the unit. I was standing in the hallway having a chat to a couple of the detainees, kind of phasing out of my shift.

I started thinking that, despite the dangerous vibes in the yard we had made it safely through that day. A detainee appears in the window and asks to be let into the unit. You do this a hundred times a day, so I thought nothing of it. I let him in and another detainee came in behind him with a cricket bat. So, at that point I've realised someone is going to get hurt here and it's either going to be me or one of the youths.

I need to step in here and tell the youth to take the bat out as you know you can't have it in the unit. I was not aggressive it was literally just conversation. Within a minute the bats cocked, and he starts cracking it at me, swinging and hitting me in the head a couple of times.

My colleague Rachel was standing next to the detainee with the cricket bat as he started to attack me. Rachel called the code and screamed into the radio I was being assaulted. Anthony, shared in his podcast interview, that he will never forget the desperation in that scream. Many officers have shared with me they are still haunted by Rachel's panicked scream, and they don't ever want to hear a scream like that again.

At that point, I knew I was in a lot of trouble. I was in a confined space and this 140kg youth was raining blows on me with the cricket bat. I have my hands up trying to defend myself and I'm

backing away down a hallway basically trying to get a gap between me and the youth. Then my jumper is pulled over my head, and I am knocked off my feet. At this point it escalates into a full-on gang assault.

So, now there are three youths stomping on me wherever they could. I did lose consciousness for a bit as I hit the deck with a hit of the bat, but I still had my hands sort of up to my face. I was thinking 'what the fuck was going on' and then I just started getting kicked repeatedly. I believe that the unit had spilled into full riot at that point. I remember thinking I'm done for here and that I could die. In my mind I was saying to my wife, my kids, my unborn baby 'that I don't think I am coming home tonight'. By then it was six or more youths kicking and punching me wherever they could. One of the youths (all 140kg of him), with a weapon, led the gang assault and was just stomping on my head over and over again. It was bad and the ferocity of the attack was frightening. This wasn't about just getting me down and letting me know who was in control, this was designed to do real damage to me and at one point I heard one of the detainees say, 'let's finish him off'.

As the kicks kept coming, I acutely felt the one that broke my back. It was just like this massive pressure going right through my whole body and at that point, Rachel threw herself on top of me and said, don't move, don't move, don't move, because she knew that if I got up, they would have probably killed me.

So, I just lay there, and the kicks just continued and all I could do was to try and protect my head with my hands. At last, the code response comes and officers come spilling in from the other units. We have dedicated response teams that respond within minutes once a code is called. It felt like a lot longer than minutes but with the number of people assaulting me and the brutality of the attack it does not take long to do a great deal of damage. I'm lying on the ground, and I can barely see at this point, and I can just see people going everywhere and then screaming and yelling, people directing, trying to, yeah, remove these youths and stop other youth getting involved.

What happened then is pretty sketchy as some of it I simply don't remember. The unit was still being 'subdued' and I could hear the Operations Managers screaming and directing staff as to what to do. I remember having to walk out of the unit with my fractured back and a nurse on each side, providing first aid and then off to hospital.

I remember sitting on the bed and I was looking out a doorway and looking at all the people walking past and the absolute distress on their faces and the fear that I saw in their eyes. They were looking at me, and I could see their relief that I was alive and then they were gone.

I heard one of the nurses say to her partner 'my god there is fluid in his ear I hope it is not from the brain' which was rather concerning. The pain relief medication kicked in quickly in the ambulance and that was great. By the time we got to hospital I was told that there were camera crews setting up outside the emergency department to get footage of me coming into the hospital. It got public very quickly. For me I was kind of in shock and I was just trying to process what had happened to me. It was funny really as I was trying to convince myself it was not that bad and I would be back at work in a couple of days. A lot of people get assaulted and get back to work so why wouldn't I? On the other hand, though I knew my colleagues had saved my life and it makes you realise how crucial the connection is between us at those times. It brought home to me why we must be hyper vigilant and alert all the time as someone's life could depend on it and in this instance, it was mine.

As the days went by, I just had this huge sense of relief I was alive. However, your thoughts soon turn to the future and to what will happen with your career and the impacts of the injuries become more evident.

I was acutely aware that I had not been there for my family. For several weeks I was in bed as my neck and head injuries were significant. I was aware that my cognitive capacity to process and comprehend tasks was impaired which was extremely worrying to me. By the time my employment was terminated (I still struggle with that) I was more aware of the impacts from the head injury and the PTSD which I hadn't fully appreciated. It was very confronting to realise this was a disability I would have to navigate for ever. Despite having five fractured vertebrae my back recovery seemed to be going okay. As the days went by my thoughts drifted to why a Code Aqua that was requested had been denied. A Code Aqua would have enabled the centre to be closed which might have provided a chance to defuse the situation.

I was aware something was going on but I didn't realise a deal was being hatched to get me. I was constantly being targeted through that day. Yes, verbally, not physically but verbally. They were coming at me like a real barrage. Senior people had picked that up and went this is off, something's going on, something is off. Something's going to happen. There were suggestions that it might have been someone was 'going down'.

When operations managers make a call to say this place is not safe, we need to shut it down, the people who sit in a position of power to make that call are juggling a whole bunch of stuff. They're going. Okay, if we lock one unit down, what does that do for the rest of the centre? If we do this, you know we then must justify a whole bunch of isolations. We've got to write reports. There's a whole bunch of stuff that happens at that point and you know a whole bunch of isolations will get sent up so high that they could end up with the Minister. You know quite senior levels of government, potentially even further than that Human rights commissions, you know, child services commissioners get involved and all this sort of stuff, and so they're navigating that. So, they're going. Do I keep my officers safe? Do I keep the unit safe by locking it down, or do I just hope that for the next five or 10 minutes we can juggle it and avoid the complexity of locking the centre down?

The decision was made not to close the centre, and my safety was secondary to the larger political issues. I have never had anyone tell me what happened that night or why the request for Code Aqua was declined. At one point I was on a stretcher looking back into the unit and I saw the executive director of custodial operations, Victoria, standing on the floor. So, I knew at that point things had progressed to a high level, quickly. I am not sure how it was managed and unofficial sort of stuff might have happened, but the official like no to the Code Aqua was a denial of the need to shut this centre down. I still have flashbacks to the images of the assault and the things that happened that night. I have vivid recollections of thinking it is only a matter of minutes until they shut this joint down, and we can get home to our families, but they never did. I will live for ever wondering had they have shut Malmsbury down that day would I have not been assaulted? Sadly, I will never know.

It was not easy living this personally and seeing the public focus the assault had received. The youths who had assaulted me were virtually immediately removed from youth custody and for the first time in Victoria transferred into adult custody. So, it was in the news, and the court case was held very quickly the next day. The severity of the assault meant my government employer felt an immediate response was required.

A lot of the stuff that I've struggled to navigate since the assault has come off the back of the quickness of the judicial process. They had trouble finding a magistrate who could hear the case that quick and myself and Anthony were not represented in court. One of the issues for me was a lot of information around what happened to me was publicly released through the court process and ultimately through the press. I really lost control of what happened to me as no one consulted Anthony or myself about any of it.

So, I get my images being shown on all the news outlets throughout the night and right through the next day. So here I am seeing myself being, basically nearly being finished off. So, that was not easy to watch or deal with. I did not feel very supported either. People ringing me on Saturdays saying your names on the news, your names on the radio, we can see what happened to you. All these things around privacy that should have been put in place to protect me, were just taken away and the worst day in my life was out there for everyone to see. I don't think any thought went into my feelings, my thoughts about wanting to return to work. Any control I had over the situation was taken away within 24 hours.

It caused Anthony and me great distress that our full names and photos after the assault were released to the press without even informing us. The department generally has a cloak of secrecy about everything they do and generally try very hard to keep what happens in prisons out of the press. In this instance there was no cloak of secrecy, and our trauma was there for all to see. Our privacy was sacrificed because it suited the Department narrative to have it out there and that was how they wanted to manage the situation. It wasn't used to protect me the minute I needed that protection.

So, I had to navigate that it's like, okay, we've sent you off and this has happened to you, but this isn't about you. That action probably was nearly as hard to deal with as the assault. I was the victim, but I wasn't being treated as the victim of that assault. It was like we're going to use that assault to justify the next set of actions which are to remove people from youth custody and put them in adult custody, and we're not going to have anyone come back to us and say, why are youth being remanded in adult custody? So, from what I understand, the Department needed to convince the magistrate that what was needed was to remand these youths into adult custody, which I don't believe had happened in Victoria up to that point. So, they needed a set of rationale to outline why this was the most appropriate course of action. Whilst I cannot substantiate it, I heard that the Department, decided by releasing all the footage of the assault and our personal details to the court it would justify and expedite the decision to move these youths into an adult prison. So, footage, names and secure footage, that I never got to see were all released to the court.

As someone who worked in that environment, I never got to see that footage. Yet that was decided that it could be put on the 6 o'clock news. I'm lying on the couch on a Friday night and bang, I'm the first image on Channel 9. They're getting a crop and a cricket bat. So, I'm thinking where am I? Like they're coming after me again, like what's this about? At that point I knew my job was gone, not only dealing with everything I'm going to have to deal with in the next, however long, but my job's gone effectively, like I can't go back to work in that environment. What do I do? What happens next? So yeah, that decision at that point was made by the magistrate to justify why he was remanding kids into adult custody, and that's my belief. Whilst it was the magistrate who permitted our identity to be revealed the Department did nothing to prevent that, which to me was just abandoning their duty of care to Anthony and myself.

I never expected an apology but some formal recognition of what I went through and that it was one of the worst things you could go through would have been nice.

In terms of follow up you would get a phone call from a unit manager just to check in with you. This would have been prompted by pops up and a calendar reminder to give you a phone call to say, how are you going as a part of return to work like any other workplace.

It's a graduated thing where they manage you on a return to work, but it probably doesn't recognise the reality of what you have been through. It doesn't recognise the work that you were involved in and the challenges of going back into a correctional setting after that level of assault. At the Senior Manager level and above, there an awareness of the significance of the assault and the potential damage that it had done to me, but I don't think anyone knew what to do with me or anywhere near understood the impact it had, had on me. You would get the calls to check on you, but it seemed more a routine or prompted contact, to tick a box as we would say. I don't remember anybody talking to me to gain an understanding of what was happening to me. It was primarily damage control and rarely felt sincere.

I had many conversations with the Youth Commissioner and occasionally the Minister and I wanted to have those conversations. I would look for any opportunity to advocate for staff safety as I didn't want this to happen to anyone else. I wanted to contribute and be a part of a reform process that encompassed the needs of youth but concurrently provided greater support and safety to those who worked with them.

I wanted to be part of that. And so that was the conversations that I had. I probably took a step back from the impacts of my own injuries and the trauma and the PTSD and all that sort of stuff and tried to focus on what needed to change. When I reflect on those high-level conversations, I never came away with a sense that people really understood 'life on the floor on a daily basis.'

In my mind I was always going back to work. It wasn't going to impact me; it wasn't going to define me. As time went by, I realised I was not going to get back to work and that the assault probably has defined me to a degree. When I asked for support, it generally wasn't given. The basic return to work stuff was there. You would be contacted and told; we can try and find you a role! It became clear very early on to me that I was never going back to work in my pre-injury role. That was never going to happen for me. There was a recognition of that at high levels.

It is not easy to digest that the events of 3/10/2019 had permanently changed me and permanently changed the direction of my career or even if I still had a career. Yet I don't remember anybody talking to me about any of that. It very quickly became 'what are we going to do with him'. For everybody else my past life or who I used to be really didn't matter anymore. They simply had a problem to solve, and I simply had the rest of my life to live.

On one occasion I approached the one of the operations managers, who should have an awareness of what I was going through, to have a talk. He said I would need to make an appointment which I did. When I attended the session, he said 'which assault were you in?' I cryptically replied, 'the one that shut the whole centre down for four days'. The GM of the prison who was present also, just went red and mumbled sorry. I thought to myself well you are sitting on that chair whilst people like me are getting their heads bashed in and you don't even know what assault I was in. Maybe we should give assaults a number and I could have said I was in assault no 4! There's no attention to detail of what you have been through and he would have been more focussed on who he was going to get to replace me and now that I was sitting in front of them what the hell was, he going to do with me.

It is moments like these when you realise you are really on your own and I started to think if I wasn't going to be able to go back on the floor, how could I contribute in other ways? I missed my colleagues; I missed the connections I had, how could I maintain that? I looked for opportunities, but nothing ever materialised. No one really connected with my idea that I still had a contribution to make. At the end of it all it left me broken and very isolated. There was no real concern that I had lost virtually my whole life and the stress this placed on my family was catastrophic. I had put my life on the line for the job and I just felt I had nowhere to turn.

Unofficially people would say we need to look after you. They would tell me not to worry, 'that things would work out' and so on. In the end they were just words. Unofficially people can say anything at the time to placate you or have a feeling we must do something with this guy, but when it comes into materialising into a job, a position, a career which I've lost, it's not there. Initially in taking on the advocacy for a safer working environment I was a part of a process, and I was desperate to be a part of a team. I kind of liked keeping an eye out for colleagues' wellbeing. It was part of my nature, my background and what I've done most of my life. I was not so good, as I found out, looking after my own well-being. I had a real interest in looking after other people's wellbeing and I saw opportunities to provide support in that space.

I just wanted to be back at work, and I thought once back things would just sort themselves out. I was dealing with a lot, the long nights, driving to work, medical appointments and so on. I would tell myself it'll be okay but clearly it wasn't. I was after that opportunity, the opportunity to return to work. That opportunity came along to act in a role that was part of a reform process in youth justice. I loved it, I was working with a mate, working with a team. We contributed to a parliamentary bill to reform the youth justice system, and the team received great feedback; quite high levels of government were very impressed. I was on a high but the high did not last for long. I had acted in this position for twelve months, yet when it was advertised permanently, I didn't even get an interview. The day after that I walked into work and I didn't want to be there, I had to go home. I received no feedback about why I had not been given an interview. It took some weeks to get over the disappointment of missing that job, but I reached out again in the hope other job opportunities might present themselves as a part of the return-to-work progress. I requested another meeting with the General Manager to look at the next move.

Right at the start of the meeting, he asked me if I was able to return to work in the units? I told him I had PTSD and I could not possibly return to the units, and I was still fearful of walking down the street let alone returning to the units. He then said I am sorry and handed me a dismissal letter stating that I had to show cause why I couldn't go back to my pre-injury role and if I was not medically fit to return to my pre-injury role I would be dismissed. I was really confused and when I went to work the next day I was formally 'terminated' and escorted from the site just like a criminal. I just couldn't believe it. After all I had been through, I never saw the dismissal coming. It defies any sort of compassion or humanity. I remember saying 'I've tried so hard to come back. I've come back from something that most people won't ever come back from and this is what I get?' The reply was 'sorry Justin!'

I was really struggling to work out a way of navigating what was happening. I rang my wife, and told her I had just been sacked and she's just like, What? What next? What more can they do to you'?

## Termination Letter

*Copy of the letter Justin received informing him his employment was going to be terminated.*

**Mr Justin White**

Dear Mr White

I am writing regarding your capacity to perform your pre-injury role as a Youth Justice Worker for the Department of Justice and Community Safety at Malmsbury Youth Justice Precinct following the injury you sustained in October 2019.

Based on your extended absence from your pre-injury role the department has formed the view that you are unable to perform the inherent requirements of your assigned role. It is my intention, based on this information, to advise the Secretary of the department to consider termination of your employment for reasons that you cannot fulfil the inherent requirements of your role as a Youth Justice Worker.

Prior to taking the next step, I am affording you an opportunity to respond. Should you have any medical evidence that contradicts the departments view about your ability to complete the inherent requirements of your role or any other information you wish the department to consider (including any proposed adjustments that would allow you to fulfil the inherent requirements of your role), please provide this information in writing within 14 days of receipt of this letter.

If you do not respond or the response you provide does not materially alter the departments view about your capacity to fulfil the inherent requirements of your role, I intend to advise the Secretary to consider termination of your employment.

Acting Director Employee and Workplace Relations

7/10/2021

*'I have gone from being a loyal, trusted employee, who had put his life on the line to do his job, to the enemy who needed to be terminated.'*

***Justin White***

I just wanted to get out of there. I had no idea of what I was going to do. I did not know how I was going to manage this. Throughout this process I had met people in high places, and I thought I should reach out to them and get some advice on what I should do.

I reached out to these people, who I had met post assault and asked them, where's this come from? Has this ever happened before? I know people who've worked in this return-to-work space and they all said to me they had never seen a letter like this before and no one could make sense around how it was drafted let alone given to me! This activated a process where people recognised this was not right and things started to happen behind the scenes.

I had applied for a job about a week before the termination. It was a position that was opening up, and it was in the area of DCJS responding to the Covid pandemic. I was anxious about the impact of having my employment terminated would have on the jobs I had applied for.

People promised me they would investigate it for me and they did. They took it to the commissioner and to their credit, were able to halt the termination. After another week I received a call to say my application had been successful. Whilst I should have been happy, I wasn't and I realised at that point whilst trying to push through how I was being treated my mental health was in freefall. All I could think of was here goes the roller coaster again. I was in the depths of despair and had an overwhelming sense that I didn't know that I could do this anymore.

I was at the bottom, and the PTSD just took off. I was having constant nightmares, reliving the assault night after night and it was a bad place to be. I worried constantly about my wife and three children and how we were going to manage.

My wife full-on supported me but I saw the toll this took on her. The assault will always be the most traumatic part of this experience but the post-incident treatment by my employer is right up there in terms of compounding my PTSD. It was so ironic that at last, I had a job, but I had been so destroyed by the process of getting it I had severe doubts about my capacity to do it. I never really came to terms with having my employment terminated when all I had done was be assaulted at work and did not have a sense it was safe for me to return to 12-hour shifts in a detention centre. I was so mentally and physically exhausted I felt I shouldn't take it, but I had fought so hard I felt I had to try.

I was not alone in going through these as countless other officers had been majorly assaulted. The return-to-work process was a well-worn path and the level of support you got was basically luck of the draw. I had some basic counselling, but I did not receive specialised trauma counselling at the time. Trauma is different when you experience it as a part of your job and being assaulted at work has not been easy to work through. It's the impact of ultimately losing your job, losing your career, losing your everything, your future, as opposed to dealing with being assaulted but other aspects of your life remain more constant.

I probably didn't realise how angry I was and I was angry at the people who care about me. So that was my family, that was my kids, that was my wife. The assault changed me and my family have borne the impact of that, and it has been significant and it is not over yet. This stuff's going to be there for a long time. It is hard for my wife to understand what I am going through as night after night you must navigate the impact of being assaulted, the nightmares, the dreams, constantly having a sense of not being safe and knowing your future has been taken away and having no idea what will replace it. So that's the hardest bit. We haven't been out of my house much.

My wife had to go back to work, and we had a young baby. At the time I was assaulted my wife was experiencing a high-risk pregnancy and we could have lost the baby. No one really considered that the stress of that was connected to the assault. It was news at the time and people move on but it's still impacting me daily.

