

Victim Impact Statement

Philip Keith Pollett

Richard Owain Pollett (pictured) was my only child. His life was cut short when visiting Brisbane to appear as soloist with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. Richard was 25 when he was killed. He was taken from us at a time when he was most radiant and energised for his future career as a solo violinist. His death has had devastating effect on Patricia and me, and writing this statement has been very difficult for me.



Richard Pollett

16 February 1986 - 27 September 2011

Richard spent most of his early life in Brisbane. The three of us were very close, our relationship warm, loving, nurturing and supportive, and this was amplified by having our extended family living elsewhere (in Adelaide mainly). Despite Richard leaving home in 2008 for Lugano, this relationship remained strong. We maintained weekly contact through Skype, and followed his various exploits and successes. We visited him several times overseas and interstate, and attended most of his concerts. His death has thus left an enormous hole in our lives: not only personal loss, but the loss of his future and the consequent loss of ours. We now realise how much our own aspirations were tied up with his future. Richard was developing a serious relationship with fellow musician Lara De Marco, in Lugano. We thought they were perfectly suited, and we expected they would marry. We were looking forward to having grandchildren.

Patricia will provide a separate statement, so let me now focus on how Richard's death has affected me in particular.

I have already said that Richard and I had a wonderfully strong, supportive and loving relationship. I was there at his birth and with him at all major events in his life, and now he is gone. I miss him so very much. The grief I feel at losing my only child, my brilliant and beautiful boy, seems incalculable.

Richard and I had a great deal in common. Despite my being a professional mathematician, music has always been a very big part of my life. I play the piano and the cello. Richard and I often played and listened together, and we frequently discussed music. Given how intimate music making is, you can image what a hole is left in my life. But, we shared so many other pursuits, from the relatively trivial, such as roasting coffee beans, cooking and watching test cricket, to a passionate common interest in literature. It was, and indeed is, a source of great personal satisfaction that I had such a well rounded son, one who sucked the very marrow out of life. Our last conversation, just hours before Richard was killed, concerned

the poetry of William Blake. Richard had just read *Auguries of Innocence*. We discussed this at length, and especially the opening:

“To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”

I am in tears now as I copy these prophetic words, knowing as I do how deeply Richard understood Blake’s view of the universe and the world in which my beloved son thrived.

I adored Richard as a boy, and admired him as a man, and continued to learn from him. He epitomised the qualities that I most admire in others: generosity of spirit, dedication and hard work, a deep understanding of man’s creations, love of simple pleasures, balance in life, and the need and ability to make the lives of others richer. You can begin to see why I feel the loss so profoundly.

Whilst I feel confident that I am learning to live alongside my grief, I have still not come to terms with the horrific nature of Richard’s death. Every sinew of Richard’s beautiful body and his wonderful mind were directed to finding the deepest nuance in his art—antithetical to the spectre of his death. It is causing ongoing problems for me, and I am deeply saddened that I cannot yet live in a way that will honour Richard’s legacy. Life is just far too challenging at present.

I am Professor of Mathematics within the School of Mathematics and Physics at the University of Queensland, and well respected by my peers. Up to the time of Richard’s death I had substantial administrative responsibilities. I undertook major leadership roles and led a major research programme. Since Richard’s death my administrative load has decreased, and I am relying heavily on research staff around me. I now feel unable to take on administrative roles commensurate with my position within the University and my standing in the Mathematics community. This is especially difficult for the School, as there was an expectation that I would eventually become Head. At times I feel very uncomfortable that colleagues need to make allowances for me.

My difficulties stemming from the nature of Richard’s death are manifested in many ways.

My mind frequently returns to the scene of his death, and what I imagine he experienced in the last moments of his life. I feel his terror, and see his mangled body on the road. These thoughts are triggered by many stimuli: whenever I see or hear news of a cycling death, or indeed of a death of someone involving trauma. Often they come simply when I am alone with my thoughts: in the shower, when I am walking or as I’m trying to get to sleep.

I have flashbacks to the time the Police visited our house to tell me the awful news, often when I see police and police cars. I now do not answer the front door unless I'm expecting someone. Patricia was not at home at the time the Police arrived, but returned later in the afternoon. I also frequently "relive" the moment when I told Patricia of the tragedy. I knew this would be difficult, but I didn't comprehend *how* difficult. How did I summon the strength to tell my wife that the light of her life had been snuffed out? It remains the most painful moment of my life.

