

FEBRUARY 2021

Police Journal



Finally, we meet

"It meant so much to me that someone who had impacted my life felt the same about me, that I'd made an impact on his life."





Finally, we

He was the 24-year-old cop, and she was the two-year-old whose life he saved.

But, after the rescue, he would never see her again – until nearly three decades later.



By Brett Williams

1. Clair, not quite two years old, at the Prospect house.

2. Cole receives the Star of Courage medal for bravery from the now late Dame Roma Mitchell at Government House in May 1994.

meet

SHE WAS THE WOMAN HE HAD NOT SEEN FOR 27 YEARS. Not since she was two years old. But she had always remained firmly and affectionately in his thoughts. His connection to her was, after all, a life-and-death police incident, and it was too indelible in his memory ever to fade.

A raging Prospect house fire had threatened to kill her and another child back in 1993. Then-constable Michael “Coley” Cole ran to the back of the house, kicked open one locked door and then another, and charged straight in to black, suffocating smoke.

His vision extended only about as far as the length of his arm, but he could see bright orange flames to one side of the house. He knew the two children were somewhere inside and could hear the cries of at least one of them.

Coley simply followed the sound until he found little Clair Anderson sitting on the living room floor, just a few metres from the flames. He scooped her up into his arms and rushed back outside with her to safety.

Indeed, he had saved her from a certain, horrific death and would ultimately receive the Star of Courage medal for his bravery.

And now came a chance for him to meet the grown-up version of the little girl he had not seen since the night of that fire. He had come to think of her as the daughter he had never known and longed to find out what she had made of her life.

Coley had discovered nothing about her over the years, and Clair was too young to have any memory of the fire, let alone the cop who rescued her. Bits of information she had picked up as she got older were sketchy.

“All I knew was that a police officer had kicked down the door and saved my life,” she says. “I didn’t know anything else about him. Nothing at all.”

The pair’s reunion was to begin not face to face but rather with a phone call in February last year. And it would be the first time Coley, then 51, would ever hear Clair speak.

The sound of her crying, which led him to her in the fire all those years ago, was the only sound he had ever heard her make.

Today, still a little overwhelmed, he struggles to describe the moment he first heard her speaking voice, and the two-and-a-half-hour phone conversation that followed.

“I was just so happy that I could finally speak to her,” he says, “and just hear that life (for her) was okay.”

“She was telling me how she had a couple of kids, a partner, a business and was going on quite well. So, it was just really nice to hear.”

Clair, who had never even known her rescuer’s name, thinks of those hours on the phone with Coley as “just so wonderful”.

“As soon as I talked to him, that first time he called me, it felt like I knew him already,” she recalls. “It was very strange.”

“Straight away we just felt a connection; and he said: ‘I’ve always wondered about you and wondered how you turned out.’”

“I was just in tears. I was just crying and crying and crying. It meant so much to me that someone who had impacted my life felt the same about me, that I’d made an impact on his life.”

“And then, because of the coronavirus, it was actually a little while before we got to meet face to face.”



2

It was easy for Clair to make the decision to meet Coley in person. She found out he wanted to meet her when a SAPOL victim contact officer called her early last year.

Coley had sought the okay of his supervisor to initiate the contact, to find out if Clair was amenable to a meeting or totally against it.

He had sought consent once before, 15 years earlier, when Clair was 14. Her mother, however, would not allow her daughter to meet Coley and never told Clair of his approach.

“So,” Coley says, “it sat with me for years that I really wanted to meet this girl.”

Now it was up to Clair, and when the VCO put the question to her of meeting Coley, she felt “quite emotional”.

“But I was really, really interested in doing it,” she says. “She (the VCO) actually said: ‘Can I give Michael your phone number?’ And I said: ‘Yeah, absolutely!’”

Later that same February day, Coley rang Clair and the two revelled in their two-and-a-half-hour conversation.

Says Clair: “When we first spoke on the phone, Michael actually said: ‘You know, I feel like you’re the daughter I’ve never met.’ And that was really nice for me because my father passed away about six months after I was in the fire. So, I’ve grown up without a father.”