There had been very little discussion with management throughout the whole process, particularly around how I was going. It did not occur to anyone that having and dealing with PTSD might cause me some issues in my new role. One day I walked into work whilst I was waiting for my new role to start and my manager basically said to me, 'why are you here? So, I said, trying to prepare for my new role'. He replied, 'you shouldn't be here'. His attitude and his rudeness towards me just penetrated right through me.

So that was the catalyst for me to basically get into my car, but I didn't know what to do, it was a sense of overwhelming panic. I was not sure of how I was going to get home that day. The coldness and lack of caring just got to me. I simply had no more energy to fight. My COVID response role was being set up but hadn't started yet. With all this stuff going around me and personally still not feeling safe, I thought, I don't know what I've got to do, how can I navigate through this. The way he treated me was just so demeaning I'm trying to deal with things but there was no encouragement from managers. They would put me down whenever they felt like it and never stopped to think about the impact their words were having on me. I didn't believe the department was going to look after me and there was plenty of evidence to suggest they weren't.

At that point they issued an alert as a 'staff member is missing', blah, blah, blah. I've got people ringing me and I eventually spoke to the counsellor at work.

I just broke down and I told her, I can't be there and I don't want to be like this anymore. I need some help and some support. Please give me some support. I was crying out for support. I had, had access at the highest level, the Minister, the Youth Commissioner and so on and here I was crying in my car begging for help. I realised at that moment I had lost my dignity totally and I was forced to beg for help and some understanding of what I had been through. There was rarely any acknowledgement that I nearly died at work.

I was not an officer that was in their face or 'asking for it' I was an officer who cared for the youth and interacted with them. Despite that I was targeted. I am not sure whether anyone really understood what that would be like to be so brutally bashed when you haven't really done anything wrong. There was no recognition I was not coping. I felt I had become a problem, and no one quite knew how to solve it.

I've been very angry. I've been broken. I've had to feel pain I never could have imagined. I felt like I've had to fight for everything. My Work Cover case was also closed as well and so I had to fight to get that process reactivated. So, I thought I could at least have the right to get to the two-year deadline. Well, the decision was made and my case was closed without anyone speaking to me. Reversing these poorly informed decisions takes a lot of energy.

There have been times I have reached out to Senior people I have known for help, and they have looked at how I have been treated with disbelief.

Various issues have been resolved for me with their help not through a system working. One Senior leader of a stakeholder service said, 'Justin I don't know what is going on here, this is the worst I've ever seen, so we've got to fix this, which they did. I was constantly contacting people who I knew to help get things moving for me. The Departmental system was simply dysfunctional and most of what I achieved came from my own orchestration and the individual help of others.

*'How could I be dismissed for being a victim of such a serious assault that shut the centre down for four days and yet then experience being escorted off the youth centre site like an offender not a victim? It hurt me very deeply!*

***Justin White***

## Damaged Goods

Looking back now there was no interest in looking for alternative roles for me. You are seen as damaged goods. It is never verbalised but you are fighting that all the time as well.

You know, no one wants to have that label on them that you're damaged. You're viewed as a ticking time bomb and my sense at times was people were thinking why don't you just take your damage and go. They were simply waiting for me to leave which explained why no one really went out of their way to properly assess what my work capacity was. You know, like you sit down and you have a conversation with people and say, well, you've got skills in certain areas, in fact, you've probably got more now than you had before. But you, you know you're seen as damaged and you're seen as someone who should be managed and probably managed out.

There was awareness that I had skills and it was discussed about the potential I had to work in a peer support environment as I understood workplace issues and the risks that were an integral part of that. The other side of the story though was that being 'damaged' in the way I was they didn't want me anywhere near the trainees or new graduates for fear they would hear my story. There was also great reluctance to conduct peer support groups as bringing all these damaged officers together was seen as 'to risky'. The wellbeing teams wanted to, but the idea was knocked down from above.

There was no clear process or creative thinking in assisting me to retrain into something else. There were simply an awareness and a concern I would now be a workplace liability. To me this evolves out of a total lack of understanding of how trauma impacts on people and the incapacity of staff to recognise 'damaged goods can still have the resiliency and the capacity to work—it just might be different work. I try not to think of what a different position I might have been in, if I had been properly supported and cared for.

## The Future

I have thought about this a lot, and I thought one of the things that I need to get back to where I was and one of them was that connection to colleagues, connection to mates, connection to a squad, whatever that looks like.

And so, I thought I'll follow the adult corrections path [not custodial] and I'm being told that my skill set was wanted. I went through the process, and I was deemed unsuccessful or unsuitable, yet I was being chased in February this year and in the meantime, they changed their minds. My idea was to go back into corrections but in a different role. I suspect they got into my Malmsbury history and decided the risks were too great. No one told me that and I received no feedback as to what was going on. You were second-guessing yourself all along. And then in the meantime, nothing happened. It was slowly dawning on me that what I was desperately hoping for, to work in a team with offenders was slowly slipping away from me.

The occupational health providers did try and identify roles for me and I appreciated that. They did realise that attention needed to be paid to what the role was. You always ended up having to apply for jobs and generally never got them. It just became a demoralising process in the end and my self-confidence just kept spiralling to all-time lows.

I have told my story a lot, to many different people but most of the time you're telling it to people who don't have an understanding or a concept of what you are talking about 'looks like'. You feel like you are not heard and that you are talking to a brick wall a lot of the time. There were times I

just felt like a 'number', just part of the process and the lack of recognition or awareness of what I had been through really hurt me.

All I really wanted was an apology. It could have been as simple as like, sorry, we're sorry. We recognise what you went through and we are going to support you and your family for however long it takes to get you back to work. That's all I wanted and is probably what I should have had.

As the process went on and I came up with ideas the department would just say no. I was not a part of the process and they fought me tooth and nail on any type of financial compensation for my injuries. They questioned the nature of my injuries and did all they could to distance themselves from taking any responsibility for what happened to me. You are provided no support by this stage. It was a lonely place to be, you are trapped and you have nowhere to go. I felt like the enemy in no man's land. Looking back now I was never going to get back to work, within the justice field, as the processes that needed to happen simply didn't exist and the processes that did exist simply destroyed me and were largely geared towards exiting injured officers from the workforce.

## Trauma Counselling

When you go through something like I went through you really don't know what the best way is forward. Experiencing that level of psychological trauma and the physical injuries were a new experience for me. I didn't know what I needed and I learnt as I went along. There was no pathway for me to follow. Managers offered Employee Assistance counselling [EAP] but they would give me a card and tell me to 'give them a ring'. That was it, no one really explained to me why I needed to give them a ring. So, I didn't.

It was not until one day I sat with my GP and shared with her the extent of the psychological trauma I was experiencing. With my mental health experience, I suggested a clinic to my GP that might be able to help me, and she agreed to refer me there. I contacted the clinic and discovered they treat people with severe PTSD and particularly those with occupational-related trauma. They did not normally cover correction officers but agreed to take me on. The counsellor understood me from the beginning, and she understood the context of what happened to me. Whilst she needed to hear my story she knew and understood the context it occurred in and she knew what brought me there. She got it and it was a fantastic clinic and simply amazing to be able to access that support. I know a lot of people struggle to get support and whilst it was a bit of a fight to get there, I got there. The EMDR therapy was really, hard and it left me feeling vulnerable and exposed. But that's part of the processing what you have experienced and moving through it.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) was the most bizarre thing I've ever done in my life—Incredible, Amazing. Following a bouncing ball across a screen, what does that do? But it puts you there, back at Malmsbury, and then it starts to bring associations back. So, you start to talk about what happened and you'll hear a narrative response from your counsellor who will talk to you and it's almost hypnosis, but there's a narrative there and the counsellor will ask you what do you see now? What are you feeling? And you're feeling it, you're processing that and a lot of what happens, what happened to me I am re-experiencing in the therapy session. I'm not going to say that happens for everyone, but what happened for me was that I was feeling these emotions constantly during the sessions. I'm swinging up and down, hypervigilant, angry, depressed and all this constantly happening a hundred times a day. But I didn't know what was

happening to me. I didn't know what was going on. The therapy was a learning process and it's like rewiring the brain.

It's connecting everything back. Why are you feeling this? Tell me what you see? And you are so vulnerable though. That's probably the bit that I took out of it was that I lost all my defence mechanisms. I couldn't be, I couldn't project, pretend to be this or pretend to be that, because it strips you right back to not much, and that's part of the re-processing. Slowly you start to process what happened and you start to understand what's going on. I would like to see anyone who's had a similar experience to me or has had to navigate trauma experiences to be able to do this, because it just changed my life.

It was that dramatic to be able to feel again, to be able to process and have emotion and not just anger, but to feel love and hope again the things I took for granted before. To be able to feel that again was just incredible. It was the third lot of therapy I had tried and all I wanted was to be not impacting on people the way I was. The outbursts of anger on my family that I couldn't control I never wanted to hurt my family in that way. The therapy was hard, but I had to do it, it is hard to explain like to give it words to and what therapy does, but it allows you to feel like you're back in control a bit. You feel like everything's out of your control. So, when you start to be able to process and navigate what is happening to you and you're understanding what's going on you can start to put a label on it and you can start to say to your kids, your wife, that Dad's not great today and this is why not just reacting all the time.

I've always been a hopeful guy, like I've been more optimistic than not. I've held hope for people in the workspaces I've been in, I had hope for the youths at Malmsbury. Hope's one of my key kind of values and what I base my life around. Ultimately being assaulted slowly took my hope away until I had none and I didn't know how to navigate the world without hope. I just thought everything just kept coming and coming at me and there was no way to defend myself from it. A bit like the assault in a way. And for me to be able to say to my kids yes, this has impacted on us so much, but not anymore. I want to turn around and say, dads in a better place now and I think I've got there. So, you know that moment where that just clicks and you go 'I am going to be okay'. I am in a better place now and you're not okay for so long. To say that you're starting to feel okay is quite emotional, like you've got tears streaming down your face, your children are almost bawling, because they've been a part of the journey.

You know they're living it as much as you. To feel like you might be able to be in control again and start to navigate your life. And live your life again is powerful.

And look, you know I didn't have hope for a long time.

So, I've been through some intense trauma treatment, and you know I've done that for two and a half years every week and that has helped and it's amazing what it has done for me. I still live with this every day, but the treatment has made a real difference. The fear you have of everyday life, the real fear that your personal safety, your family's health and safety is at risk, has subsided a bit. It is still a battle though and I have had to go a complex legal process that was eventually settled. Until you get to that point you can't move forward.

We have been able to buy a house now, and we decided to move towns. That has been quite an adjustment, and I am navigating that now, but I feel safer now, because even though the assault occurred at Malmsbury, which has been closed, a lot of what happened to me was in the town where I lived. So, the court cases and all these things were in that town. So, everything still associated with the assault was associated with where I used to live, and that made it very hard.

I just didn't feel safe, and so everything that families would normally do was not an option for me. I became completely disconnected from everything, in a state of constant fear, having bad nightmares and things constantly just trying to navigate every day as well as trying to be there for my family. It has been hard.

## Sophie

Sophie's been amazing. I'm not sure many marriages would have survived this. She's had to navigate all that I have gone through. Sophie was there too and witnessed firsthand the impact the Malmsbury assault had on me. Sophie was heavily pregnant in a high-risk pregnancy at that time, when I was assaulted, we thought we were going to lose our baby. There's a whole bunch of stuff that we were navigating, and you don't ever wish to test how strong your marriage is in that way, and I think on several times Sophie could have walked away and probably should have. But she is an amazing person, and I don't know if I could have stuck around if Sophie wasn't there, particularly with the crap being thrown at me constantly. I think Sophie understood how perilous my hold on life was. She just knew. She knew how bad this was and so that anything that I was saying or reacting to or doing or not doing was because of this or why I was like the way I was. She had to keep going as I wasn't going. Sophie had to go back to work six months after our third child was born because she didn't know where our future was, or if I had a job, or if I was going to be okay, if I was ever going to be okay again. Like she just didn't know any of these things and so she just had to keep going.

You know the impact on the kids well. You know the publicity side of that was probably the hardest for the kids to navigate. Sure, dad was a bit grumpy, angry at times and reactive, and not the dad that I once was, which was very hands-on and, you know, playing all the time. But every time I got a knock, I'd have a concussion, and it was just this sequence of things that if I got a knock on the head I'd be wrecked for days. And so, you stop being the dad that you were and your identity is gone. Your job's gone; you're not a dad anymore. So, what are you? It's navigating all that whilst still trying to keep the family kind of happy and functioning.

I think for a long time and Sophie was, like me, a bit optimistic that things will eventually be okay, will eventually work out. Then after several months and years go by, Sophie lost hope. Sophie said to me one day we've got no hope anymore. We are in a lot of trouble. It was a sad time for both of us, but you keep going, like everyone does. We just didn't know where the end of this was.

Sophie felt very exposed by all this stuff hitting the press and our lives on the front page of the paper. She lived with my fears of our personal safety stuff. Sophie would ask me are we still at risk? Sophie just wants that to be a long-forgotten memory, I think. For her to even talk about it, she's had to live it, is very hard for her. She was not a witness to the assault, but in a way, she's lived it every day for five years. I think the kids were initially really shaken, couldn't go to school and things like that. They saw how it impacted me, continues to impact, with my head injuries and stuff. The kids are amazing, yet it is still hard to gauge what the impact of all of this will be on them—time will tell, I guess.

## Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

In my mind there was little understanding or interest for that matter around the severity of my head injuries. What does it look like? What is it? I present okay, I look okay, I talk okay, but I'm not. I've constant headaches. I feel like I'm in concussion. I have days I call like an ABI day, where I just can't process what is happening. I can't think. Everything's a brain fog, and I've had

those a lot recently and you wonder, what does the future look like? A lot remains to be answered. Can I get back to work? Can I ever be a functioning member of the work force? For a long time, I had hoped to get back to where I was. I know now that's probably not going to happen and there's an acceptance there, but I don't know what comes next. We've had settlement now so that bridge has been crossed but the future looms large and I have no idea what it holds. I would really have appreciated some guidance and support from my employer around my cognitive brain changes, but it was not forthcoming and to be honest I don't think anyone even thought of it.

## Closing Comment from Justin

There must be something I can do with this experience. Can I change the system? Can I get in there and be part of that change? I thought I could. I thought I was part of a plan or a rollout of support services that was going to help and support officers and maybe improve things a bit. That was my motivation and passion was to be part of positive change for officers working in prison environments. There must be change we can't go on doing things the way we are.

Youth justice appears in the news quite a bit, a lot, depending on which state you're in. The ability to be able to go, to work, to contribute, make positive change was so important to me. That these youth all go home, that I was going to be involved in sending someone home in a better place than what they came here, had great appeal to me because they all go back to their community. So, I wanted them to go back to their community with something that has a future attached to it that's not involved in crime. That was my passion and I've got to try and find another passion and try and find another way to reconnect with myself again.

The last five years have probably been the hardest five years of my life. I've had to fight, I've had to battle, I've had to take on health challenges around my mental health. I've gone through treatment that you know is quite punishing, so it leaves you really exposed, quite vulnerable. The impact on me and my family was so significant and there were times we were genuinely fearful we would not have a roof over our heads.

For most of that time, we were constantly worried that we'd lose our capacity to pay the rent and have nowhere to live. Sophie, my wife had to go back to work early after our son was born due to me being unable to work. The impacts are so significant, and another aspect has been this constant feeling of not being safe. I can be walking down the street, places where the risk is quite low, but I don't feel safe. I will be constantly looking over my shoulder in case someone is coming up behind me. No one really understands this feeling of being in constant danger. You have that at work all the time, but the assault sent it through the roof. Even after a couple weeks a lot of people stop asking are you okay? It was kind of ironic but as I went downhill and everything just got harder there were fewer people asking me how I was.

There was not really any acknowledgement of the reality that I had been through a major assault. There were initial expressions of 'we will support you', 'you will be okay', 'don't worry about a thing', which gave me a sense I would probably be okay. There was no guidance of what lay ahead for me and the battle I would have to have. There was no real tracking of my emotional state, it was just this reassurance I would be okay.

I came to not trust any process or anyone in response to the complete lack of duty of care shown to me. I felt like I was drowning and as a victim I lost the capacity to interpret or understand the myriads of contradictory processes that were thrown at me. Very few people really understood the high level of stress and trauma I was experiencing or that the way they

were treating me was adding to my suffering. I did have some very supportive colleagues and there were people who did try very hard to advocate for me. But the justice system is a very hard system to advocate within. I often wonder if I had received support, guidance and understanding all the way through the recovery process would I be in a better place than I am now? It is not a hard question to answer, and I feel some bitterness around the reality that what I needed was not there for me. Here we are, nearly six years down the track and my future still seems a long way down the track, having said that though I still have a 'kick in my step' and a hope that one day I can contribute to the world of youth justice, like I had always hoped to do!

## Bruce's Reflections on Justin's Story

There is a lot of irony in Justin's story, and I wish to highlight one. Justin entered the field of youth justice as the idea of making a difference in the lives of youths really appealed to him. He wanted to help change the life direction of these youths and felt he had the skills to do it. Post-assault this passion to make a difference, to contribute did not die it just shifted. Justin wanted to be a part of the process of making Malmsbury a safer place.

### Reflection 1

*Clearly there's a risk and you understand that an environment like this has significant risks to your personal safety. It's not really talked about in the training, in the sense of what you will be confronting, what you are going to be exposed to and the level of abuse and violence that will be directed at you every day.*

*JW*

Justin makes a critical observation here and it is backed up by most officers I have spoken too. The marketing approach to attract staff is almost totally around the concept 'of making a difference to the lives of the youth' and nothing about the inevitable exposure to violence and trauma that comes from working in a youth detention environment. From the beginning this sets up a thought process around what you can do for the youths and not what the youths can do to you. This is very subtle, but it permeates through the whole correction industry and as a result there is virtually no training provided around what 'officers need to do' to be able to manage and deal with the level of abuse, violence and trauma they will be exposed to. Whilst de-escalating angry and violent youths was covered in the training (not marketing) there is nothing on what will be required, of officers, to psychologically manage these at times very traumatic experiences and being the target of such behaviours.

### Reflection 2

*But the reality of being in that environment is that it is all encompassing and it certainly impacts on all aspects of your life. I think a lot of people probably are not aware of just how much of an impact this work can have on you.*

*JW*

Justin expresses this point with such clarity, and I am sure he is right. There is a lot of system denial around how much impact this work has on their staff and the long-term psychological damage it can cause. Justin shares in his story this sense of 'exhaustion and hypervigilance' was virtually present in his life the whole time he worked at Malmsbury and that it occupied a great deal of his thinking time during and after work. Justin outlines the amount of energy one has to give to this work and the constant fatigue officers experience. Prison authorities seem very resistant hearing or exploring these 'lived experience' accounts of the impact of this work on staff. For once you hear them you must develop responses to them. Subsequently there is no validation or recognition given around the issue of workplace hypervigilance, fear and fatigue amongst officers or its diverse range of psychological impacts.

