

Cousin of missing backpacker Theo Hayez, Lisa Hayez shares the family's heartache since the tragedy

By Ann Wason Moore

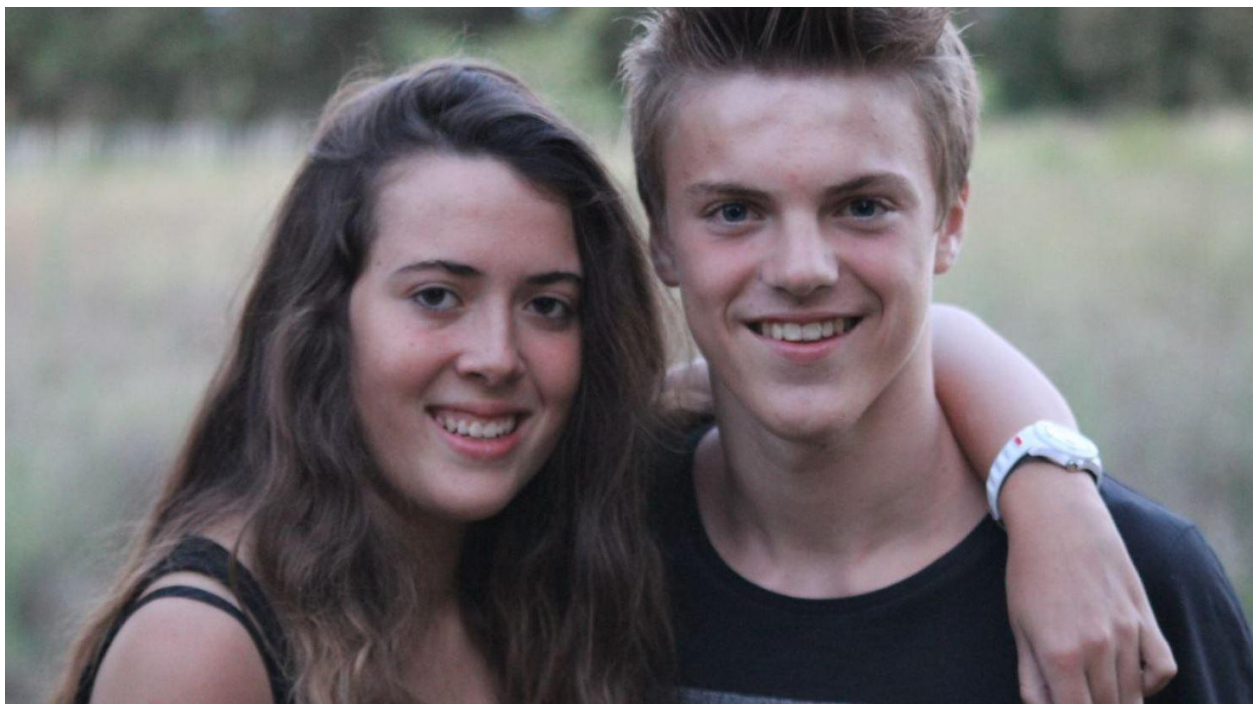
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Every morning, Lisa Hayez wakes knowing this could be the day.

And that's both the hope that keeps her searching and the dread that tortures her.

For three years now, Lisa has been living a waking nightmare ever since her cousin, Theo Hayez, disappeared in Byron Bay. With no body and no closure, she cannot yet begin to grieve her loss but instead is suspended in an endless, ambiguous anguish.

Three years after her world was rocked by Theo's disappearance, she knows that any day another bomb could explode, in the shape of answers of what happened to the Belgian backpacker.



Lisa Hayez with cousin Theo Hayez, who disappeared from Byron Bay in 2019 Picture: Supplied

And so every day she braces herself for that bomb to drop. Or worse, not to drop.

Theo was last seen on May 31, 2019 when he was asked to leave the Cheeky Monkeys bar in Byron Bay about 11pm. NSW Police suspended the search for Theo on July 3, 2019 and referred the case to the Coroner.

In February this year, NSW Police posted a \$500,000 reward for significant information relating to Theo's Disappearance and the findings of the NSW Coroner's inquest into the case will be handed down on October 21. For Lisa, no matter what findings NSW State Coroner Teresa O'Sullivan hands down, she knows it simply can't be the answer she needs. "I've heard all of the evidence but there is no conclusive answer. The Coroner and her team were incredible with us, but the answers we need don't exist yet," says Lisa, who last saw Theo when he boarded a bus from Brisbane to the Gold Coast, just days before he disappeared.

"My one great hope is that with the money on offer now, someone will come forward. My whole family truly believes someone knows something, we need them to speak.

"I don't have a gut feeling. Everyone has their scenario and if I start thinking about every possible thing I'll go crazy.