Although Coley and Clair wanted to meet each other in person, the curse of the COVID-19 pandemic was to make them wait three months.

But, in that time, they kept up their contact through text messages and more phone calls. Then, finally, in May, came the day when each would see the face of the other after 27 years. And neither had the slightest idea what the other looked like.

“All I remembered was this little baby with blonde, gleaming hair,” Coley says. “And I remembered that (not from rescuing her but) from the Channel 7 news footage of the fire.”

Coley drove up into the Adelaide Hills where Clair and her partner live with their two children and run their business. When the two came face to face, Clair found the moment “just overwhelming”.



“It’s very strange that you can have such a full-on connection with someone when you

haven’t had anything to do with them before. But I literally do owe him my life.”

“All these emotions come rushing over you,” she says. “As soon as I saw him all I wanted to do was just hug him. I just felt quite safe around him and quite comfortable.”

“It’s very strange that you can have such a full-on connection with someone when you haven’t had anything to do with them before. But I literally do owe him my life.”

And her life, of course, was just one of many topics she and Coley talked about that afternoon. He met, and had lunch with, the whole family but, outside on the deck, he and Clair talked privately for more than three hours.

Clair remembers “lots of tears and lots of laughs” as they discussed “anything and everything”. That included their families, and deeply personal details of their respective journeys through life in the nearly three decades since the fire.

“She’s a talker,” Coley says with a smile, “so there was no lull in the conversation.”

3. Clair and her sons, Iggnatius and Archer, and partner, Gus, with Cole on a visit to his home last year.
4. Cole and Clair reunited after 27 years.

But there did come a stretch of silence when Clair took to reading articles and documents Coley had brought with him about the fire.

He warned her that what those writings covered – like the death of the other child – had the potential to distress her. But, undeterred, Clair said simply: “I’d like to know.”

No detailed account of the fire and the police response had ever been at hand for Clair. The briefest retelling of the story by her mother was all she had ever known. She had never even seen the news footage.

But now, after meeting Coley, she knew the cop who rescued her, the circumstances of the fire, and how close she had come to death.



“I don’t see him not being in my life. He’ll be there forever now. That’s the way I see it.”

The joyous day of her reunion with Coley eventually came to an end but a special relationship between the two had only just begun. Like a father and daughter, they have remained close and frequently in contact.

Clair has visited the Cole home, dined with her rescuer and his family, and got to know the copper she calls “my hero”.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Michael,” she says. “I just feel very at ease around him, very comfortable. We’re a bit the same, a bit antisocial, a bit quirky. I feel like he gets me.”

Clair has also appreciated the presence of “a strong male influence” in her life.

“He’s just always there if I need him,” she says. “I feel very blessed that it’s someone like him that I’m able to have a relationship with. He’s an amazing person.”

Coley stresses that finding Clair was never about him replacing, or even trying to replace, her father. His aim was simply to know that she was all right and to offer help, or just himself as a sounding board if ever she needed one.

“I just feel she’s family in a sense now,” he says. “She’s a character, she’s fun to be around and she’s good to talk to.

“She’s got a busy life, but I send her a message every couple of weeks and we try to have lunch together as often as we can. I’m pretty sure that we’ll be in touch now for the rest of our lives.”

Clair, too, sees a lasting relationship for her and Coley.

“It made me feel really sad when I heard that he’d reached out (when I was 14) and I hadn’t got to meet him,” she says. “So, it’s been really nice that I got that second opportunity.

“I don’t see him not being in my life. He’ll be there forever now. That’s the way I see it.”

... THE FIRE

It was around 1 o'clock on a Saturday morning in March 1993 when First Class Constable Michael Coley responded to a Prospect house fire. A motorist had stopped him just moments earlier on Prospect Road to alert him to the blaze on Braund Road.

As he approached 96 Braund Road in his patrol car, he could see thick plumes of black smoke billowing into the air. And then, as he pulled up, he noticed a dozen-odd screaming, panicked people gathered on the road out front.