The ramification of that denial of workplace reality is that minimal support services or interventions are available that would address or assist officers to manage this constant state of hypervigilance. I remember a conversation with a senior prison manager where I raised the

issue of how many codes officers must attend in a normal month and the impact on the body of the repeated triggering of the flight/fight response required to attend a code. He immediately went 'Oh no I love that surge of adrenalin and the high that comes with it.' The response captures the other side of the story but revealed a very limited understanding of how working in a dangerous environment impact on most people who do it and that over time this can be become quite problematic.

To develop support or training for staff around key issues like hypervigilance, fatigue and so on, Managers must identify it as an issue, realise a response is required and then make it happen. Whenever I wanted to run training I was constantly met with a multitude of reasons as to why that wouldn't work. Rotating shifts, had to be maximum 2 hours on lockdown day, mandatory topics had priority etc. Subsequently, from what I witnessed, training tended to be educational, easy to deliver on mass with no interaction amongst participants and no follow up. Many of the issues raised by officers, that relevant training would have been helpful for, never saw the light of day. These important expressions of workplace issues simply exist in a void with no possible resolution.

### Reflection 3

*The aim to get these kids out of a life of crime into a different way of being was the philosophy being promoted and there was a lot of focus on that. There was no focus on how to cope with the sound of an officer having his jaw and eye socket broken.*

*JW*

This is a complex reflection from Justin and powerfully captures both ends of the conundrum the system finds itself in. As we know despite the challenges working at Malmsbury Justin was one of the officers who tried to engage with the youths. Yet he also talked about how traumatic it was for him to hear his colleague's jaw and eye socket being broken when he was assaulted by a youth. Clearly there is no simple answer here, but it captures why working in these environments is so challenging. To continue to provide professional care to a youth that has broken a colleague's jaw and eye socket requires complex psychological processing and the 'systems' incapacity to really deal with or articulate the complexity of issues like this really doesn't help. The regularity of assaults on officers in the youth detention system is a constant reminder to all officers of the risk of injury and the possible severity of any assault. The rhetoric of moving kids away from a life of crime is easy to espouse being the person sitting with them and trying to elicit this transformation is not quite so straightforward.

### Reflection 4

*You know by the end of it I realised why other officers were not engaging with the youth because it was easier to keep yourself safe by having your back against the wall. There priority was to keep themselves safe on the shift. Reality was the more you engaged with the youths the more you were putting yourself at risk.*

*JW*

This is another example of issues within the culture of the centre that just never gets addressed. With the focus of the centre being this idealistic working with youths to change their lives comes a blinding to the reality of how our brains work. With Malmsbury being such a violent place to work I can understand how the hypervigilance of staff is high and the underlying fear of being

hurt is through the roof. With this overwhelming feeling staff have of not being safe it is not surprising, almost to be expected, that many staff will behave in a way that minimises their exposure to these dangerous situations. When prison authorities have their head in the sand around the issue of improving safety for staff, it is also not surprising this behaviour or self-protective reaction to the environment does not get addressed. I still remember one night watching the news and they showed a clip from the new Cherry Creek Youth Detention centre (Malmsbury Replacement) and it showed this youth walking towards a youth detention officer and punching him with full force, in the face, with the officer crumpling to the ground. It looked a totally unprovoked attack. I couldn't really visualise what it would be like to have that happen to you at work! But I could understand if that officer returned to work their personal safety would become a higher priority and their behaviour could well change to reflect that. Ultimately, the instinctual part of our brains focus is to keep us safe. If your work constantly requires the overriding of this instinct (Military, Police, Corrections etc) there are often psychological complexities and ramifications in doing so. The temptation to stray outside job requirements to keep yourself safe is understandable and sometimes if you are emotionally struggling irresistible. The other side of this is the safer the environment is for youth officers the less they would have to use avoidance behaviours to stay safe and the freer they would be to interact with the youth at a higher level!

## Reflection 5

*There is no sitting with them sharing stories with your guard down. They have you on edge and they know that. By the end of a 12 hour shift you have nothing left.*

**JW**

This really is a very different story to the vision recruitment material provides in terms of the bountiful and meaningful engagements you will have with the youth. At times this material conveys an image of the youths just waiting for you to come and change their lives. Justin provides a realistic description of the context that defines the interaction between the youth and the staff with its inherent complexities. When you are fearful of the person you are engaging with and understand this interaction can have negative consequences for self and colleagues, this will significantly interfere with the nature of that relationship. Adult and youth correction officers tell me repeatedly 'you can never let your guard down' as this will be taken advantage of.

It seems obvious to me that any philosophy of working with youths in custody that does not factor in this relationship reality is not really balanced or thought through and places officers at higher risk, particularly with offenders with a propensity for violence as the safeguards that should be in place are not in place.

## Reflection 6

*My rights as a worker, to go to work and come home safely were placed well behind the rights of the young people repeatedly. Initiatives that would have provided us with a lot greater safety were simply never implemented as they were seen as being anti-rehabilitation by restricting the freedoms of the youth. There was no deterrence for their violent behaviour.*

**JW**

I have witnessed first-hand the employer resistance to shifting focus off prisoner outcomes and the rhetorical ideas around making a prison feel like a home environment, to enhance prisoner

rehabilitation outcomes, rather than accepting that some prisoners in maximum security prisons or youth detention centres, have the capacity to be extremely violent. Officer safety needs to have precedence over some concept of connecting the idea of creating a home-like environment to more positive prisoner rehabilitation outcomes. (i.e. you don't have handcuffs at home, so they need to be last resort in a prison.) Simplistically as prisoners/youth display violent and abusive behaviour to other detainees or officers their needs to be more consequences than the provision of 'pizza and coke' to de-escalate them. There needs to be intensive 1-1 programmes that work with them around their behaviour but identifies risks to staff and constructs an environment that provides both safety for the detainees and the officers.

Assaults on officers reverberate throughout the whole custodial system and the lack of any real consequences for offenders is a major issue for all staff who have prisoner/detainee contact. Equally the influence these philosophical prisoner management concepts have, overtime, taken precedence over many initiatives that would have made officers safer. There seemed to be an acceptance that officers would be injured, and it was 'part of the job' rather than any significant attempt to address the imbalance in priorities.

## Reflection 7

*When I attended the session, he said 'which assault were you in?' I cryptically replied, 'the one that shut the whole centre down for four days'. He just went red and mumbled sorry. I thought to myself well you are sitting on that chair whilst people like me are getting their heads bashed in and you don't even know what assault I was in. There's no attention to detail of what you have been through, and he made no effort to connect with me. I was sitting in front of him, and he would have been wondering what the hell he was going to do with me. At the end it left me broken and very isolated. There was no real concern that I had lost virtually my whole life and the stress this placed on my family was catastrophic. I had put my life on the line for the job, and I just felt I had nowhere to turn.*

**JW**

In many ways this captured the whole post-incident process in terms of the type of responses Justin received from people. Justin did seek people out and he did have high level discussions with people about the problems in the system (which sadly he feels went nowhere) but in the day-to-day management of his situation, post assault he felt a coldness, a lack of empathy and a sense he was very much on his own. From what I could see there was no coordinated approach to his care. It was an ad hoc disjointed process which was hard for him to navigate and largely driven by uninformed trauma bureaucratic processes. Whilst EAP cards were bandied around like chocolates no one really talked to him about what he was going through, the impact on him and what they could do to help.

It is important to note that what happened to Justin was not an isolated event, it happened in a context where officers are injured all the time, Work cover claims are one of the higher ones in Australia and every research paper on the mental health of correction officers indicate appalling mental health outcomes for those who do this work. Given the evidence of trauma impacts littered throughout our custodial facilities it is hard to understand that the support services, from a trauma point of view, are virtually non-existent and the process is largely dictated by what is best for the organisation.

## Reflection 8

*Based on your extended absence from your pre-injury role the department has formed the view that you are unable to perform the inherent requirements of your assigned role. It is my intention, based on this information, to advise the Secretary of the department to consider termination of your employment for reasons that you cannot fulfil the inherent requirements of your role as a Youth Justice Worker.*

*(Exert from Justin's pre-termination letter)*

I had been made aware by some of the officers I had seen over the years that you had two years of possible work cover after a workplace injury but that your employment could be terminated after 12 months if you were not medically fit to return to your correction officer role. Whilst this was the case, generally attempts were made to relocate officers into other work and the talk of possible termination was more at the two-year mark. When I heard what happened to Justin, I was non-plussed and a little angry! This sentence in his termination letter captures just how insensitive and ill-informed senior bureaucrats/managers are in terms of the trauma recovery processes. Returning to work, particularly to a context that presents the same exposure to danger is fraught with psychological sensitivity and great risks to the individual. Whilst the protection for the employer is you must have 'Medical clearance to return to your pre-injury role', the threat of termination of employment is a major incentive for wounded officers to desperately try and get back to work, often with the risk this is too early in the trauma recovery process.

There should be no time frame on returning to pre-injury role and for officers that can safely return there needs to be a trauma-informed process that has a graded exposure to the highest risk aspects of the work—not a first day return that is to a management unit! Justin's instincts told him he was not ready to return to his pre-injury role, which despite the challenges this presented, was an insightful decision to make. We all know that coming back from those injuries and returning to custodial work would have been enormously challenging, highly unlikely and very unlikely within twelve months. Clearly this policy exists as it is a way of moving injured officers out of the system so they can be replaced by new officers 'wanting to make a difference'.

To me Justin's story raises the issue for all new officers 'if I am one of the unlucky officers to be attacked is that the process that awaits me?

NB: Even now I still cannot come to terms with the concrete reality that after nearly losing your life, incurring permanent injuries and doing so in the context of your work Justin receives a letter, from his employer terminating his employment. Legally you might be able to do that, but to me, it is indefensible, inhumane, trauma ignorant and morally questionable!

## Reflection 9

*People promised me they would investigate it for me and they did. They took it to the commissioner and to their credit, were able to halt the termination. After another week I received a call to say my application, for a position I had applied for prior to being terminated, had been successful. Whilst I should have been happy, I wasn't and I realised at that point whilst trying to push through how I was being treated my mental health was in freefall. All I could think of was here goes the roller coaster again. I was in the depths of despair and had an overwhelming sense that I didn't know that I could do this anymore. I was at the bottom, and the*

*PTSD just took off. I was having constant nightmares, reliving the assault night after night and it was a bad place to be. I was so mentally and physically exhausted.*

**JW**

This so powerfully captures the two-part process for people in Justin's position. From the night of the assault Justin is dealing with the almost inevitable onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its powerful debilitating psychological impacts on himself and his family. Not only that but he is also dealing with the post-incident ramifications in terms of recovering from his injuries and returning to work. We must appreciate that how the post-incident process is managed by the employer will have great influence on the recovery process officers have to go through. Thanks to the support of those close to him and the integrity of the Commissioner at that time the termination was rescinded, and Justin was offered a job. It is again ironical his employment was terminated at a time he had a job application in process (don't departments talk to each other?) It did bring me a strong sense of sadness that this fight for justice, that Justin had been drawn into took so much out of him that eventually when a meaningful job was offered to him psychologically, he was not well enough to take it.

I will always have, in the back of my mind, and I am sure Justin's, what difference would it have made had his employer had in place a trauma-informed support process for injured officers like Justin'. If 'arms had been wrapped around him' instead of being 'this isolated, lonely person in no man's land?' I am also of the belief that at some point in his recovery process Justin would have been employable, but it was going to need a far more integrated and co-ordinated return to work process. It was probably also going to need a far more intense commitment by his employer to prioritise returning injured workers to work wherever possible. On the one hand we have a very well-oiled machine to exit injured workers from the workforce and on the other hand we have an ad hoc, disjointed process to support them post-incident with no cohesive process to get them back to work. Does this reflect a little of where the priorities lie?

NB: The system as it is and almost by default, exits injured workers by having processes that will facilitate their departure from their employment. Financial compensation needs to be sought through legal processes which generally occurs when workers are terminated or resign from their employment. Employers might find this hard to believe but many of the officers I have dealt with are quite loyal to their employer and often feel a sense of betrayal when financial reality dictates, they must seek legal redress for their workplace injuries. Psychologically, as Justin expresses, this puts you outside of your employer which is a lonely place to be. Not only that, but you are taking legal action against them, which employers generally defend with gusto (which also generally facilitates and absolves of any sense of responsibility for the workplace injury).

I appreciate these processes are a 'fact of life' but the point that these processes are not helpful, insensitive and at times quite destructive for officers in the recovery phase of their workplace injury and desperately trying to reclaim their lives, is still a valid one to make. My sense is the urgency to move injured officers on to allow space for new officers to replace them is more of the focus and trauma amongst these injured officers is kind of pushed aside. The organisational requirement to fill positions at this point in time, seems at odds with providing a fully resourced, trauma-informed, support service for injured officers. The area of financial compensation for severe workplace injuries needs a total overhaul. To me, a proactive permanent disability component attached to an officer's superannuation policy i.e. 80% of salary for life - occupation related. If this was in place fewer officers would be forced to take

legal action through the courts and disability retirement applications could be processed while officers were still employed by the organisation.

## Reflection 10

*There was awareness that I had skills and it was discussed about the potential I had to work in a peer support environment as I understood workplace issues and the risks that were an integral part of that. The other side of the story though was that being 'damaged' in the way I was they didn't want me anywhere near the trainees or new graduates for fear they would hear my story. There was also great reluctance to conduct peer support groups as bringing all these damaged officers together was seen as 'to risky'. The wellbeing teams wanted to, but the idea was knocked down from above.*

*JW*

Justin talked about the issue of being 'damaged goods' and it really hit a chord with me. I would hear Senior Officers say repeatedly officer so and so 'was cooked' and couldn't be put with prisoners anymore. On a practical level there was open awareness of officer's burnout and that at some point the damage would be such they could no longer work with the prisoners. In many ways these officers were seen as a liability to the system as they could no longer attend prison codes/incidents etc. Justin is right in saying injured officers, particularly psychologically, are viewed differently and I believe his thoughts about not giving recruits exposure to his story for fear of alarming (or forewarning) them.

It brought back a memory of some years ago when I wanted to develop a trauma support group for officers with PTSD. A low-key concept, coffee and a bickie—bit of a chat. That was shot down almost before I had got to the car park. There was resistance to anything that promoted the idea of occupational trauma or the need to address it. The decision was certainly not based on the idea that the traumatised officers didn't need it. I have no doubt it is in this space Justin has an enormous contribution to make but no one really identified that.

## Reflection 11

*When you go through something like I went through you really don't know what the best way is forward. Experiencing that level of psychological trauma and the physical injuries were a new experience for me. I didn't know what I needed and I learnt as I went along. There was no pathway for me to follow. Managers offered Employee Assistance counselling [EAP] but they would give me a card and tell me to 'give them a ring'. That was it, no one really explained to me why I needed to give them a ring. So, I didn't.*

*JW*

## Reflections on Counselling

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) are the main form of counselling and critical incident debriefing for custodial officers. There are two main points I would like to make here. Firstly, EAP is a generic, short-term counselling model and not trauma-specific counselling. Secondly, most senior correction officers saw the handing out of the EAP card as “job done” and subsequently did not see it as their responsibility to engage in conversations with their officers about what they were experiencing in terms of trauma reactions.

To be fair to senior officers, there was no push from prison management for them to have these types of discussions, nor was there training provided to equip seniors with the skills, confidence, and inclination to initiate such conversations with their staff. Whilst seniors would routinely ask officers, “Are you okay?”, there was an awareness they might not be. However, it was rare for me to hear from injured officers that an actual conversation followed about their psychological injuries and how they were coping.

The trauma-informed literature generally identifies the quality of the relationship with your immediate manager as the most important factor in recovering from trauma. So much so that the better the relationship, the better the chance of a positive trauma recovery. It is important to state that these conversations are not to be confused with counselling, but they do have the capacity to be a precursor to counselling. Seniors and managers are often in the best position to support officers to take that step into the counselling process.

From what I saw, the management structure in the prison system was shambolic, with managers being moved around like donut vans, no sense of a team, no team meetings, and most of the time officers didn’t even know who their manager was. What Justin needed was one manager whose responsibility it was to have these conversations with him, to connect with his experience, and to guide him to where support could be found.

Justin never received this, as the system doesn’t provide it and hasn’t even identified that it needs to provide it. So Justin, like many officers before him, did not make the call—because no one had really explained to him why he should.

## Trauma Counselling

It will always amaze me that in a workplace that is generally one of the most violent in Australia, and with such a high percentage of traumatised staff working within that context, there is a total void of awareness around the need for specialised psychological trauma support after traumatic incidents.

There seems to be no evident pathway for officers in Justin’s position to locate funded, specialised trauma counselling. It breaks my heart to hear of Justin’s struggles to find counselling that really should have been a seamless process for him. Justin has a sense that the counselling, once he finally located it, has given him his life back, some hope. Good trauma counselling can do that.

Officers should be educated about the importance of accessing counselling support at these times and have a cohesive network around them that ensures it happens. Prison management systems need to do far more work on the stigma that is still “alive and well”, promoting the idea that only the weak seek counselling. Officers need to view trauma counselling as a positive step they can take that, alongside other supports, could play a pivotal role in their recovery process should they become traumatised through workplace incidents.

My hope is that if officers read Justin’s account of what trauma therapy has done for him, it might tempt them to try it themselves. The challenge is (and it will be a challenge) that we need to develop a prison culture that embraces trauma as a real reality of the workplace experience and has an informed response to it, rather than an aversion to confronting the complexity of the issues trauma raises.

This will require Justice systems to address, head on, the attitudes and beliefs senior staff hold around trauma incidents—ideas such as “get on with it”, “that’s what prisoners do”, and “just do

what you are asked to do". It will also require education about trauma and the establishment of clear expectations around what senior staff need to do to support officers who are struggling with their reactions to the work.

Until this happens, justice workplaces will continue, where trauma is concerned, to miss the point and to construct no formalised response to it.

## Sophie – Justin's Wife

*Then after several months rolling into years went by Sophie lost hope. Sophie said to me one day  
'We have got no more hope. We are in a lot of trouble'*

*JW*

*Sophie lived with my fears of our personal safety stuff. Sophie would ask me are we still at risk?  
Sophie just wants that to be a long-forgotten memory.... she was not a witness to the assault,  
but in a way, she has lived it every day for six years.*

*JW*

I would have liked to interview Sophie very much, but Justin felt it had been so traumatising for her, watching what he went through, that it was just not appropriate. Justin sees three people as having saved his life: Anthony and Rachel on the night of 3/10/2019 and Sophie for the next six years. I have often talked about fear and hypervigilance as being significant underlying and ever-present psychological emotion that sit deep within most officers whether they acknowledge that or not. This is not just confined to being on shift, but overtime permeates into all areas of the officer's life.

These two comments from Justin on what it was like for Sophie tell us a great deal about the impact of this experience on her. Let's put ourselves in her shoes.

Her husband Justin is a youth detention officer at Malmsbury youth detention centre. Sophie worries about Justin constantly as she hears and reads about the violence in that work environment. Sophie is pregnant with their third child and is having a difficult pregnancy. Sophie had been thinking Justin must be home soon and the phone goes telling her Justin has been seriously assaulted and is on his way to hospital with significant injuries. It shocks her to see how badly beaten Justin is.