Whilst the frequency of these episodes has not decreased, I have, through psychological counselling, developed some strategies to help deal with them. However, when I am tired, as I frequently am these days, I find that they are less effective. I am beginning to feel that they are "part of me" and will not go away quickly. I try to "keep busy" and to keep my mind occupied.

I now frequently experience anxiety. I can become emotional and teary, and have cried uncontrollably in front of friends and colleagues. My colleagues are so kind. I don't feel at all embarrassed, but I know that they feel awkward. A recent instance was when I was visiting Melbourne for a meeting. I was walking with colleagues to get lunch. We were waiting to cross the road at a set of traffic lights, and began to walk on Green. Then, two cement trucks, side-by-side, stopped very abruptly and broke noisily. After crossing the road, I broke down. I felt real fear. One close colleague was very supportive, but the others seemed quite shocked, and it was only much later in the day that an explanation was given.

I also experience anxiety about collegial presentations. Up to the time of Richard's death I was a regular invited speaker at national and international meetings, but since then these engagements have become difficult for me, and I have honoured only a few existing commitments. I now feel unable to accept invitations at major international meetings, and have been making excuses.

I do not sleep well. I frequently have nightmares. I often cannot remember the dreams well, but just wake up frightened and panicked. Patricia says that sometimes I will cry out in my sleep. I have been prescribed sleeping tablets, but I try to use them only sparingly. I usually manage to get to sleep listening to the radio under my pillow. Distraction is a strategy that I have found most helpful.

Since Richard's death I avoid cement trucks. I always drive in the left-hand lane on freeways so that I can exit if I spot a cement truck in my rear vision. There is a lot of building work at the University at present, and I do my best to avoid going anywhere near cement trucks or other heavy vehicles.

I have been prescribed medication to help with my anxiety, but only take it when needed.

Additionally, I have become forgetful. At times I find it difficult to concentrate. I have certainly lost motivation, and I have sometimes found dealing with students difficult. It is a great concern to me that I may have to reconsider my future as a teaching-and-research academic.

I have not had any personal experience of mental health issues, least of all any of my own, and it surprises me that I can maintain a kind of “double life”, functioning at one level where those around me are usually oblivious of my problems, and at another where I am deeply troubled.

It is important that I also mention how Patricia’s experience and state of mind are affecting me. You will know from her statement how profoundly the loss of Richard has affected her. Patricia and Richard had a mother-and-son bond that transcended that which one would expect bearing in mind their shared careers and outlook on life. I had often described their bond as visceral: instinctive and intuitive. Despite Patricia being on medication, she often has periods of deep despair. Patricia cries several times each day. I worry about her constantly, and try to be with her whenever I can. Arriving home after work is a time of great anxiety for her. I try to be there when she arrives in the evening. Sometimes I feel unsure about whether I have allowed myself to grieve fully given that I have tried to “protect” Patricia from much of what has happened since Richard’s death. I am thinking here of my dealings with the funeral directors, the Police, the Coroner’s Office, with the DPP, with our solicitors, with the recovery of Richard’s personal effects, and with the Police Forensic Investigation Unit. You will learn from Patricia’s statement that she cannot attend concerts. This was, until Richard’s death, a source of great pleasure for us and a very important part of our lives together. I now attend concerts alone.

Finally, let me add that our loss is also felt by the musical community, especially the Australian musical community. As a violinist, Richard had great technical facility and demonstrated extraordinary musical depth, and no doubt he would have achieved much in the musical sphere and have gone on to make a big impact on the cultural life of Australia. Richard was greatly admired and respected. The depth of feeling in the musical community is evidenced by a long list of memorial concerts both in Australia and overseas, radio broadcasts, countless messages of condolence from Richard’s colleagues and from prominent musicians around the world, and new works by major Australian composers, including Andrew Ford and Elena Kats-Chernin, written in his memory. There is also a major instrument bequest by Janet Holmes à Court in Richard’s name, and memorial scholarships and awards in his name, the most important being *The Richard Pollett Memorial Award* (administered by the Australian Youth Orchestra). Full details are available at the following website:

<http://www.pollett.id.au/RichardPollett.html>

This outpouring of grief and love not only recognises the loss of a wonderful artist, but also the loss of a wonderful man who possessed great personal qualities that affected positively the lives of all who came into contact with him.

Philip K. Pollett
19/04/2013