"There are so many people who want to help by offering their theory but it's so hard to keep hearing their assumptions or the dream they had last night ... we just need people to support our family by being there.

"Ambiguous loss is so different ... you can't lay anyone to rest. You can't say goodbye and you can't really start grieving. I know I will never see Theo again, and that still feels so unreal. How has this happened to us? It still hits me every now and then, he's really gone.



"My hope now is so different from three years ago. Then, I hoped to find him. Now, I hope to find answers.

"But I also know that if or when those answers come, a whole new trauma will begin. Police might call tomorrow and say we found his remains. It's a bomb that might go off any day. Or it might not ever.

"That's a trauma in itself."

It's all part of the ambiguous loss suffered by the family and loved ones of a missing person. And tragically, the number of those missing – and those left behind – is exploding. In fact, the Australian Federal Police's most recent figures show that there has been a 30 per cent increase in the number of missing people since the start of the pandemic. Because in Australia, despite the stereotypes portrayed on film and television, the vast majority of

our missing are not embroiled in some murky underworld connections or caught up in crime but are dealing with mental health issues. The onset of Covid-19 has only exacerbated our country's difficulty in dealing with mental illness ... and the proof can be seen in the number of those who disappear.

But while the problem grows, the solutions and the support remain stunted. It's the reason why Loren O'Keeffe created the Missing Persons Advocacy Network in 2013, two years after her own brother disappeared.

It was July 2011 when 24-year-old Daniel O'Keeffe went missing from his family's home in Geelong, Victoria. He was a martial arts instructor and was due to begin a carpentry apprenticeship the following week. Only two years older than her little brother, Loren was devastated and quickly established a public campaign, #DanComeHome, and its Facebook page would eventually acquire more than 70,000 followers – the largest campaign of its type in the world at the time.

Eventually, she used her experience to create MPAN, a charity to support people experiencing her own family's peculiar hell. Almost 10 years later, although Dan's body was eventually found, MPAN is still going – and is the only group like it in the country.



Theo Hayez

Powered almost solely by Loren, plus a few generous volunteers, she works with more than a hundred family members experiencing ambiguous loss – including Lisa and the extended Hayez family.

“We have no corporate dollars, no state or federal funding, we’re a hard sell.

“MPAN doesn't fit any of the neat categories – we're not arts, we're not education, we're not health ... but we're a bit of everything. We're a grey area ... which is ironic as that is exactly the space that the families of the missing exist in.

“I have to be the dancing monkey to get any of the money we need to exist, but supporting our families, liaising with media and police on their behalf, it leaves me with very little time to dance. Governments and the police are well aware of our work, they regularly refer people to us, but they're not supporting us in the ways we need.”

Loren says while funding is important, Australia's handling of mental health issues is the biggest factor at play when it comes to our missing people.

She says because the vast majority of cases, more than 80 per cent, are not criminal, it's very difficult to engage police help.

“When Dan disappeared, the police did nothing. It wasn't a suspicious case so we had no help,” she says.

“That's still the reality for most families, and it's just not good enough.

“But it's not just a case of providing better help for families, but better prevention to stop the missing from going missing.

“So often this is correlated with mental health, if there was more support it would have a profound impact. This is a public health issue, not a criminal issue.”

For Lisa, she has similar sentiments when it comes to police involvement. While she can't praise the people of Byron Bay, northern NSW and even into the Gold Coast enough for their help and support, she says it took the grieving Hayez family's own Detective efforts to get authorities involved.

“It's complicated,” says Lisa, who lives in Brisbane.

“The police have set rules and procedures they have to follow, but it makes them too slow to act. In the first few days after Theo was reported missing, there was so much information we needed that they couldn't provide.

“We ended up getting access to his social media accounts and phone information before the police did. Google was quicker to respond to us than the police.

“The red tape they operate under must be changed.

“But what was wonderful was all of the community support. In this horribly unlucky situation, we were lucky in that respect.

“I don't know how I have kept myself going all these years, but the people of Byron Bay, northern NSW and southeast Queensland are part of it.”

Three years after Theo's disappearance, and almost four years since Lisa and her cousin first came to Australia, she still replays their last moments together.

The pair, who grew up together more like brother and sister in Belgium, shared one last family night together before saying what would become their last goodbyes. “Theo was probably one of the happiest people I've ever met, he was super positive and interested in everything and everyone. He would ask a question and listen to everything you say,” she says.

“That last night together we stayed with my brother in Brisbane and played games and ate tacos, we laughed and laughed like we always did.

“The next day I took him to the bus stop to catch a bus to the Gold Coast. I gave him a hug and said goodbye. At least I had that moment of closure.”

But it's not enough. Maybe, someday, Lisa will finally receive the news she needs to finally lay Theo to rest. Until then, she exists in the limbo of ambiguous grief.