The next day the assault goes nationwide in the media and the press and Justin's (and the families) identity is revealed to the public with footage of the assault. This starts a long-term process for Sophie watching Justin, firstly to try and recover from his physical injuries, secondly begin the process of trying to understand the complexity surrounding his post-traumatic trauma reactions and finally trying to return to work. Justin was very open on how the assault had activated a deep sense of fear that he and the family were in danger. He shared they rarely left the house as his fear would naturally flow through to Sophie and the children. 'Are we still at risk?' Sophie lived with this sense of danger to her family for years. With Justin unable to work Sophie had no choice but to return to part-time work for the family to survive financially.

When Justin's employment was terminated and he rang her to tell her Sophie cried 'what more can they do to you?'

Sophie is watching Justin's journey, seeing what it is doing to him, whilst supporting their three children!

Who in this process cares about Sophie? Did anyone from Justin's employer visit them at home to see how they were going and what they needed in terms of support? No. Did anybody ask how Sophie and the children were going? No. Was any support offered to the family? No. Was there anyone Sophie could have reached out to seek support? No. Was the family experience of Justin's workplace assault understood by the Employer? No. I think I have made my point. In any frontline field where exposure to trauma events is a part of the work responsibilities it is the family of the worker who will be the main support and the people who will bear the brunt of the impact of the incident on their loved one. Whilst all of us working in the psychological fields, know it is generally the family that hold these injured workers together, experience the trauma through their loved one, yet employers pay scant attention to that and offer minimal support services?

## Request for Code Aqua – Denied

It troubled me greatly on the night of the assault the experienced officers at Malmsbury sensed the situation was increasingly volatile and requested that the centre be closed to regain control. I am really struggling to understand how this was denied. I appreciate this is a last resort option but I would have hoped in this instance the safety of officers would have been a priority rather than the human rights of the youth or some philosophical belief about impact of lockdowns on the youth. (I hope it is not the case here but I have come across situations where prisoners/detainees are afforded more privileges in order to lessen the risk of a riot or as a way of gaining greater behavioural compliance from the prisoners!)

As all officers attest the 'no' response from senior authorities had a dramatic impact on the capacity of Malmsbury staff to manage the situation and ultimately this was a factor in Justin being attacked. Were the rights or wrongs of that decision ever reviewed? Did an analysis of the decision have impact on future decisions of that magnitude? I don't know but I do know this putting of staff safety second to the political requirements of youth management ricochets throughout the whole corrections industry and does untold damage to the confidence in officers that their employer will look after them and do the right thing by them at these times of great danger.

I think Justin is on the money when he expresses his belief that these decisions are made 'high up' and there are many stakeholders who influence these decisions. These decision makers (or stakeholders for that matter) are not based in custodial settings and it is probably fair to say have very little awareness or understanding of the issues on the floor, either from a staff safety point of view or the complexity of managing a group of escalating youths. There needs to be a rethink of how these decisions are made and if they are made ostensibly to appease the political forces within the system rather than err on the side of safety for custodial staff.

This 'no' decision from the powers at be that day totally ignored what the staff, on the floor, were experiencing which is demoralising as they are seeing and feeling the risk. As it turned out staff were fully vindicated in pushing for a Code Aqua and there is a real chance it could have prevented what happened to Justin and many of his colleagues who paid a high price that day. If we think of Justin for a minute, he now wears the physical and psychological cost of that decision for the rest of his life. Did anyone take ownership of that decision? Did anyone explain to Justin why not locking down Malmsbury was the course of action taken? Did anyone acknowledge to Justin that not putting his safety first was the wrong decision? I think we all know the answer!

## The Pivotal Moment

*I was crying in my car begging for help. I realised at that moment I had lost my dignity totally and I was forced to beg for help and some understanding of what I been through. I had nearly lost my life.*

**Justin**

I would have read this comment from Justin multiple times, but it was on one of my final edits I really read it and it had quite an impact on me. Justin has described with great clarity how his life was in freefall in the years after the assault, but who noticed? The vision of Justin crying in his car begging for help really upset me. I was struggling to reconcile how someone who had nearly lost their life trying to do their job could, in the recovery phase, end up feeling they had lost all their dignity. As someone geared towards helping people it was very foreign to me to fully comprehend the treatment Justin was receiving. Certainly, no one had a discussion with him and other than Anthony no one was running alongside him to see how he was going. Justin did not deserve to be crying in his car begging for help. I had a vision of falling overboard on a ship and thrashing around in the water trying not to drown. I look to the boat, desperate for help and all I see is people drinking sparkling looking at the sunset blissfully ignorant that I am going down with the sun!

## Closing Appreciation

I would like to applaud Justin for sharing his story and that of his family. I am very privileged to be in a situation where I can hear stories such as Justin's, learn from them and be able to respond to them. Justin's sole aim is to make a positive contribution to this topic of psychological/physical injury for officers, what support they need and what would make officers safer. He is disappointed with his employer but not angry. He holds no animosity towards his youth attackers and still holds a desire to work with youth in the future. Despite what he has been through the desire to make a difference in the lives of youth has not died. I am hopeful as we embrace the idea that 'lived experience' can be a significant force in the healing processes that one day maybe Justin could be a peer support counsellor for officer's or a youth mentor for troubled youth. Either way he has the skill set and he certainly has the lived experience.

## Chapter 2 - Anthony's Story

### **WARNING – Trauma Material**

Should reading Anthony's story trigger any personal experience you have of trauma please seek the support of your GP or relevant health professional

*You come out of training full of hope and optimism and full of the difference you are going to make. By the end of the first twelve months half of your class is gone and the other half have rolled into the negative status quo. It is very difficult to be a lone voice in such an environment. Whilst a lot of energy goes into creating our hope very little energy goes into transforming the system to keep our hope alive.*

**Anthony**

### Extract from Anthony's Victim Impact Statement, 10/10/2019

After providing a statement to Vic Pol I was placed on a stretcher with my head secured, placed in an ambulance and then transported to the Regional Hospital with my Operations Manager on board as support.

Physically I had lumps on my head, bruising (on face, head, inside lip, right pectoral muscle and left side of body below ribs) cuts, black eyes, very sensitive front tooth, constant headache, extremely sore neck (whiplash), concussion and fractured nose in six places.

Emotionally I thought I was okay initially but have since had nightmares almost every night. I also have the incident running through my brain and nausea.

I have strong feelings of guilt as I wish I had done more to prevent such harm to my peer Justin White. The strain on my family has been nothing short of traumatic. It is as though they have suffered as much as me. I have two teenage boys. My oldest boy is special needs, and he took longer to adjust to how it happened to me.

### The Beginning

I had worked in local government for some years covering a diverse range of positions. Essentially, I wanted to challenge myself. I was aware that the youth justice field had some similarities to working in an adult jail and that in many ways it was as equally daunting and dangerous, but I felt I had the right background and mindset to be able to contribute and meet those challenges.

I wanted to test myself out and see how I could cope in all respects in the youth justice environment. So that's what drew me in and to also work with like-minded people. I had no experience of working in this field, so the advertising approach connected with my desire to have more meaningful employment and to make a difference in the lives of the youth. Most people attracted to this work and who enter the profession genuinely care about youth and want to make a positive influence on their lives. Having said that though you learn quickly that unfortunately this work is harder than you could ever have imagined.

There was a lengthy assessment process with psychometric testing initially and I think they were looking for flexibility of thinking and capacity to manage your reactions in difficult situations. There was great emphasis on de-escalating aggressive behaviour on the part of the

youths. There was nothing on what you should do if things got out of hand with the belief being handled properly that won't happen. We did however have code response training which implied there are times when it does get out of hand. It was not really articulated much. Underneath we all had a degree of anxiety about what we were stepping into but that was never addressed.

*'You don't want to hang around here mate. They (management) will not support you and it is a very dangerous place. Besides you won't achieve anything by being here.'*

*It was only a couple of weeks later and both these officers were gone. They rattled me a bit, but I look back now and it was almost prophetic what they said.*

### **Anthony**

There was a fair bit that flies in the face of your training once you start. I had high hopes of making a difference, but when you walk out on the floor and the gate shuts behind you with fifteen or more sets of eyes looking at you—nothing can really prepare you for that. From the beginning the older officers are at you: forget about changing lives it is more about save your own. It was a disillusioning deconstruction of the training. You have been trained to climb Everest, but the actual reality of the job is a long way from what you have been trained for. By the end of my first 12 months half my class was gone and the rest of us generally rolled with the status quo. The optimism and hope I had at the beginning had gone. It is about what difference did you make to their day. It is always about the youth it is never about you.

The training did provide some centre scenarios, but you're basically dealing with an actor not the actual detainee. So, they run through the various scenarios with paid actors. That was still a bit daunting but was nothing like the real thing. Once that door closes with the job proper, you're scared as and if you are not, you're fooling yourself. The training never really got you thinking about, in the scenarios they threw at you, how you might manage yourself it was primarily about how you responded to situations and your capacity to de-escalate the aggression in the youth. We did very little on our own emotion or the range of reactions you could have to situations including the constant level of anxiety we all carried with us.

The harsh reality of this work is glossed over to a large degree. I don't think we really got into the nitty gritty of what does happen in the centre. You do your pretend searches for contraband, restraint techniques and so on and that would happen every day, but you don't really know what it is like until you do it proper.

The main issue I found with the training, was that they don't really talk about the mental side of the work. For me, it was more of a struggle mentally than physically. It might sound silly, but with the assaults etc which happened quite often, that didn't affect me anywhere near as much as the mental side of things. Once that gate shuts you are jumping into the deep end. I was always nervous as whilst these youths were generally younger than prisoners in adult facilities some were very hardened and capable of significant violence. There was nothing in our training to really help us deal with that. The moment you're left alone, even with a couple of them, you're having second thoughts about What am I doing here? You go in with all the right positive vibes and desire to help etc, but the reality hits you quick when the ad nauseam shouting, language and intimidation directed at you all the time.

I mean, I'm no prude, but when every second word is a swear word and then the different stories, you hear of what the detainees have done which covers every imaginable thing you

could possibly think of. It is very hard to deal with that on top of your workload. We wear so many hats in our roles with the detainees. We may have to be the doctor, the parent, the psychologist, the teacher, the fireman and so on. We are not qualified in any of these areas and most of us this required learning on the job with a workforce age average of around 25 years of age. It was a lot to ask of all of us. It is worth pointing out that if a youth was sentenced under the age of 18, they would do their time in youth justice. This meant some of our detainees were as old as 23. This made a huge difference in the capacity for violence within the centre.

It helps to have a good crew around you. For new staff you latch on to like-minded professionals whenever you could. You try and find out as much as you can, as quick as you can to survive. The relationships I formed with staff were probably the best thing for me.

I could give you so many examples, but the one for me that stands out is we had someone who was in and they were a paedophile. It took me two days to even look at the guy. I knew I had to be professional, but I was very anxious I would say something wrong or deal with a situation in the wrong way. I was just ignoring him. I must be professional. I'm just going to block it out in my head about the offences he's committed and just treat him like everyone else, which I did. It's hard, but you know, you're doing your job. You must be professional. And I got to the point where I didn't want to know what or the details of what they had done unless there was a valid reason too.

But as a rule for me, I didn't want to know why anyone was in, because I don't want to judge them or be perceived as judging someone. These were complex situations to be thrown into with little preparation, and you need people around you that you can trust who can point you in the right direction.

We must deal with detainees with acquired brain injuries, intellectual impairment, mental health/trauma histories, behavioural disorders etc. It was like opening a can of worms and our challenge was to make it easier and safer for them in that volatile environment. We had so many detainees who had very short fuses for whatever reason.

It was in your best interest to find out what pushes the buttons of these kids as well. Everyone has a button, obviously, and if you can find out what it is, it could be a certain word, certain phrase, certain topic. Unfortunately, it can even be that you might look like someone that they don't like. Could be an uncle or anybody that has crossed them at some point in their lives.

You try and gather as much information as you can about each of the detainees, their character, how they interact with other detainees and staff, how they deal with not having their demands met and so on. It doesn't take too long to observe and work out their vulnerable points and when there is a higher likelihood of their lashing out. You get so focused on these observations and as you are always trying to avoid a catastrophe where someone gets hurt. It is just so hard to switch off. You are doing 12-hour shifts. You're expected to go hard all the shift and often we never took our breaks. You must be switched on every second through the shift as something innocuous can turn out to be something major. For example, when the detainees take their washing to the laundry, this is a meeting place for them, and they'll exchange whatever they can whether it's a shiv or it could be a TV remote. But, you know, all these things can be weapons. Anything can be a weapon. A sock could be a weapon if something has been hidden there. You must be very mindful of, your own safety, the safety of the detainees and the safety of your colleagues. You just must focus on everyone and always be hyper-vigilant. So, you can imagine it's very draining and it is not as simple as opening and closing doors.

Attending a new unit has its challenges. In the main, detainees probably do not know you and/or how you work. They will test anyone new to them more. They will say things like "What the fuck do you know? I run this unit!"

It is a constant pressure cooker environment so no it did not surprise me, other than literally anything – even nothingness—sets these inmates off. There is also intensity regarding how violent they can be – verbal and physical. There is no filter for most detainees. I guess I was surprised with the percentage of detainees that are drug dependant, and I am talking about anxiety/depression/diabetes drugs. To be honest, any drug is a win/win in their eyes, as it can be used as capital. Conversations can be quite intense too, especially on hearing about their lives prior.

You are always watching your back and others' backs as most attacks come from behind.

Stopping short of being complacent, it does become "just another job" and you become better adapted to whatever comes your way. The danger comes from inadequate staffing levels, lack of proper breaks, and indifferent management.

It did change me in terms of not trusting most people (outside of that work) and I think I am not as social anymore. Makes you reassess life in general.

Peer support, drinking at the pub or coffees with workmates (as they can relate and debrief), proactively processing and working out the best coping strategies. Family (but obviously from a different angle). Having support is great BUT whilst working in the prison environment workers will NEVER be themselves! In other words, it is a continual fight with your senses. You go into the prison job without PTSD but everyone comes out of it damaged to some degree. It is just a matter of where you are on the scale of damaged.

Don't get me wrong, there are good times and good laughs. In many ways these youths have a lot going for them. They have everything at their disposal. I don't feel overly sorry for the ones who keep coming back. There are lots of opportunities for them to change but they don't learn their lesson. But you also get detainees who are in there for one mistake and usually they'll learn and they won't come back.

The early days were tough and there was a lot to learn. Even if nothing happens to you, you go through a period of negativity which I think is a kind of adjustment phase to the world you are now working in. It is hard to put words to it, but it is like hitting a roadblock and you are trying desperately to get to the other side. You must really work out what to do to get out of that negativity whilst at the same time witnessing incident after incident. On the one hand you are trying to master the job but on the other hand the tension builds up, and you start to get a skewed view of the world. That was the major takeaway for me. When I was outside of work, driving home or just at the shop or whatever, work was always in my head. It kind of took over my brain and I was constantly on edge just waiting for trouble. You must just try and work your way through it. Other officers would say leave it at the gate, but I could never switch off but I needed to vent. I would talk to my wife, but it was not long before it wore her down and she became quite traumatised by what I was seeing and experiencing at work. I had to stop talking to her.

## Thursday 3 October 2019 – Anthony's Recollection of Events

*The ultimate risk was the assault that happened with me, Justin and Rachel as it was another level of violence, a pack mentality and ferocious. I reckon it was through the grace of God that none of us died. We were all aware assaults on staff occurred but not in my wildest dreams did I envision it would be that dangerous and that quick.*

### **Anthony**

From the beginning I was interested to experience all facets of working in a youth detention centre and I had voluntarily moved onto night shift some months before.

I arrived at work and got dressed into my uniform and gear and was sitting in a quiet room next to my unit waiting for my shift to start. I was going through my normal routine of mentally preparing myself for the shift ahead. I always like to do this if I could and would regularly be ready to go fifteen minutes or so before my shift.

I'm only a matter of 20 metres from the door that led to my unit, and I heard, one of my colleagues, Rachel called a systems code. I was instantly on hyperalert, and I knew it was not good. Very quickly after that code Rachel desperately screamed a code purple which signalled an officer was being assaulted. It was a guttural scream and I just had that feeling that it was a colleague of mine and that they were in serious trouble. So, I rushed to the unit as fast as I could. It is hard to put words to what it is like when you are running into what you know will be a dangerous situation, but you can't wait to get there in case a colleague is in danger.

When I got to the unit, I saw a youth laughing which I found annoying. I then see a whole stack of people wrestling on the ground and it is generally chaos everywhere. I noticed this detainee, he's like 150 kilos and no one's grabbing him. We are taught in our training not to go into those situations on your own as it is too dangerous and you would be asking for trouble. Yet in training you are not watching one of your colleagues and in this instance a good mate Justin being seriously assaulted. I had to make an instantaneous decision and that was to tackle him solo. There was very little room to get to him but somehow, I got to him. I grabbed this youth who was at that time repeatedly stomping on Justin's head. There were two other youths kicking Justin wherever they could but the youth I grabbed was going his head. There was a female colleague, Rachel, laying on top of Justin trying to protect him from the punches. It still gives me chills when I think of how heroic that was. Eventually I am able grab this youth from behind with all my might, and I tried to throw him against the other wall, essentially to get him off Justin as soon as possible.

I knew every second counted and it is hard to work out a clear strategy. I throw him aside and he looks at me with an anger that still haunts me. I put my arms down because I know the cameras are everywhere. I don't want to be seen as throwing the first punch as that could have major ramifications for me and my career. Next thing you know, this haymaker punch lands on my face. At that point I thought I was blind. It was the most scared I had ever been in my life. I had glasses which were shattered by the punch, and I did not know where the glasses were. With that he's pulled my jacket over my head. I didn't even realise he had done that; I was too focussed on I could be blind, completely blind. I was getting and get absolute pummelling in every way and to every part of the body. With the jacket over my head, I can't see anything, so I decided I was not going to fight back and that I had to get into a defensive position to try and

limit the damage. At that point he full on punches me and shatters my nose. It sounds horrific but I was in so much pain it doesn't really stand out as being that bad.

My goal was do not go on the ground because what happened to Justin would have happen to me. Keep upright and protect the vitals, that was my only strategy. I do remember taking this huge punch to just below the ribs, but I didn't realise how bad it was until the next day when I saw this massive bruise across my whole stomach. The blow he delivered to my neck stands out as being the most damaging of all the blows I took. Oh, my God, it was the worst pain ever. The other parts of the body eventually healed but nearly four years later I still have considerable pain in my neck. So I could handle a punch in the face, looking back on it any day of the week. But on the neck. I'm still having issues with that today. So luckily, I didn't know at the time, but there was another female colleague, Narelle, from another unit, who ran in behind me, and when she saw that I was getting assaulted, she jumped in between me and this big guy and held on to me. I would have copped an even worse beating if she didn't do that. All of this happened in about 2 minutes, and it is like time is in fast motion, you have a multitude of thoughts running through your head and pain all through your body. I always sensed this was a scary place to work and my deep held fears for my safety were laid bare that day.

