

Ben wearing his Southern Highlands Club colours. He had just received a letter offering a place in the Illawarra Academy of Sport.

From left: James, Daniel and Ben Mikic with their parents Andrea and Darren.

Turning Tragedy to Good

Can anything good come from the tragic death of a promising young cyclist? With the help of her close knit family, cycling club and local community, Andrea Mikic believes that it can, as she explained to **Phil Latz**.

Andrea Mikic and her family have been through a nightmare since she received the phone call that every parent dreads. But for the sake of her son and other young cyclists, she was keen to share her experience and in particular, the good that she hopes can come from it. Here is her story.

"Ben and Alex (Tomlinson) had gone out for a training ride and several people have told us that they saw the boys going past. I was at work at the private hospital, so I wasn't home. The boys had come home from school, got changed and decided to go out together.

"Apparently it happened at 5.20 pm. I didn't know anything about it until I had a missed call on my mobile at 5.45 pm. I returned the call and it was one of the people we cycle with. They said, 'There's been a terrible accident. Just come down here, we know it's Alex but we don't know who else is involved.'

"My heart just stopped because I knew Alex and Ben rode every sin-

gle afternoon together. They trained together and were best friends. Alex used to spend a lot of time at our place and I used to jokingly call him my fourth son because he was always here and we love him. He's a great young person and he and Ben had a great friendship.

"They were coming from Mittagong and going towards Bowral. They came down a hill and were riding through an intersection when a lady was coming from Bowral and turning right. She obviously didn't see them.

"We haven't heard anything from the Police about who she hit first, but unofficially this is what we've been able to piece together. Ben died of a fractured skull and massive head injuries and he had bilateral clavicle fractures as well. We haven't been told any other injuries at all. We think he was hit first because that's what it looks like from the damage to his helmet and when we saw him, the huge amount of head trauma he had, that he'd gone straight into the car. And then she hit Alex afterwards. (He was injured, but not critically.)

"When I got to the scene I had to push my way through two huge Police blockades and I had to say I thought it was my son. Nobody had told me it was a fatal accident. I stopped and parked the car and ran up the road and that's when I saw a body on the road covered with a blanket and it was Ben's bike next to the body. I knew it was Ben. We weren't allowed to go over to him. We couldn't actually identify him or do anything because it was a crime scene.

"They had to get the traffic Police down from Sydney, which took a couple of hours. We couldn't actually do anything; we didn't get to see him until after midnight on that night.

"It was the worst night of my life absolutely. Because I was the first family member there, I had to phone my husband Darren and all the other family members and tell them that Ben was dead.

"The idea of the foundation was started the day after Ben was killed—mainly because Ben was such a positive person. In everything he did he always gave 110%. He was always very dedicated with his cycling. He absolutely loved it.

"I just really felt that I wanted something positive to come out of his death. If we could help another family not to have to go through this, then I felt like Ben's death wasn't a waste. I just think this is too painful and I don't want another family going through it. If we could somehow make our roads safer, especially for our young people then that's the aim of it.

"After Amy Gillett's death and that beautiful Scott Peoples, there's just been too many cyclists killed on the road. Darren (Andrea's husband and Ben's father) and I are both passionate cyclists and so is our middle son Daniel. We've got a five year old and he just comes along to all of the events with us as well. We just thought as a family we wanted to do something positive to help young people know about the dangers on the road. Also to teach road users, as in car drivers, that cyclists are allowed to be there and we can share the road.

"Basically our goal is to make Australian roads a safer place for cyclists and especially young cyclists.

"Volunteers will run the Ben Mikic foundation. We've got some really nice people on the board. We've got Paul Hillbrick, Peter Tomlinson, who's a Commissaire and Alex's dad of course, and my dad (Phil Herd). Mark Braithwaite who has been a rider for years and is a very prominent businessperson. Anne Drury, she's a lawyer. An accountant called Deborah Buchanan who has a lot of experience with the tax side of things. All these people just volunteered themselves.

"Before I had kids, I had a marketing and PR type of role, but I just want to be there because I'm Ben's mum and I'm very passionate about it. Darren's the same. Darren's worked for defence for 21 years and he and I have only taken up cycling in the past year and a half. We absolutely love it; it has changed our lives I have to say.

"We did consider joining forces with the Amy Gillett Foundation, and we will be working with them. We've had a look at the Amy Gillett Foundation and we don't have the same goals, but our goals align with their goals. This foundation is for young cyclists.

"One of our goals is to set up training programmes. We'd like to get a training programme into the schools, starting locally. One of our ideas is to speak to the Department of Education and see if we can have some

type of training programme actually put in the curriculum for 10 year old children and up. Teaching them about safety, having to wear helmets, the importance of having a properly fitted helmet, the importance of being visible on the roads, for having a flashing light on the back of your bike. All those sorts of things. How to tell when it's not the best time of the day to ride, because of bad light and things like that.


"We don't see this as something that's just this year. We see this as something that we can grow. Hopefully we can lobby the Government about making roads safer and councils about putting more signage up.

"There are just so many cyclists on the roads and the number is increasing all the time. It's not just cyclists who are in a club like us but other cyclists who don't necessarily belong to clubs.

"Bike riding is one of the best exercises, I believe. Our fitness has gone up incredibly since I took up cycling at the age of 42. I took it up last year and my fitness level has gone up amazingly since then. I can actually do the races. I don't get places but it doesn't matter. It's just the fact that we're out there and we're doing the healthy thing.

"Richard (Vollebregt, Southern Highlands Club President and champion marathon cyclist) actually got me back on the bike two weeks after Ben was killed. I was quite nervous about getting back on the bike, but Richard took me out for a ride.

"Since then I go out in the mornings with a group of people. Darren and I did a 50 km ride this morning with our little son. We're all riding and actually feel it's one of the things that's really making us feel better, because we feel so close to Ben when we cycle.

"It's hard to go on some of our routes where we all used to race together. All these lovely memories we've got, but we also know that we are not going to stop cycling. Ben wouldn't have wanted us to stop cycling and we're not going to. It's a huge part of our lives and we just have to somehow, through the Ben Mikic Foundation make the roads a safer place." 

Seed money to create the Ben Mikic Foundation was raised at a dinner which had been originally organised as a fundraiser for Richard Vollebregt's Race Across America (RAAM) campaign. However with Ben's death just six days before the dinner and the funeral scheduled for the following day, Richard decided that all funds raised would go to the Mikic family for funeral expenses and the creation of the Foundation.

I was privileged to attend that function, where Southern Highland Club members showed tremendous generosity and support for the Mikic family, who also attended.

Now would be an excellent opportunity for members of the wider cycling community to show their support.

If you would like to make a donation to the Ben Mikic Foundation, please visit www.southernhighlandscs.com.au and follow the link on the home page. Or phone Michele O'Byrne on 02 4878 5078.

Photos courtesy of Mikic family.