He could also see smoke and flames burning furiously at a window on the northern side of the house. Bystanders were trying to put that fire out with a garden hose, as others made the same attempt on the southern side of the house.

Then someone among those gathered out front yelled out to Coley that two children were inside the house. Coley moved instantly to draw more information from those people, who believed that one child was in the room with flames pouring out of its window.

And as best those bystanders knew, the other child, Clair, was in a room toward the back of the house.

With that information, Coley sprinted around to the back of the house, kicked down those two locked doors and charged into the inferno. Although the smoke limited his vision to the length of his arm, he could see the bright orange flames burning in that northern room.

At the same time, he could hear little Clair crying and followed that sound until he found her sitting on the floor of the living room. As he picked her up and carried her out of the house the smoke grew thicker and he began struggling to breathe.

"I certainly remember her crying," he says. "I just scooped her up and I'm yelling at her: 'Where's the boy? Where's the boy?' Like a two-year-old's going to be able to tell me that.

"In hindsight you think: 'Oh, God, what'd I do that for? Poor kid. All she'll remember is a copper yelling at her.'"

"I certainly remember her crying. I just scooped her up and I'm yelling at her: 'Where's the boy? Where's the boy?' Like a two-year-old's going to be able to tell me that."

Once outside with Clair, Coley handed her to a bystander, whom he told to give the child to her mother. He then grabbed a piece of child's clothing, soaked it in water, wrapped it around his face, and charged back into the house.

Although he now had almost zero visibility, he made his way to that northern room in which the fire had indeed trapped the three-year-old boy. The room was so full of raging flames that Coley could not even distinguish items such as furniture.

"You just couldn't get in there," he remembers.

In the intense heat and with thick, stifling smoke filling the house, Coley simply could not breathe and had to retreat. But he still refused to abandon the little boy and made four more courageous entries into the house to find and rescue him.

On his last entry, he could see the light of a torch in a passageway and hear the voices of two of his colleagues.

Kevin Brown and Ian Rowe had arrived on the scene and were now in the house, crawling on their hands and knees in search of the boy. The then-constables would both earn the Australian Bravery Medal for their actions.

One of them shouted a warning to Coley that the roof was on fire and might at any moment collapse.

Coley reluctantly accepted that he could do no more and made his final exit from the house. He had never had any real chance of saving the boy, but the death left him shattered.

5. Coley receives the SAPOL Police Bravery Medal from now late former commissioner David Hunt during a graduation ceremony at Fort Largs in December 1993.





6



7



8

“So, I’m just really happy that Clair’s here and enjoying her life. And I’m glad I played a part in her having that life.”

Later, after he had been to hospital for suspected smoke inhalation, Coley returned to the house, where he spoke with fire techs analysing the scene. “They talked me through it,” he says. “They said: ‘Look, the fire was well and truly going before you even got here. That child wouldn’t have made it. Nothing you could’ve done, Coley, would’ve saved him.’”

“It would’ve been hard to live with not knowing if I could’ve got him out but talking to the fire techs eased my mind. I couldn’t have done anything else.”

“So, I’m just really happy that Clair’s here and enjoying her life. And I’m glad I played a part in her having that life.”

Clair has not lived with any memories of the fire or her rescue. But she has, throughout her life, felt particularly uneasy around fire.

6. Clair, at the age of 4, seated at a drum kit in the home of a family friend. **7.** At age 6 with her maternal great grandmother in Victoria. **8.** Clair aged 5 with the daughter of a family friend.

Whenever it came to sitting near a campfire, or her mother simply lighting the oven, Clair would “freak out”. She even became stressed when she visited friends’ homes in which open fires were burning.

“I’d sit there,” she says, “and I’d start to feel too hot. And then I’d start to feel like I couldn’t breathe. So, I couldn’t be around fire at all.”

“I actually had to go through a lot of hypnotherapy to be able to even deal with it.”

Police found, in their investigation of the fire, that the children had lived with their mothers in the rented three-bedroom house since January 1993. The cause of the fire appeared to be two lit candles left in the children’s bedroom.

Clair was not in the bedroom that night because she had fallen asleep in the living area. **PJ**