## Anthony – Post Assault

*Because there are so many incidents at Malmsbury people get them mixed up. When you return from time off staff will ask you 'which assault was yours?' When you tell them you get 'Oh yeah, that one—you were the one that got to him'. I was told ours was the fourth worst at Malmsbury. Dare I say it is probably not the fourth anymore. It is almost laughable in a way but that's what happens, you will be connected to the fourth the third or the fifth!*

### **Anthony**

So, it might sound very odd, but I don't have anything against this youth for doing what he did to me. I knew, working in that environment, there was a chance I would be involved in something like this one day. These youths get heightened and then they basically are not in their right minds. I just happened to be the one who stopped and ran to the aide of my colleague. I need to be very clear this assault was aimed at Justin with the intention of injuring or even killing him and my aim was to prevent that from happening—whatever it took. It just as easily could have been me and Justin would have come to my aid.

I was off work for more than three and a half months. I was on medication because I was angry and short fused. I felt this overwhelming guilt that I should have done more for Justin and this thought I had let him down kind of consumed me. What made matters worse was our photos and names, post assault, were released to the media by the magistrate. The magistrate argued it was in the 'public bests interest'. We had no control over what happened from that point on as our assault travelled all around the world and it was certainly not in our best interests. The media lacked integrity and I don't think the Department ever understood why we were so upset by them not protecting us from what happened from then on. All we got was a phone call from a manager thirty minutes before that it was 'hitting the media'.

So, I ended up getting out of Malmsbury essentially because of the mental side of it and more so because of it affecting the family. I still believe it is a very commendable job.

In many ways it was the best job I've ever had in terms of the best people, the best like-minded people, caring and supportive. They've got your back. I've never experienced that before, so I

miss that camaraderie a great deal. I became more fearful though and if I saw a group of youths I would cross to the other side of the street. I still have a bit of that. I wish I didn't, but that's just the reality of it and I am more cautious around those types of young people.

However, let me explain it this way from a detainee point of view, they need to be stimulated more. It's not just attended this class, attend that class, which a lot of them don't even attend anyway. The custodial environment simply worked against us all the time. One of our big roles was to rehabilitate or help assist with rehabilitation of these young detainees. Now, good luck in doing that when you have fifteen or more young people creating chaos and you want to teach one youth something separate to the other youths it is simply not possible. In the context we work in it is very hard to find the time to rehabilitate any detainee.

There is a lot of focus on what we do and very little focus on what the system does. I hear all the time the words best practice and I can assure you there was no best practice at Malmsbury. It was poorly resourced, not aligned with modern thinking around juvenile justice and in denial about what was happening to staff. If there is to ever be a silver bullet it must encompass everything.

## Returning to Work

The Minister and the Commissioner at the time were caring and gave us their time but they conveyed a sense their 'hands were tied'. Nothing really changed in terms of how things were done at Malmsbury and no special favours came our way in terms of redeployment into other meaningful roles. The advice given was basically 'you will have to wait until a job comes up and apply for it then'.

I returned to work after three months into a temporary position largely doing filing which was very menial and not good for my brain.

I was still dwelling over everything, and you need to be meaningfully occupied to help you get back into the flow of work. I just hounded them until I managed to get moved into stores, so I learned what there was to learn there. After getting a bit sick of stores I said I need something for my brain again, and I then worked in infrastructure for about a year. That was a good move for me and the work was more challenging.

I had to push for these moves and there was nothing available to me in terms of career support or tracking how my recovery was going. There was no real focus on finding you meaningful work it was locating anything that you could do. I had times where I was very frustrated, even angry at this directionless process I was going through. Once in infrastructure I was happier as I had people to talk and work to take my mind off things.

Whilst I knew the position was temporary, but I was informed that there would be a position but in the end that never came to fruition. I was then told that I would be finishing up in infrastructure and I'd have to go back to my primary role as a youth detention officer. That being said, my primary role at that stage was doing nights, not day shift, which is quite different. So initially I was told that I would have to return to day shift. I complained vigorously and with the support of my GP who did not want me back on days. After a month of complaining they said I could go back on nights. I was very relieved as I was very anxious about going back on day shift. I never felt the managers or HR bureaucrats really appreciated how hard it would have been for me to return to day shift and that this was dictated by trauma fears rather than personal choice.

I was then told due to being out of the officer role for more than twelve months I would have to do the whole seven-week officer training again. It just seemed one roadblock after another and whilst I had hoped to return, at that point I couldn't cope with the thought of doing the training again. It made no sense to me that I had to do the training again, so I decided to bail out and return home to Perth to support my family. I just had a sense it was roadblock after roadblock thrown at me to make my return to work as hard as possible. Not once did anyone ever express to me any hope that I might return to work one day or that, that would be a good thing. I am not sure anyone really cared whether I got back to work or not.

## The Department and the Media

One of the standout traumas would be the fact that the regional magistrate decided to let the media release our full names and vision of the assault. I don't understand why the Department couldn't protect us from that let alone not be in court with us at any point in the process. Justin and I were asking for their support, and nothing was forthcoming.

On the day of the sentencing, we sat there alone and together in court. We wanted to see firsthand what our lives were worth. The sentences were minimal which we expected, and everyone else had kind of moved on. I left the court with this shallow feeling of I don't know what?

The release of our identities to the media really interfered with how we were trying to deal with it from the outset. I received a call from my sister in WA saying words to the effect of 'hey I heard there was an assault at Malmsbury, and she was wondering if I knew who had been assaulted. I told her it was me! You are in shock and you are trying to process what has happened. It was not long after that when the magistrate released our names to the media and the phone started to ring non-stop. So much so we had to take it off the hook for days. Our personal experience went global very quickly and Justin and I really lost control of it. It would have been a lot simpler just dealing with the assault not the world-wide attention it received.

At the time the clinical care counsellor at Malmsbury really helped me the most and she was amazing. When I returned home to Perth to provide support to my mother it kind of took my mind off it a bit as I had a different focus. For me time did make it better, but it has been an up and down process. My depressive moods come and go. The trauma side has dimmed a bit, and I don't revisit the assault scenario very often these days. When I tell other people about what happened I can normally get through it but on occasions often out of the blue, I can become upset and start shaking. Just the other day I flashbacked to the hospital when the manager with Justin and myself said do you want to ring your wife?

I went no, I don't see the point, because she'll only worry. So, she didn't know until I walked through the door and she was just looked at me and she was almost hysterical, as you can imagine. She was in shock at how beaten up I was and then I was just talked about it ad nauseum to her every day, every opportunity. I'd be just talking about it because I just had to release it all and there was no one else, I could do that with.

She would listen for as much as she could take and then she'd walk off and read a book and just sidetrack herself and tell me not to talk about it and to leave it at work. I think it overwhelmed her, and it was hard for me to see that as I was so focussed on me. As things progressed different challenges presented itself, the complexity of the release of our identities, the media involvement, less money coming in, are you going to have a job and so on. These things all create new anxieties, and it compounds on the trauma of what you have been through.

Then you realise you are back there again in the middle of Malmsbury.

My wife is proud of me for working there and trying to do the best for the youths but basically said she'll leave me if I ever do that job again. I know I haven't fully recovered but I am on my way. Most of the time I can control my emotional reactions. I still have some anger towards the media release of mine and Justin's full names to the public and that has increased my reluctance to be outside of my home. The impact on my family has been substantial.

## On Counselling

EAP counselling was offered but we didn't contact as it was 'give them a ring if you want' which just didn't connect with me. There was no pathway provided to psychological support, and I would have to say the response from Malmsbury didn't match the severity of the assault.

*I do not remember any debrief after the incident, but I do remember 2–3 weeks later Justin and I going into a meeting with up to twenty-five people. We were not back at work at that point, so it was emotional. A lot of people were very upset as it was the first time they had seen us since the assault. Some just gave us a hug. The session was run by external facilitators, but it was more an information gathering exercise and a checking in process rather than a debrief. I could see people cared and it was very supportive but there was nothing in depth about how Justin and I were going psychologically.*

**Anthony**

When you experience what Justin and I did you really don't know what you need. You are hurt, in shock etc and you need the 'system' to provide the direction, the structure to the post-injury journey. Other than the counsellor at Malmsbury there was nothing that seemed remotely coordinated in terms of supporting us. I needed counselling, far more than EAP could have provided, but no pathways were presented for that or encouragement to seek it. Looking back, it is not surprising as the corrections system has accepted that staff will be in and out like a revolving door. The focus is on luring people into the work rather than mentally supporting them whilst they are doing it. The burnout rate of staff is very high, and the problem is the acceptance of this by the department 'with a get them in and get them out' attitude with not even a glance at what could be done better to support staff generally and particularly when they are assaulted. I could never have anticipated what was going to happen to me and I could never have anticipated how poorly, generally, I was going to be treated.

## The Commissioner's Apology

It was not long before I resigned that I had a phone call with the Commissioner at the time who I had significant respect for and I always felt was trying to help Justin and myself. I think I was sharing the toll the whole experience had taken on me and my family and how I needed a fresh start. At one point the Commissioner paused and apologised, 'We really should have done more to support you both'. I wasn't ready for that, but I appreciated the honesty and in a way the acknowledgement that the system had let us down. When I reflected on it later, I also realised the Commissioner had connected with our trauma and had conveyed a genuineness that was rarely displayed to us either before or after the assault. It captured really what had been lacking and what Justin and I had craved for—genuineness!

**Anthony**

# Bruce's Reflections on Anthony's Story

## Reflection 1

*There was great emphasis on de-escalating aggressive behaviour on the part of the youths. There was nothing on what you should do if things got out of hand. There was a belief if you handled this properly, did things in the right way—things would not get out of hand. AM*

This type of thinking now seems embedded in correctional thinking. I heard it at the ICPA conference in Belgium 2023, I heard it on the prison floor (what did you do to aggravate the prisoner?), I read it on LinkedIn and so on. Where did the idea come from that if you handle a violent person in the 'right' way they will not be violent? I read of women being killed every week, I read of people being knifed and murdered every day. Where does the idea come from that prison is an optimal environment to change behaviour? (As these perpetrators of violent behaviour are heading there.) Where does the idea come from that correction officers wouldn't be targeted by prisoners if they treated them better? I could go on but my main point is, it is not the low risk, non-violent prisoners (adult and youth) that harm custodial officers it is the violent maximum-security prisoners that do severe psychological and physical damage to many of the officers who manage them.

Isn't it time to split the rhetoric and have a rehabilitative approach to prisoners who have the capacity to benefit from it and a more management approach to prisoners who have a history of not changing their violent and abusive behaviour? For the first group attacks on officers would not be common and in the second group management would incorporate and prioritise maximum safety and protection for correction officers.

## Reflection 2

*There was a fair bit that flies in the face of your training once you start. I had high hopes of making a difference, but when you walk out on the floor and the gate shuts behind you with fifteen or more eyes looking at you—nothing can really prepare you for that. From the beginning the older officers are at you: 'forget about changing lives it is more about save your own'. AM*

Anthony has captured here what so many officers have shared with me. The training does not really connect with the reality of the 'floor'. It was disillusioning for Anthony to have the training concepts treated so despairingly by older officers who were more immersed in the day-to-day running of the centre and their personal survival. In all my time in prisons I never really witnessed any attempt to align what happened in the prison facility to the ideologies taught in the recruit training. As one new officer once put it 'it was like being thrown to the sharks'.

So, for most new officers they must make sense of it themselves and with the prevailing belief being 'save yourself' for many officers that became the modus operandi rather than attempting to connect with the youth which was what was taught in the training. Justin, Anthony and Rachel were all officers who attempted to connect with the youths and not adopt the 'safest' behaviours approach. Ironically this placed them at greater risk of being targeted by the youths which is ultimately what happened. With no psychological training provided around managing the aftermath of being attacked and assaulted Justin, Anthony and Rachel were totally unprepared, in either what to expect or what to do after it. Whilst some officers from early on in their careers adopt an avoidance of potentially dangerous situations Justin, Anthony and Rachel embraced the idea that to fulfil their roles they would need to expose themselves to dangers of

the Malmsbury environment. Clearly the avoidance behaviour of some officers needed to be addressed but wasn't and the officers that embraced the risks of the job should have been supported more but weren't. Sounds like a hot bed of confusion to me.

### Reflection 3

*I was always nervous, as whilst these youths were generally younger than adult prisoners some were very hardened and capable of significant violence .....you go in with all the right positive vibes and desire to help etc but the reality hits you really quick when the ad nauseam shouting, vile language, and intimidation directed at you all the time. The anxiety this created in most of us was simply never addressed.AM*

Another poignant comment from Anthony. Anxiety is the main weapon our brain has to encourage us, even compel us, to avoid dangerous situations. For those in the military, police, corrections or any career that has violent/aggressive behaviour in the job specification they need to learn how to overcome these anxiety reactions to manage situations that pose some level of physical or psychological harm. In many ways the workplace culture plays a role here in promoting the bottling up of emotions, creating a tough exterior, never disclosing vulnerabilities and so on. Officers learn acknowledging fear or anxiety, which are to be expected reactions to being in dangerous situations, is a sign of weakness and they are maybe not cut out to do this work and so on.

Subsequently only the brave share their fear/anxiety of the environment and the majority hold it in until they reach the point where they can no longer hold it—'the meltdown'. I can't really pinpoint why anxiety is such an ignored commodity in corrections hierarchies but psychologically it is rampant in any prison I ever went to and often officers felt they could only share it in the confidentiality of the counselling room or with very trusted colleagues. The onset of anxiety symptoms, particularly when they start the night before a shift or in the morning when you point the car towards work are often the first sign all is not well. I can talk from personal and professional experience if the work environment doesn't change the anxiety won't go away!

### Reflection 4

*When I was outside of work, driving home or just at the shop or whatever, work was always in my head. It kind of took over my brain and I was constantly on edge, just waiting for trouble.....I would talk to my wife, but it was not long before I wore her down and she became quite traumatised by what I was seeing and experiencing at work. I had to stop talking to her.*

Sadly, I loved this description of work taking 'over Anthony's brain'. It captures what intense work environments can do particularly when combined with anxiety and hypervigilance becoming permanent states. The cortisol levels simply never come down which is why officers when going to a restaurant will all race to get a seat in the corner so they can see who is coming in the door. The exposure to trauma and high stress events quickly overpowers partners and families when officers share what is happening at work. Officers learn they only have each other which generally is a small group of four or five as most officers they do not trust to keep their confidences. Overtime they become more traumatised, isolated and hypervigilant yet finding someone in authority who wants to discuss these persistent inner thoughts of perpetually being in danger is a bit like finding a diamond on a football field! Unfortunately, alcohol, medications and to a lesser degree illicit substances become the ways of managing this hypervigilant, on edge feeling compounding the battle to maintain one's mental health.

## Reflection 5

*I threw him aside and he looks at me with an anger that still haunts me. I put my arms down because I know the cameras are everywhere. I don't want to be seen as throwing the first punch as that could have major ramifications for me and my career. Next thing you know, this haymaker punch lands on my face. At that point I thought I was blind as I could not see. It was the most scared I have been in my whole life.*

Officers have shared with me repeatedly that the installation of CCTV has created great anxiety as they feel, quite strongly, the cameras are solely to watch what they do and not what the prisoner does. Officers feel this creates a second-guessing in dangerous situations where they are concerned about how their responses will be viewed with potential disciplinary action to follow. Anthony demonstrates the ambivalence this surveillance creates when after dragging this 140 kg, angry offender off Justin he then drops his hands for fear of being 'viewed' as the aggressor in this altercation. Anthony explained 'We were taught we should be able to de-escalate or negate the threat thus not having to go on the attack and that was what I tried to do. The worst-case scenario was touching the youth'. Anthony did, courageously, what his training dictated he do.

With hindsight we know this 'haymaker' punch was life-changing for Anthony. What should Anthony have done? Often in these situations employers will say it is a 'grey' area. Should Anthony have done what he needed to do to restrain him? Should Anthony have defended himself? Should Anthony just have taken the punch and the multitude of punches that followed (which is what happened)? I just wish more time was spent discussing the dilemma's these types of incidents create rather than on what constitutes the ideal correction officer response!

The police who attended acknowledged that had they have been in a similar life-threatening situation they would have gone the attack. It was interesting to me in my interview with Anthony he never referred to any training around a plan B or what to do if the tactics for deescalating the risk were ineffective. There is an underlying assumption, I think, that if the officer applies the theory of deescalation properly there will be no need for a plan B. My guess is whoever designed the deescalation theory for the department has never witnessed a haymaker punch racing towards their nose!

## Reflection 6

*In the context we work in it is very hard to find the time to rehabilitate any detainee. There is a lot of focus on what we do and very little on what the system does. I hear all the time 'world's best practice' but I can assure you there was no best practice at Malmsbury. It was poorly resourced, not aligned with modern juvenile justice thinking and in denial about what was happening to staff.*

I don't have a lot to add here but I felt Anthony's point needed to be reiterated as it reflects his direct experience of working at Malmsbury. The irony of this is the significant expectation placed on the role of the youth justice officer by the employer and then simply not provide the resources or the work context that would be required to fulfil the role.

## Reflection 7

*The assault was a factor in the escalation of my fear towards work, but it was the mental side of it and seeing how my wife, my kids and the rest of my family were reacting to it. It caused them*

*deep distress, and I learned it is not just about me. I would never have imagined how devastated my family would be.*

Anthony captures here the significant impact this work has on all the people around the correction officer. I remember Anthony telling me about the shock on his wife's face when she first saw him after the assault—the fear of the return to work is simply not understood by the employer and their managers. Whilst there is some awareness obviously, the needs of the facility will generally override what is best trauma management for the individual. I have never forgotten talking to an officer, in an adult facility, who was seriously attacked in a dangerous management unit and off work for two months. He had made it very clear to the operations manager he felt he could return to work as long he was not rostered on in a management unit. This is a very reasonable request as he was psychologically still recovering from the assault. When he arrived, he saw he had been rostered on in the unit where he was assaulted. He approached the manager on duty and explained he could not go to that unit as he was feeling too anxious. The reply was 'get over it sunshine that is where you are needed'. The officer immediately walked out and went home. He never returned.

These attempts to get back to work are very delicate for the officer and need proper management. It is often against the wishes of their families who are very fearful of their member being injured again. We need to be very mindful and supportive of the family as when officers experience trauma, poor management, bullying etc they will take it home to their families and or social networks.

## Reflection 8

*If you make a positive impact even if it is only one youth that can make your day. Despite what happened to Justin and me there were some great moments and interactions with some youths.*

**Anthony Milbourne**

I felt this comment from Anthony is important to hang onto. Good work and good moments with the youth occurred at Malmsbury they are just overshadowed by those moments of extreme violence.

## Reflection 9

*It is a constant pressure cooker environment so no it did not surprise me, other than literally anything – even nothingness—sets these inmates off. There is also intensity regarding how violent they can be – verbal and physical. There is no filter for most detainees. I guess I was surprised with the percentage of detainees that are drug dependant, and I am talking about anxiety/depression/diabetes drugs. To be honest, any drug is a win/win in their eyes, as it can be used as capital. Conversations can be quite intense too, especially on hearing about their lives prior.*

In a variety of different formats, I constantly reference the power of absorbing so many traumas, psychiatric conditions and behavioural issues the youths/prisoners have and bring with them into the detention setting. It is always sad to see young people in such challenging situations and having life experiences at such a young age that would challenge all of us. However, the ramifications and complexities of these experiences can make some of these youths very challenging to manage. Whilst it is important for officers to understand and encompass what these young people do bring into detention their histories do not diminish or justify the attacking

of officers. It might go part way to explain why they behave like that but for Justin and Anthony, I don't think it provided much comfort or condolence in knowing their attackers had troubled histories and that being assaulted by them was simply a by-product of that.

## Reflection 10

*It did change me in terms of not trusting most people (outside of that work) and I think I am not as social anymore. Makes you reassess life in general. Peer support, drinking at the pub or coffees with workmates (as they can relate and debrief), proactively processing and working out the best coping strategies. Family (but obviously from a different angle). Having support is great BUT whilst working in the prison environment workers will NEVER be themselves! In other words, it is a continual fight with your senses, and you can't be who you are. You go into the prison job without PTSD but come out of it damaged – everyone does. It is just a matter of where you are on the scale of damaged.*

The issue of this work changes you comes up all the time and most officers I have met acknowledge it has changed them, sadly generally in problematic ways. The recruitment, the training, the early years in the job, there is nothing available to officers that alerts them to the reality working in a prison, with the exposure to trauma, abuse, the life stories of the prisoners, poor management behaviour, lack of support and so on does change who you are as time goes by. Officers, sometimes with help from family, colleagues or on their own start to track this negative change in 'their view of the world' often combined with their own deteriorating mental health. There is simply minimal recognition, by the employer, of these insidious cognitive changes occurring in response to the 'heaviness' of the work environment.

Often the view is officers experiencing this correction fatigue are simply 'milking the system' whereas the reality is they are becoming increasingly vulnerable to the next trauma that lies ahead whatever that might be. Due to there being no real encouragement for officers to put their 'hand up' if they need help most don't for fear of being ostracised by less caring officers. The damage goes on and an opportunity to proactively intervene is lost!

## Reflection 11

*One of the standout traumas would be the fact that the regional magistrate decided to let the media release our full names and vision of the assault. I don't understand why the Department couldn't protect us from that let alone not be in court with us at any point in the process. Justin and I were asking for their support, and nothing was forthcoming. On the day of the sentencing, we sat there alone and together in court. We wanted to see firsthand what our lives were worth. The sentences were minimal which we expected, and everyone else had kind of moved on. I left the court with this shallow feeling of I don't know what?*

### **Anthony**

From my conversations with Justin and Anthony I know how much the exposure of their identities to the media hurt them and their families. They felt it was politically motivated and were deeply hurt by the lack of support provided to them, by their employer, throughout the legal court processes. I just have this vision of these two mates sitting together in the court room waiting to see 'what their lives were worth'. It wasn't that they wanted the offenders severely punished, they didn't. They were more hopeful they would have had their employers support on the day and a debrief coffee after it. It brought home to me, my firm belief, that sometimes the simplest things mean the most to us and having a support person from the

Department sitting with them would have shown a commitment, a caring that would have meant the world to Justin and Anthony on that most ambivalent day.

## Reflection 12

*It was not long before I resigned that I had a phone call with the Commissioner at the time who I had significant respect for and I always felt was trying to help Justin and myself. I think I was sharing the toll the whole experience had taken on me and my family and how I needed a fresh start. At one point the Commissioner paused and apologised, 'We really should have done more to support you both'. I wasn't ready for that, but I appreciated the honesty and in a way the acknowledgement that the system had let us down. When I reflected on it later, I also realised the Commissioner had connected with our trauma and had conveyed a genuineness that was rarely displayed to us either before or after the assault. It captured really what had been lacking and what Justin and I had craved for—genuineness!*

### **Anthony**

There are times in writing *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger* and this account of what happened to Justin and Anthony where I just feel a sense of despair. As a counsellor I hear of the painful life experiences people can have and of the valiant attempts many people can make to 'reclaim their lives' from sadness. In going in and out of workplaces I look at Managers, HR professionals and so on and I look for signs of caring. Sometimes I see it sometimes I don't. For me the Commissioner acknowledging 'they had not done enough' for Justin and Anthony is a beacon of hope in a very bleak story. Front-line workers, correction officers included, often live very altered damaged lives after their years of service and I often ask myself who cares? Who feels their pain? What the Commissioner did here was they listened to what Anthony was saying and provided a heartfelt and honest response to it. Anthony rates that as the highlight in the whole sad and sorry story—'that the Commissioner heard his pain'. How good was that!

## A closing comment from Anthony

*As I am typing a response to you Bruce, I have an analogy whereby an assault is like a group of soldiers fighting the enemy and one soldier goes down and "unfortunately or fortunately" the others step over that one to continue the fight, and the hit soldier is dragged out of the way when they can be removed from the scene. I feel that is what Youth Justice (System/Management) is like, but in the wrong way.*

### **Anthony Milbourne**

**I think this comment from Anthony makes our challenges very clear!**

## Chapter 3 - Rachel's Story – Permission Denied!

*Rachel's story was not included in this book because her employer declined permission to publish her account, despite her willingness to share her experience and her story being provided to her employer for approval.*

Both Justin and Anthony mentioned Rachel in their accounts of the assault and the pivotal role she played in saving Justin from more serious injuries, or even death. When I contacted Rachel, she had left her previous employer sometime after the assault at Malmsbury, so she was free to talk to me about her experience of the night of 3 October 2019.

Rachel was supportive of anything that might be beneficial to Justin. My reasons for contacting her were that I felt the heroics of what she did that night needed to be captured, that it could be emotionally beneficial for her to share her story, and that her reflections on the assault could be very beneficial for Justin in his therapeutic journey to come to terms with what happened to him that night and how dramatically it changed his life. My awareness from interviewing Rachel was that she was very passionate about her work, but that the assault had had a significant impact on her.

I was not surprised when Rachel contacted me to say she had accepted a job back with her employer and was absolutely loving it. I was really pleased that Rachel's experience was not going to be wasted, and that her return to the justice system would allow her employer to access her vast experience around surviving a high-level trauma.

With the stringent rules around staff talking, in any way, to people outside her employer, I knew immediately that Rachel would need to gain permission from them for her story to be included in the book. While I was not overly optimistic about the outcome, I was hopeful that the powers that be might recognise that Rachel's story was a powerful one—one that outlined her own heroic deeds, her deep commitment to supporting her colleagues Justin and Anthony, and the psychological challenges involved in processing the trauma she experienced on the night of 3 October 2019.

I provided a copy of Rachel's story, which she then gave to her GM, who forwarded it on to headquarters for a decision. When Rachel rang me to tell me it was a "no", I must admit I was very disappointed, as a wonderful story would now not see the light of day. It was a story that reflected very positively on the work of her employer, from an employee who still, despite everything she had been through, had been able to rediscover her love of the work.

It was also an opportunity for her employer to embrace and publicise the reality that their staff can be traumatised by this work, but also the reality that they can recover from it. So why was it a "no"? I did not ask Rachel for the reasons, as I accept it is the prerogative of her employer to make that decision, and I would 100 per cent abide by it. However, it still puzzles me as to why you would not want Rachel's most inspiring story to be part of this book.

It was an opportunity for her employer to embrace the trauma that surrounds this work and the challenges it presents to its employees. It is hard for me not to put a negative or defensive interpretation on the "no", as it felt like yet another example of resistance to the lived experience of officers and to the idea that trauma is a very real and prevalent part of the prison officer journey.

Fortunately, Rachel did get the opportunity to share her experience with me, and this interview was very beneficial for her and, therapeutically, for Justin and Anthony to have access to. It was a privilege for me to meet Rachel, and to even play a small role in assisting her post-Malmsbury was very rewarding for me. Her heroics on the night of 3 October 2019 really stand out as the ultimate example of risking your own life to save the life of a colleague.

## Chapter 4 - Trauma

I was talking to a welfare officer not that long ago and they were telling me about a discussion group they had started for officers off work with trauma related injuries. The first session had gone very well, and they were on their way to the second when the GM of the prison rang and said,

**“I have just heard about these sessions and they must stop now. I am not having angry, burnt-out officers getting together and bad mouthing this prison, which is what always happens with these types of sessions”**

If we unpack this short but explosive sentence there is no concern for these officers, no interest in playing a positive role in their recovery and a 100% focus on what damage they may do to the organisation. There is no awareness that these officers, who have been dragged to the dark side of psychological pain and will be desperately trying to reclaim their lives and their identity may have a great deal to offer this organisation in terms of knowledge around what the organisation can do so that they are not ‘angry and burnout’.

The old saying applies beautifully here, ‘If I had my time again what would I do differently?’ If you can go through that process it demonstrates as a leader you have the capacity to reflect and identify where you may have missed the point. We all know if you have a leader that cannot do that you are not going to reach the promised land!

### The Narrative of Psychology – The Trauma Debate

It was not long after I had started working privately, and I had recently registered with an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), that I received an early-morning phone call asking if I could conduct a debriefing session with prison officers at our assessment prison in the city. A prisoner had suicided during the night.

To be honest, this was very new to me, and I sat with five prison officers who openly shared what they had seen and their reactions to it. From my perspective, it was a very good session, and the most productive aspect was that the officers were exposed to the reactions of their colleagues, which was very normalising of their own reactions. They also had the opportunity to verbalise what they had experienced before going home.

As the years went by, I conducted many more of these types of sessions, and I never experienced any negative reactions to the experience from any of the officers who participated. On one occasion, I had an officer come up to me after a session and say, “That was great. I am not sure what was great. I just know it was great.”

As time went by, I noticed that the directives from the EAP providers for these group debrief sessions shifted towards a psychological first aid approach. The aim was no longer to address the trauma reactions of the group, but to ascertain whether any participants were not travelling well and then follow them up individually. In some psychological circles, the view had formed that these sessions, where trauma was discussed, were not helpful for participants.

My anecdotal experience was quite the opposite. I had witnessed participants benefiting a great deal from these discussions. It is important to appreciate that EAP psychological services are often the only psychological services officers have access to, so this shift away from permitting counsellors to address the trauma experience and its impact had quite significant

consequences. It further limited opportunities for officers to articulate what they were going through in response to their ongoing exposure to trauma.

The reality is that it was far easier to get officers to attend a group debrief than to initiate individual counselling. Group sessions provided an immediate opportunity to talk and could potentially encourage officers in distress to seek individual counselling because of that group experience.

In 2016, when I delivered more than forty training sessions to officers in our four maximum-security prisons on Mental Health and the Impact of Trauma, this further confirmed for me just how much officers valued the opportunity to share their experiences, with all their challenges, and just how open they were to doing so. These conversations formed the basis of my book *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger*.

We need to be promoting the idea that talking about your experience—whether traumatic or not—is a positive thing to do, and not maintain underlying beliefs within counselling services, driven by providers, that it is preferable not to deal with trauma in group situations.

The one aspect I do support, and personally adhered to, was that participants in my debrief sessions all had to have been present at the traumatic incident. If this was not the case, the session would have taken more of a psychological first aid approach. There is certainly a risk that the accounts of officers who did experience the incident could traumatise those who did not, because even learning about a traumatic event happening to a close friend can lead to PTSD.

Where all officers had been present at the incident, there was never an issue around what officers chose to share.

With what seemed to me to be total confusion around what frontline workers—including correctional officers—needed in terms of psychological support, in 2022 I embarked on a 15-session podcast programme called *Trauma from the Frontline* (accessible on my website, [letstalkdifferently.com.au](http://letstalkdifferently.com.au)). My idea was to interview trauma therapists and make these interviews available for frontline workers to listen to, so they could gain a better understanding of what therapies are available to assist with managing trauma experiences.

What I hadn't realised was just how beneficial doing these interviews would be for me in terms of enhancing my own knowledge of these therapeutic approaches. I learnt that, despite my twenty years working as an EAP consultant, I was nowhere near—from a skill point of view—being able to provide trauma therapy. All the therapists I interviewed were having a significant impact in the work they were doing with clients.

I began to wonder how frontline organisations could be so disconnected from the wealth of trauma knowledge that exists within the private sector, and how the pathways that connect frontline workers to these therapists could be so non-transparent—and for correctional officers, virtually non-existent.

What made this even more difficult for me was hearing first-hand the capacity these therapies have to make a significant difference to the lives of traumatised frontline workers. For Justin, his EMDR therapy was most helpful in his recovery journey.

There is still a great deal to be learnt about what psychological supports can be implemented to minimise the later onset of trauma reactions. However, I suspect the place to start is to canvas the existing knowledge of therapists who currently work with traumatised individuals.

The justice system needs to shift its thinking to address the high likelihood that most prison officers will, at some point in their careers, experience traumatic incidents that have the potential to be life-changing. This means gaining an understanding of just how painful and debilitating post-traumatic reactions can be, and how complex it can be for individuals to make sense of what is happening to them.

It also means accepting that these officers would not have been traumatised if it were not for the work they did, and that for those who come to need psychological support, this support should be available to them for the rest of their lives—whether they remain employees or not. As Justin and Anthony have shared, the therapeutic process helped them work through what they were experiencing and provided some relief from the intensity of their post-trauma reactions.

The mental health of officers is not going to be resolved by sitting in boardrooms “think-tanking”. It will be resolved by forming links with professionals and educators who work with traumatised individuals every day, and who have the capacity to provide far more intensive support to frontline workers than they are currently given access to.

The challenge within psychological services is to more clearly define what people experiencing trauma need in terms of treatment, and the processes required around communication about trauma issues. For decades, frontline industries have inadvertently—through simple inaction—facilitated the idea that bottling up emotional reactions to trauma is the preferred method of coping.

With that belief now in tatters, we have a significant task ahead in educating these workplaces about more modern ways of dealing with trauma. This will not be achieved by wheeling in an expert to deliver an expensive two-hour presentation at every prison in the state. It will require the development of more informed and intensive training programmes that have the capacity to genuinely change prison culture.

For those of us working in the psychological industry, we also need to develop greater clarity around talking about trauma with our clients. To me, it is deeply problematic if counsellors feel that part of an individual’s trauma experience is a taboo topic. Counsellors need to have confidence in their capacity to therapeutically manage whatever a client chooses to share.

For me, all life experiences are part of our lived experience, and we need to relate to the emotions of what we are experiencing in life, whatever that may be. There is safety in allowing individuals to express what they feel comfortable expressing, and therapy provides the context for this sharing to occur and, over time, for the impact of trauma to be processed.

Simply handing out the EAP card with a sense of “job done” is wholly insufficient to ensure officers receive the therapeutic treatment they need. Justice Departments need to drive real cultural change in how officers view counselling and therapy and create accessible pathways to longer-term support.

This means recognising that trauma is alive and well in prison workplaces, and that trauma psychology is a critical tool in addressing it.

## Managing Trauma

In terms of looking at the trauma-informed principles adhered to in supporting Justin and Anthony post-incident, it is hard to find any obvious ones, and much easier to list the principles that were not adhered to in managing their respective situations. Whilst justice organisations constantly spruik what they are doing in the space of employee mental health, very little of it addresses the immense underlying factors that drive the spiralling mental health of correction officers.

These stories highlight the shambolic, disorganised processes that Justin and Anthony had to navigate, processes that ultimately did not have their wellbeing at their core. Most importantly, they failed to recognise the level of trauma they were experiencing, or to ensure they were methodically linked into professional trauma counselling that should have been financed by the employer. It is misleading to say officers have access to EAP and imply this is sufficient, as this is not a trauma therapy model.

There are a multitude of trauma therapists and programmes that can offer real help to people experiencing work-related trauma conditions, but there are no pathways provided for correction officers to be linked into them. Some of the newer counselling initiatives for the military and police do not even cover correction officers. When this is combined with organisational denial, or at least indifference, to the significance and prevalence of trauma-related conditions experienced by staff, it is not surprising that so little has been done to ensure traumatised officers are supported and linked into the longer-term services they need post-incident. Subsequently, most officers do not end up receiving the trauma counselling they so desperately need.

Justin, recognising that he needed help, fought hard to find trauma counselling and eventually discovered a clinic. He approached his GP, who was happy to refer him. When Justin contacted the clinic, and despite them not normally covering the cost of counselling for correction officers, they compassionately decided to provide him with no-cost trauma therapy after seeing how traumatised he was. This was therapy he desperately needed but did not have the funds to access.

To me, it is inconceivable that Justin, Anthony, and Rachel could be so seriously injured in a vicious assault occurring in the workplace, and yet be offered only short-term, generic EAP counselling, with no attempt made to ensure full access to, and financial coverage for, the short- and long-term trauma counselling so critical to their recovery. There really is no counter-argument to justify why this was not overseen and provided by their employer. It would have made a substantial difference to their recovery, rather than leaving them with a growing sense of abandonment at the hands of the organisation.

It is even harder to understand that this lack of post-incident care continues in a context where officers are leaving the correctional industry in droves, recruitment is becoming increasingly difficult due to the level of violence in youth detention, and morale across the industry is chronically low.

It is core to the trauma recovery process that officers, and non-custodial employees who can also experience trauma reactions, are provided with comprehensive organisational support post-incident. This support needs to be centred not on what is best for the organisation, but on what is best for the individual, within a workplace culture that promotes taking these steps as healthy.

It is not that people did not try to support Justin and Anthony or show compassion at times, but the post-incident process is dominated by departmental procedures that bureaucrats and managers enforce with minimal understanding of what people like Justin were going through. This is not necessarily their fault, as to my knowledge they were not provided with training on working with officers experiencing significant mental health issues or trauma. There was no assessment of Justin's injuries, no attempt to explore feasible return-to-work options, and certainly no tracking of Justin's or Anthony's psychological wellbeing as they moved through the aftermath of what had happened and tried to make sense of their future.

We cannot go into the legal process Justin was forced to pursue against his employer to seek financial compensation for his injuries. However, as a general observation, once his employment was terminated, Justin had no choice but to seek legal redress. Inadvertently, this shifted the goalposts completely. What had been an employee issue became the Department defending itself against legal action.

Justin has shared that this alienation from his employer hurt him deeply, yet it was his only avenue for securing some degree of financial security. Ironically, the move into a legal process absolved the employer of any responsibility toward him as an ex-employee. While Justin was left dealing with a protracted court process, the employer was free to move on, leaving the matter to their legal teams.

Justin's solicitor commented to him, "We were always going to win, and the employer and their legal team knew that. It took far longer than it should have to reach a satisfactory settlement." What began as a severe workplace injury ended in a lengthy court process, where Justin's main source of support became his solicitor. Whilst all of this may have been legal, I am not convinced it was morally right.

Credit to Justin that he has emerged from this process disappointed in his employer, but not bitter. I have a strong sense that if the opportunity ever arose to return to the youth justice field in a safe way, he would take it without hesitation.

If I were someone considering youth justice as a career, I would need to know that far greater support would be afforded to me than what Justin, Anthony, and Rachel experienced in the post-incident phase of their journey. More time should be spent at the beginning of the process clearly outlining what employers provide in terms of physical and psychological support throughout these challenging and sometimes traumatic incidents, and how officers are prepared for them, rather than filling recruits' heads with how much difference they are going to make in the lives of the young people they work with.

## From Left Field

I was walking down the street in the Melbourne CBD, thinking about my work and the job I had attended that day. It was a large company where one of their senior managers had recently died from cancer. What I heard from the staff I spoke with was what a wonderful and compassionate man and manager he had been.

I heard how he could push you when you needed to be pushed but hug you when you needed to be hugged. I heard how committed and caring he was toward his staff, and how they cherished their interactions with him. I heard what a crushing loss he was going to be to the workplace and to his colleagues.

I reflected on how I never meet these lost colleagues, yet I hear about their legacies and the great impact they can have on those who work under them.

As is often the case with my brain, a sudden random thought came flying in from left field. It was the realisation that this is what is lacking in the correctional industry. I rarely heard correction officers refer to their seniors or managers as compassionate or caring in an emotional way or speak about having deeper connections with them.

What I did hear a lot about was the zealousness applied to seeking out poor behaviour, whether between officers or toward prisoners. I heard a lot about managers not connecting with officers at times when they were traumatised, and I heard a lot about the fear these hierarchical systems create in officers. I just never heard much about human connection, and there seemed to be a coldness in relationships, much like the prison walls themselves.

I could not help but compare how uplifted I felt after hearing about the life I had heard described that day, and how generally bereft I felt when I thought about my time in the prison system. It is not that managers or seniors do not care, as I know most of them do. But like all hierarchical systems, the use of power and authority to command compliance from officers is everywhere.

As one officer said to me, "In many ways, we fear our managers and seniors more than the prisoners." This connects with what a senior officer once said to me, "If I ask an officer to do something, I do not want a debate. I just want them to do it."

If your management structure is strong on demanding compliance, overly sensitive to any "mistakes" an officer might make, and quick to reprimand or discipline, it is simply not going to create a context where officers feel able to seek support, develop personally, or even place trust.

There were occasions where officers would share that they had a senior who genuinely cared for them and always had their back. These seniors were revered by the staff they were responsible for, but often this management style isolated them from the promotional system and was not identified as a strength.

A very senior officer once commented to me that he thought Code Blue was anti-management. I responded very quickly, "Well, that is what 500 of your officers told me." I have reflected regularly on that comment, and my response now would be a bit different.

What Code Blue reflected was that the relationship between prison officers and senior management is far more based on fear of retribution than on encouragement or staff development. It also highlighted the disastrous impact this has on the relationship between officers and their management.

From a trauma-informed perspective, one of the most critical elements of the Trauma-Informed Care approach is almost non-existent in this context, and that is the relationship with your senior or manager. There seemed to be a total lack of nurturing of staff, which I do not believe was ever even identified by senior management as something officers might need.

Occasionally, I saw glimpses of this from individual managers, but generally it was overridden by the expectation that they adopt an authoritarian management style.

The response I had hoped for when writing Code Blue was not a defensive one, nor attempts to discredit the book. What I really wanted to hear was concern about how alienated officers felt from the system, and what needed to be done about it. No one has ever asked me about that.

While we can spend all day hypothesising about the perfect qualities a correction officer should have, and how wonderful it would be if officers possessed those qualities, and the impact that might have on prisoner recidivism outcomes, we miss a fundamental reality. The prison system is in a personnel crisis, and one of the key issues is the capacity of seniors and managers to form meaningful and supportive relationships with their officers.

There is minimal focus on this, and it is never identified as a key issue in why we struggle to reduce reoffending. Lift the morale of officers and you will lift recidivism outcomes. We do not need to invent a new robotic correction officer who can have their jaw broken and attach no human reaction to it. We simply need to listen to the officers we already have, support and develop them, provide a much-improved work environment, and the rest will follow.

Sadly, the correction system, as Justin and Anthony highlight, is a system lacking soul and devoid of real warmth between officers and the management staff they dealt with. I should have been hearing stories of support, of feeling embraced by their employer, and of having their experiences acknowledged. Instead, their stories expose the deficiencies in post-incident processes and the severe impact this lack of care had on all of them.

While the whole system needs what might be called relationship reform, perhaps the easiest place to start is at the end of the process. Maybe we need to accept that being a correction officer, in many ways, is like going to war, and that some officers will return with long-term injuries and may not be able to return to their previous duties.

This personal sacrifice needs to be recognised and honoured, and a system created that supports these officers and provides a comprehensive recovery programme that is caring and has integrity as a core value. There also needs to be a visible place in prison histories for these unsung heroes, providing transparent acknowledgement that some officers will be injured in the line of duty, and reassurance that if this happens to you, you will be supported and not have your employment terminated under an insensitive policy that serves no one other than the employer.

## Chapter 5 – The Way Forward

### **If I had to choose four things that needed to be addressed urgently, I would choose:**

- The need to align the marketing approach to recruit adult and youth prison officers to the realities of prison work and the inherent risk of exposure to psychological and physical injuries
- The training of recruits needs to encompass, realistically, the psychological challenges of this work and develop a more transparent awareness around the balance between officer safety and prisoner rights
- The implementation of trauma informed training in order to up skill non-custodial staff around issues such as how to respond and support injured workers. This would also involve intensive training with Senior prison officers on how to have 'trauma conversations' with the officers who report to them
- Normalize, within the prison culture, the need to access trauma counselling at the appropriate time and have a clear, funded pathway for officers to receive specialised mental health

Whenever I talk about my work in the custodial setting, I always find myself using words like psychologically complex, multi-factorial, diverse range of issues and so on. At times it is challenging to articulate your thoughts as there are so many themes that run parallel through custodial settings, many are incompatible with each other. At times in collating the stories of Justin and Anthony I have had thoughts around how all the components of these custodial worlds are interrelated and impact on each other in a myriad of ways. Recruiting people to corrections work through promoting the 'making a difference in the lives of youths' to the exclusion of creating an awareness of the violence of the workplace sets off a chain of confusing messages that everyone struggles with. From the very beginning of the process this exclusion of trauma reactions to the work in the recruitment and training material sets off an almost irreversible thought process that trauma is not a part of the correction officer journey. Justin and Anthony both reflect how challenging it was for them to conceptually gain an understanding and appreciation of just how dangerous this work environment was. It was almost an if we don't tell you maybe you won't notice type approach. Whilst there was great focus, in training, on how to manage the youths in times of aggressive behaviour there was virtually nothing on how to psychologically manage being the recipient of the abuse and violence the youths would direct at you.

When you look at the violent history that was synonymous with Malmsbury it really is quite extraordinary the lack of airspace that was given to that or the support services to manage it. When you look at the number of traumatised officers working at Malmsbury, and any maximum-security prison for that matter, what makes you think that does not have an impact on workplace culture? The trail-blazing work of Dr Caterina Spinaris Executive Director at Desert Waters Correctional Outreach Service Florence USA highlights the reality that if many of your workforce is traumatised you will have a toxic workplace culture. Dr Spinaris is a great advocate that to address the mental health of officers you also must address the issues that exist in the workplace context/culture. They are connected and the link is trauma but there seem no major initiatives to address these structural and cultural issues within prisons/youth centres or even recognise poor workplace cultures are causal factors in poor correction officer mental health.

This book was about telling Justin and Anthony's story of their time at Malmsbury and to primarily highlight what needs to change within the system to provide greater safety to custodial officers to minimise the risks of what happened to them not only in the assault, but what happens to officers who do this dangerous work over long periods of time. What we heard from them, which totally resonated with me, was that this was a system simply not geared towards supporting staff, in a trauma-informed way, at any point in their journey which complicated their preparedness for and post-recovery processes from the viscous assault they all experienced. Whilst it would be easy to focus on providing more services for officers injured in their work these stories highlight the need to reform the whole structure and approach to the mental health of officers from day one through to the last day and beyond of their correctional careers.

We need an approach that seeks to minimise the psychological impacts of this work on officers and is proactive in promoting what they need to do to maintain their own health.

It is not possible to do more than outline my thoughts about what needs to change throughout the system and particularly around 'changing the culture' which has many deep-seated issues, formed over decades and with still some significant resistance to change. The following are my ideas around supporting the mental health of officers throughout their correction officer career.

## Mental Health Support

I have spent many years reflecting over the question what correction officers need to best support their mental health in this most challenging of careers. Whilst Employee Assistance counselling will always have a role to play it is simply not designed to play an active role in supporting officers more broadly across the diverse areas their employment takes them. It has been drilled into me by all providers I have ever done work for 'EAP counselling is neutral it neither advocate for the client or the organisation.' As a social worker this lack of advocacy has always been challenging to work around. I have seen so many things that really needed some advocacy on behalf of the officer, but it was simply not in my role. *Code Blue* was my answer to advocating and that got me into enough trouble.

Since interviewing Justin, Anthony and Rachel, I have often asked myself, particularly given I was at Malmsbury so close to the assault, what difference would it have made if I was asked to visit them at home? I know I could have helped Justin and Anthony as my social work experience has me very au fait with what they were to experience in the post-incident phase of what happened to them. I also know one look at their battered and bruised bodies, and I would have swung into advocacy role to ensure they received proper support and assistance from the organisation. I would have made a point of tracking the experience of their wives to give them an opportunity to voice what was happening to them and I would have continued to visit them to the point they were fully integrated in the next phase of their lives, whatever that was going to be. With Rachel, given we had a wonderful conversation five years later I am hopeful I could have engaged her to share what she experienced that night which would have facilitated further conversations.

My point—post-incident support needs to be on the front foot and actively follow up all officers that have been impacted by an incident. The handing out of the EAP card with 'a give em a ring if you need to' is simply inadequate. Firstly, because officers generally don't and secondly even if they do it will generally be a one-off debrief with no advocacy around what should happen.

Above all else it would have provided a sense that the organisation cared and that someone would be by the side of Justin, Anthony and other involved staff advocating for them.

# A Trauma-Informed Model of Care for Custodial and Non-Custodial Staff Working in the Prison and Youth Detention Environments

## A Proposal for Discussion

One of the problems we have with the concept of mental health support services is that they are primarily directed at officers who are injured, either psychologically and/or physically. They are not based on any clear psychological ideology of what is actually required at these times for staff who have been impacted by this work.

Trauma experiences change people. As Justin pointed out after the assault on him and Anthony, he found it much harder to trust the youths and that “something was different.” Anthony described the all-encompassing fear of danger and the hypervigilance that ruled his life at work and outside of work. Whatever post-incident supports you have, they are not going to make any real inroads into these issues, which have a huge psychological impact on officers every day.

Unfortunately, trauma experiences lay deep-seated psychological memories and emotional reactions that, over time, are hard to just plough on with. Many officers have shared with me that this work has changed them, and for some it is a long and complex road back, trying to reconnect with the person they once were. In this process there is often a realisation that that person is no longer there to reconnect with, and that a somewhat new identity needs to be formed. Having access to EAP or taking a couple of weeks off is not going to be sufficient to address the enormity of the changes that trauma experiences can create.

Mental health support services need to be part of a broader approach—one that incorporates more realism in the recruitment and training of new staff and develops comprehensive training programmes aimed at shifting the reliance on “jumping back on the horse” as the best way of coping. This is going to require the construction of a whole new way of managing high-stress and trauma experiences, and I think Anthony is right when he says officers are conditioned to just “keep going” and not confront what they are actually experiencing.

In the short term, this has benefited the organisation, as psychologically wounded officers just keep fronting up to work. In the longer term, however, officers eventually burn out and leave. It is interesting that Justin reflected that everyone involved in the assault had left the Justice field, and that is a testament to the void in thinking around how we keep these wounded officers long enough to firmly entrench them on the road to recovery. The current default thinking of “move them on” is counter-productive to any genuine concept of providing mental health support post-incident and beyond.

We also need to be addressing issues such as how all-consuming this work becomes for most officers, and focus on ways of minimising that, as it is clearly “not what officers signed up for.” Justin, Anthony, and all the other officers I have spoken to single out the lack of personal safety as the biggest driver of hypervigilance, both at work and at home, and it simply wears you down.

All of their stories speak to the reluctance of Justice Departments to do what they need to do around officer safety. So, what could be done to make officers feel safer and reduce this hypervigilance is largely not done. It is hard to imagine going to work every day fearing you are going to be injured, knowing that the safeguards that should be there aren't there, and then one day you are the victim of an assault. To then experience your fear and hypervigilance going

through the roof, yet be challenged to return to a workplace context that is no safer, with the same chance of being assaulted again.

This situation is further complicated by the over-focus prison managers have on officer behaviour and/or attitudes toward prisoners. While it is important to monitor interactions and ensure they are respectful, the vast majority of officers I have spoken to feel that this obsession with looking for “the bad officer” has become so dominant in prison management thinking that they have lost sight of the need to nurture the vast majority of officers who do the right thing. As one officer said to me, **“If you do something wrong, you will front a disciplinary process within days. If you do something right, chances are you will hear nothing of it.”**

As an outsider, I think I can say the balance isn't right—but in saying that, I also recognise the enormity of the task involved in getting that balance right.

All frontline organisations know staff are leaving their professions in droves and fewer people are stepping forward to take their place, yet I haven't seen any genuine attempt to try and gain an understanding of why? The answer to that question lies in 'hearing the story'.

In the end we are not talking about adding the odd psychologist here or there, or a free coffee and donut we are talking about major organisational structural change which requires justice departments across Australia accepting this work is traumatic and it dramatically impacts on their staff. The challenge is not only to support the mental health of custodial and non-custodial employees by offering trauma-informed services but addressing the complexity of issues that make prisons and youth detention centres not only dangerous but dare I say it traumatic and not rewarding places to work. Put bluntly a financial sign-on inducement doesn't make a workplace more safe or enjoyable to work in or compensate for your life becoming consumed by what you see and experience going to work!

## A Model of Care?

### Establishment of a Trauma-Informed Care Unit Comprising of Social Workers and Psychologists

This would be headed by a Senior Clinician who would report directly to the Director of People and Culture at DJ+CS. From my experience of working in a prison is that these positions should not report to the General Manager of the prison as the role would simply become swamped by the day-to-day demands of running a prison. Also, it is important that this unit reports directly back to senior head office management around the issues of the impact of this work on custodial and non-custodial officers.

### Senior Clinician's Responsibility

- To establish a resource group of trauma therapists, brain neuroscience researchers, representatives from agencies such as Beyond Blue, Black Dog Institute and so on, to provide expert input to establish a trauma-informed model of care to staff working in prisons and youth detention centres
- To employ a full-time social worker/psychologist at each maximum-security prison to perform the following duties:
  - To provide a comprehensive welfare and counselling service for staff and their family members covering areas such as critical-incident debriefing, supporting

staff experiencing physically and psychological injuries (still at work or recovering at home) and officers facing disciplinary action who have been suspended from their duties. This would involve home visiting, where appropriate officers currently recovering at home

- Liaising with work cover and developing a trauma-informed return-to-work process that is focussed on what is best for the individual. Advocating for the individual where required. Maintaining contact with individual and being a contact point throughout the recovery or disciplinary process.
- Linking staff into medical and health professional services i.e. trauma therapists, EAP, rehabilitation services and so on. Any additional costs for access to trauma therapists should be financed by employer.
- With the Senior Clinician revamp the marketing material to be more transparent about the exposure to abusive and violent behaviour and exposure to trauma incidents.
- With Senior Clinician develop training units on Trauma, managing stress and developing strategies to manage the challenges of this work, that could be incorporated as key topics in the graduate training programmes.
- With the Senior Clinician develop a 12-month intensive support programme for new recruits which allocates a mentor to provide support, 3-month group review sessions on how they are going and targeted training around managing critical incidents and demands of the role.
- With the Senior Clinician develop a peer support service for staff that is trained and supervised by counselling professional.
- With the Senior Clinician develop and conduct ongoing training around managing your mental health and reactions to the work you do.
- With Senior Clinician develop a comprehensive training programme for all managers that educates them around trauma, what it is and how it impacts on staff. This would also include skills training on how to conduct conversations with staff around their work experiences and exposure to trauma events.
- With Senior Clinician develop training around trauma for all non-custodial staff to assist them to provide consistent and supportive care to injured colleagues.
- Provide direct feedback to Senior DJ+CS Managers around the variety of complex issues custodial and non-custodial staff confront working in a prison or detention centre.
- With Senior Clinician conduct a review of the superannuation/disability policy to better support staff who due to their workplace injuries were unable to return to the custodial officer role. This should be a pension for life at around 80% of income.

A unit such as this would have provided far more intensive support to Justin and Anthony. Contact with counsellors from such a unit would have provided support and guidance as they went through the stages they had to go through. It would have provided some advocacy for them and at critical times intervened on their behalf to get processes back on track. A unit such as this, overtime, will become a key resource for justice departments as it will develop specialised knowledge around supporting the mental health of prison/detention centre staff and fill the massive void that exists today.

## Chapter 6 - Catching up with Justin

As this three-year process of writing Malmsbury Powderkeg was coming to a close, I remembered I had said to Justin, I would visit him at home to talk about the future and to capture what it had been like for him to share his story. It was late November 2025 I was able to do that

**“There was simply no one I could trust in the end. You need to be able to trust at least one person when you go through a process like this and I never found that person” JW**

I was really looking forward to catching up with Justin and there he was a big smile on his face outside the local hotel. As we were not recording this session, I sensed it would be a more relaxed conversation which it was.

I asked Justin what it had been like to be involved in this Malmsbury writing experience

“It has been an amazing experience sharing my story in this way. When I did the podcast interview with you, I was craving connection-someone to connect with my story. From the questions you asked me I knew you connected with my story from the beginning. This experience had been so isolating for me, and it was so nice to have you show interest in what had happened to me. I had so little support by that stage and the sense of connection with you meant a lot to me.”

I was quite humbled by Justin’s words, and it meant a lot to me that he felt I had connected with his story. I had realized how much distress it had caused Justin to have no one, other than the clinical care co-ordinator at Malmsbury, make any sustained effort to gain an understanding of what he was going through and how that was constantly changing. I could remember Justin saying how much he missed the connection with his colleagues when he was off work in the early days and how that added to his sense of how much his life had changed since the assault. It is important that we all hang onto the importance of helping injured officers maintain connection with their workplaces and not subtly induce pathways of management that aim to “move them on”.

### Justin on reading Rachel’s story

“I had not really had much of an opportunity to talk to Rachel, so I did not really know what she had been through. Rachel was back at work so quickly I assumed she was okay, and I was a little bit envious I was not back at work so quickly. It was very powerful reading her story and I just sat on the couch reading it repeatedly. I did not know the deep level it had affected her and it brought back her firm belief I would be okay. Rachel is an amazing person, and she just has this quality of giving people hope. To sense the distress, it caused her was very moving to me as it connected with the pain other officers experienced that night. Just recently a colleague came to see me to share with me that she still doesn’t sleep well at night and has this intense sense she didn’t do enough to help me. We talked and talked and I really hope I was able to help her to let that go and stop punishing herself.

She shared with me that ‘I was an officer that connected with the boys’ and that it was a ‘loss to many of the boys’. It was so heart-warming to hear her say that and I remember other officers saying many of the boys were crying at what the gang did to me. That did help to know that some of the boys did care about what happened to me. It also brought home to me just how many

people my assault impacted upon and that fellow officers are still trying to process it today, all these years later.”

I could really connect with what Justin was sharing here. The impact of the unrelenting attack on him and Anthony affected a significant number of officers, many of whom are still struggling to process the trauma they experienced that night.

Yet, in the two days I spent there after the assault, no effort was made by Malmsbury to connect me with any of the officers involved in the “cricket bat incident”. As a result, I saw none of them. My point here is broader: far greater attention, focus, and care need to be attached to these high-level incidents, and responses need to be far more trauma-focused than simply “getting EAP in”.

From where I sit, there were so many conversations that needed to occur from the moment of the assault, and nobody really reported to me that any took place beyond a superficial level. This completely defies what we all need as people going through trauma.

I am not saying prison facilities don’t try within the resources available to them. Rather, the ideologies that drive mental health and trauma support for correctional officers are grossly inadequate. One does have to ask: how can so many officers be so traumatised by a single event, yet there is no evidence of any significant attempt by the employer to facilitate intervention or stimulate discussion about how those officers were coping?

Were there any proactive initiatives taken to encourage officers to talk with management and with each other about what happened that night and the impact it had on them? Or was it simply ‘on with the show’ and a managed damage-control response?

It is intriguing that someone like me, all these years later, can go in search of the Malmsbury story and find a whole range of officers still very keen to share their experiences, with a strong sense that their stories remain ‘untold’. One person who proofread *Malmsbury Powderkeg* responded, “When this goes public, you will have ex-officers from Malmsbury queuing up to tell you their stories of pain, misery, and trauma.”

I have been aware Justin and Anthony are the tip of the iceberg and there are many officers with untold stories to tell. What does this say to us? These workplace experience don’t simply fade away, they stay with people, they become a part of their persona, their lived experience and the only therapeutic thing available is talking about them with people that can connect with them. When these experiences occur in a system that doesn’t value talking, that doesn’t value the sharing of experiences officers are kind of left, as Justin puts it ‘in no man’s land’ forced to find relief wherever they can from the brutal forces trauma can create.

## Justin and his future

‘I am still committed to working with youth as I was when I first went to Malmsbury. I still want to play a role in encouraging youth to create a choice to live a good life. It is important that I take small steps to re-enter the workforce and not jump straight into the youth scenario. I want to be working with people but to begin with in a less stressful environment. The reopening of Malmsbury and the press using old photos of me and Anthony has retriggered me a bit and it has been a rough couple of weeks. But who knows what the future holds. I would never say never to working again at Malmsbury one day, but it would be directly with the youth and not in a custodial role.’

I, like a true professional, was full of ideas about how Justin could use his 'lived experience' to work with youth to move away from violence etc. In an instant Justin had insightfully reminded me he could only move at his own pace and while he loved my ideas they were simply not in his reach at this point. I instantly understood and it was such a reminder to touch base with where people are at before getting carried away with what you think they should be doing. As we finished our lunch, I asked Justin if he was ready for the focus this book could bring on his story. He looked at me and commented

**'After six years I am now ready to tell my story and maybe it is time I got on the front foot. Every step I take now will be a step I need to take on my road to recovery'**

As I drove home to Melbourne, I reflected on what a wonderful three years this had been working with Justin, Anthony and Rachel to bring their stories together in Malmsbury Powderkeg. I had learnt so much from them and my faith in the power of the story was as strong as ever. There are many challenges and messages inherent in their stories and sadly Justin's story and journey have a long way to go.

When I followed him up to see how he was after our talk he replied yesterday 'hadn't been a good day'. This wasn't due to anything I had done it was as Justin went onto say 'some days and nights for that matter are just not good'. I had not noticed Justin wasn't travelling well and it became very clear to me only one person really took the brunt of what happened on that day and it is Justin.

While what happened to him has ricocheted through all those that are close to him, it is Justin who lives with the headaches, the brain fog, the nightmares, the fears for his family and so on. I wonder what that would be like?

## Closing Thoughts

*It is very clear to me that the biggest challenge to making prisons and youth detention centres safer places to work is by winding back some of the increasing freedoms that have been granted to prisoners, which in some instances have made assaulting a prison officer less difficult and often with minimal consequences. To do this of course is at total odds with the prisoner rights advocacy movement. Whatever the answer to that issue is, the reality is unless prison officers can work in safer environments the exposure to workplace trauma and its resultant impacts are unlikely to change.*

**Bruce Perham**

When I really thought about the way forward, I recognised that given the significant research coming out into the mental health of correction officers which really paints a desperate staff crisis, in fully digesting what Justin and Anthony had told me, it really hit me what a lonely distressing experience it was for them navigating the 'system' post-assault. There really wasn't anyone on their side.

Over the years I have had so many people say to me in terms of changing how things work in the prison system either 'where do you start' or 'it is just too hard' and both are very true. Given though I have a belief you have 'to start somewhere' I am now very much of the belief you start with staff well-being, trauma education and improving mental health for all staff. If this is laced with genuine caring and consistency staff will relate to it. If the issues that prison officers raise are listened to and responded to this will foster greater staff engagement. The Belgium Conference was full of prison officers being a critical cog in the rehabilitating of prisoners but paid little attention to the significant impact the work was having on them. The refusal of Justice Departments here and elsewhere to recognise the relevance of the prison officer experience, and the knowledges held within, is a serious impediment to moving forward in the correction industry.

The flow-on of these refusal's is thousands of prison officers leave this industry mortally wounded, lives changed for ever, with a sense no one cares for them. In many ways they are right and the justice systems blind spot to their pain provides further hurdles for them to navigate in the recovery process. We all have a right to live a good life and not be haunted for ever by traumatic workplace experiences but until the powers at be can step down from their rhetoric-filled dreams of corrections grandeur, I don't have a sense officer pain will diminish anytime soon.

**Bruce Perham**

**Social Worker, Family and Narrative Therapist**

## Suggested Readings

### My Reflections -The Belgium International Corrections and Prison Association Conference (ICPA) held in Antwerp, Belgium, October 2023

One of the things I have learnt is when you write a book things evolve. I had seen the call for abstracts for this conference and decided to submit an abstract based on six interviews from my podcast series *Trauma from the Frontline*. These interviews which included the first interview with Justin and Anthony all told the story of the psychological challenges of working in a prison. To my surprise it was accepted!

My paper: Correction Officer Stories – The Hidden Voice

**Full paper available on [letstalkdifferently.com.au](https://letstalkdifferently.com.au) website**

It is always daunting when you head to a conference, in a foreign country, totally on your own and knowing no one. Over the first three days of the conference many of the discussions I had with co-delegates were a bit stilted and no one I talked to really connected with my interest in the mental health of correction officers or asked questions of my work. As the conference wore on, I became more aware that the international focus on correction officers was about how they related to prisoners and not what they were experiencing psychologically with the associated dilemmas in relating to prisoners.

I realised because I operated in a bubble in Australia and only interacted with correction officers I did not connect with the ideas, philosophies and rhetoric of the broader justice industry. It also dawned on me that where I was coming from was quite challenging to many of the justice themes and ideas conference participants were discussing at the conference. The role of officer as a change agent/mentor to a prisoner does not really align well with the stories of being beaten senseless by prisoners.

As the conference went on, I was very much enjoying the presentations and was learning a great deal about the 'pulse of Justice'. The more I realised this pulse was not about correction officer pain and disillusionment the more I withdrew into myself. By the Wednesday, the night of the Gala Dinner I was very much on my own. I had lost interest in finding a 'group' but to be honest I was relatively happy in my own thoughts.

### The Gala Dinner, ICPA Conference, Antwerp, Belgium, October 2023

I arrived (well, more slunk in) and sat at the nearest table to the door. I had some nice conversations with the people on either side of me. It was about halfway through the night, enough time for the wine to float through my mind, and I realised I was sitting at the table on my own.

For more than half an hour I sat there, just absorbing the sheer beauty of this magnificent building in the heart of Antwerp. But I knew I didn't belong there. I started to think about all the prison officers I had met. I started to think about all the things they had told me, and that whilst the 'night danced away', they were sitting at home with memories 'of faces hanging from a noose'.

The voice of my editor, Jenny, was ringing in my ears: “Your voice needs to be stronger.” But I had resisted that in my book *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger*. It was very important to me to work within the system, but post-writing *Code Blue*, no one had come knocking on my door and no one had contacted me from any prison management to express their concern for the mental health of their officers.

When you have been through trauma, whatever the cause, there is a sadness that never leaves you, and it is very easy to very quickly recoil into your own thoughts. The dinner was one of those moments for me, and your emotions become magnified and more intense. It is like being in a world of your own.

It is forty years since I went through my childhood trauma-related depression, and I have come to accept that I am wired for sadness. But I have also come to accept that this is not necessarily a bad thing. It has given me a compassion, a commitment to people who have experienced trauma, and an awareness that they too are often alone, surrounded by their own thoughts.

At these times, when my melancholy is at a higher level than it normally is, I draw on that mood and try to chart a way forward from the chaos and alienation I am experiencing. I was coming to understand that it is going to be more challenging to educate people about the impacts of correctional officer trauma than I had imagined.

By the time I left the dinner and walked back to my hotel, in the crisp Antwerp air, I had a sense that I was on the right track, alone as I was.

## Conference Paper Presentation – Thursday Morning

Whilst I had not in any way foreseen the response to my paper, in hindsight it was very consistent with my instincts about the aversion to the idea that correction officers are injured in doing their work.

There were only two questions, one of which challenged me for delivering such a “triggering presentation.” I found this very interesting, as the conference was overwhelmingly attended by professional or academic people, and I met very few correction officers during the entire week.

My response was that I was aware of the possibility that this paper could be re-triggering for those who had experienced, or were experiencing, trauma. However, if we do not share, discuss, and understand the correction officer experience, we have no way of moving forward. You cannot address the issue of trauma if no one can talk about it.

I also expressed my belief that, for those who found it re-triggering, it might act as a catalyst to seek the therapeutic assistance they needed—assistance that was probably not very available to them at the time.

I had anticipated there would be great interest in the prison officer experience of trauma, but only one person came up to me after the presentation. He was the Vice President of an Eastern European Prison Officer Association. He said to me:

*“That was a great presentation and I really enjoyed it. I reflected to him that I did not feel the audience related to the stories at all. He then said 'You are right they did not, but it is a story they have to hear and until governments fully embrace this reality your clients and my members will continue to suffer in silence’.*

This interaction really gave me a lift as post-presentation I was down. As I sat outside in the Antwerp square trying to digest it all, I just had a sense, irrational as it was, that these six stories in some way had been disrespected.

It was at that moment I decided to take the interviews I had done with Justin and Anthony, go back and talk to them again and write a fuller account of that night at Malmsbury where Justin and Anthony's lives had changed for ever. I needed to go to the next level as confronting as that may be.

## Books & Papers

*Psych Warden: An Officer's Psychological Account of the Inside* by Anthony Milbourne. Amazon.com

*Generative Corrections: Facilitating Personal Growth and Reciprocal Wellness One Conversation at a Time.* Greg Morton Amazon

*Desert Waters Correctional Outreach Service Colorado USA*—Dr Caterina Spinaris - Vast range of material, training programmes and monthly newsletter

*Mid-21st Century Criminal Justice: Transforming Work Culture.* Dr John Shuford. Higher Education kendallhunt.com

The Australian Senate Enquiry into the Mental Health of First Responders 2018

Brain2Brain Dr John Arden. Wiley Publisher

*Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger.* Bruce Perham. Self-published available for purchase on [letstalkdifferently.com.au](http://letstalkdifferently.com.au) website

*The O'Rourke Interviews—Counselling a Prison Officer with a Story to Tell.* Bruce Perham. Self-published for purchase on [letstalkdifferently.com.au](http://letstalkdifferently.com.au) website

*Correction Officer Stories—The Hidden Voice.* Paper by Bruce Perham presented at ICPA Conference Antwerp Belgium October 2023. Free download [letstalkdifferently.com.au](http://letstalkdifferently.com.au)

## Newspaper Readings

Incidents just keep happening that capture the enormity of the dilemmas that thrive unchallenged or addressed in the Justice field.

### The Age - Rejections of Mental Health Claims Soar, by Keiren Rooney 25/8/2025

The following are two extracts from the article that say a great deal about the government's view of correction/frontline workers.

#### *Extract 1*

*Workers claims for mental health compensation are being rejected at double the rate they were before the state government tightened eligibility to rescue the troubled WorkCover scheme from financial strife.*

#### *Extract 2*

*But the most significant change was the decision to exclude compensation for people whose primary mental injury has been 'mainly caused by stress or burnout because of events that are considered usual or typical and are reasonably expected to occur in the course of their duties'.*

I found it fascinating that to reduce the cost of WorkCover some bright bureaucrats/politicians have homed in on the most psychologically vulnerable workers and reduced their entitlements to support they desperately need.

As I have already mentioned the marketing approach to recruit correction workers fails to mention the horrendous trauma officers will be exposed to or to detail the known neuroscience research that clearly outlines the negative impact this can have on cognitive brain function. To then provide minimal training around managing the psychological demands of correctional work and offer shoestring psychological support for correction officers throughout their careers is disappointing enough. But to then use an argument from the 1970's that this exposure to trauma is part of the job so negates any mental health claims for PTSD, burn out etc is a trip back to the dark ages and really is proof that the lives of correction officers really don't matter and that cost savings can be made by reducing their access to supports that are vital in the recovery journey.

**With this type of thinking what hope is there for prison reform wherever you sit in the stakeholder's wheel!**

### The Herald Sun – Prisons Set for Influx, by Shannon Deery, Alex White and Mitch Clark. 13/3/2025

#### **What Is The Government Doing About It?**

This article quotes Victoria's Premier Jacinta Allen as saying:

*I'm deeply sorry for the hurt and pain and trauma that victims have experienced in any instance of crime. It has been heartbreaking: not only have I been talking and listening to victims, I read their emails, I read their letters, the distress that has been caused by this repeat pattern of behaviour.*

It is important that our political leaders do tune into the emotional pain of those impacted by violent acts in our community. I can only hope should Ms Allan read Justin, Anthony's and Rachel's story (which could not be told) of being assaulted at Malmsbury that there will be the same reaction and a recognition of more needs to be done. Violence and trauma apply equally, in terms of impact whether it occurs to a member of the public or occurs to a correction officer doing their job.

There were a couple of other very important points made in this article that I wish to comment on:

### *Point 1: Budget Deficiencies*

*Sources told the Herald Sun that the operating budget for Cherry Creek Youth Justice Centre would need to be doubled to increase its capacity for the changes. The facility has 140 rooms but according to the latest departmental annual report only 56 beds were operational.*

As I learnt from writing *Code Blue: Prison Officer in Danger*, writing transparently about life working in a prison you will very quickly be ostracised from the justice system. There are a couple of competing issues here. Whilst publicly there is no recognition, other than through the press, given to just how poor the mental health of adult and youth correction officers really is or the level of violence and abuse they are subjected to daily. If you were to ask the question, why are we having to offer financial incentives for people to consider being a correction officer the answer would be it is simply considered too dangerous. As Anthony told me after four years at Malmsbury only four of his graduate training class remained out of thirty-three that did the training. That is an extraordinary turnover rate of staff. I can understand the dilemma for the government with the community calling for less bail and more remand but a detention system that is dramatically under-resourced and not able to cope with 56 detainees let alone anymore.

This is where under-funding a system for years if not decades really catch up with a government where you have a 'beaten and bruised' workforce already under enormous strain and youth programmes that are totally inadequate [people tell me] in terms of rehabilitation or reducing the violent behaviour of the youths. One of the ironies of this is the government really fares no better, in terms of managing the behaviour than the parents of these troubled youths.

### *Point 2: Financial Incentives*

*A \$5,000 signup bonus introduced in September 2023 was recently increased to \$8,000 in a bid to attract employees to join the struggling prison workforce. A government spokesperson said 179 payments were made in the 18 months since the incentive was introduced with another 318 payments expected to be made by June 30<sup>th</sup>.*

As Justin, Anthony and virtually all the other correction officers I have spoken to over the years tell me the issue is not only attracting officers to the role but is the supporting them transitioning into the work and the complexity of the culture they will work within. The focus on numbers of people accepting the financial incentive is misleading as many officers as possible who sign up because of that, like most people attracted to this work, will have no idea of what they are stepping into and only time will tell whether they can survive it or not in the longer term.

### *Point 3: Staff Shortages*

*Corrections staff are bracing for a 20% boost in prison numbers which they say could push the system to breaking point. The Metropolitan Remand Centre is facing critical staff shortages, and it was one of several prisons forced into lockdowns in recent weeks because of these staff shortages.*

When a system is already stressed, which is evidenced by staff not being well enough to come to work, and you add more prisoners to it, it really is a recipe for disaster. Whilst you can ramp up your recruitment numbers by offering financial incentives reality is these new officers are thrown into these stressful environments, often inexperienced, with totally inadequate support structures. The ramification—the high staff turnover continues unabated. I have been aware that in sharing Justin and Anthony's story and the manner they were treated post-assault has every opportunity to be a disincentive to do this work or any frontline work. But I am at the point now, having witnessed so many lives destroyed by doing this work that we have to recognise we have not 'got it right' and until greater attention is paid to the mental health of correction officers and they are given a seat at the stakeholder table, we are not going to get it right.

### **Herald Sun Article by Neve Brissenden AAP**

#### **Tortured Prison Guard Left 'Spiralling' in Pain After Six-Hour Hostage Situation**

When one correctional officer first became a prison guard, he thought he could make a difference in a community he loved that was beleaguered by poverty and generational trauma. "I believed if I could change the life of one person then perhaps the cycle of poverty and abuse in one family could be broken," a man told court today. "How naïve and idealistic I was". The officer and his colleague, both of whom cannot be named for legal reasons (a luxury not afforded Justin and Anthony) were attacked by a pair of prisoners at the Mid North Coast Correctional Centre near Kempsey on December 19, 2020.

Whilst his colleague escaped with several stab wounds, the other man was tied up in the officer's station with skipping rope before being beaten, stabbed with a shiv, and chemically burned by hospital-grade disinfectant, Fincol.

Correctional Services NSW later pleaded guilty to breaches of the Work Health and Safety Act admitting policy failures led to the violent incident.

In a lengthy victim impact statement read to the NSW District Court the officer described the long aftermath of the incident, which left him with permanent loss of feelings in his feet and hands, partial blindness and major burns on his body. The scars that cover my body tell a story of abuse and trauma and events beyond my control. The constant writhing pain from his injuries made it impossible for him to touch anyone else and severely impacted the lives of his friends, family and partner. "The actions of others have sent both of our life's trajectories spiralling into a place no one should have to tread," he said. Every day I deal with a mind-boggling sense of betrayal. The people I trusted should not have had that trust."

The state agency says policies are now in place to avoid a repeat of the situation.