

Teen took his own life after falling into nude pics trap set by cruel 'catfish' bullies

How evil trick pushed happy boy into fatal mental spiral

Toowoomba parents Tracey and Mick Clayton with a picture of Zaeden. Picture: David Martinelli



I don't understand how people can be so bloody cruel

Mick Clayton

STEPHANIE BENNETT
EXCLUSIVE



HER name was "Bonnie". She was attractive, flirtatious and irresistible to cleancut Toowoomba teenager Zaeden Clayton when she contacted him out of the blue on the social media platform Snapchat in August.

Within days her flirty messages to the trusting kid from a good home escalated to erotic selfies and Bonnie soon lured Zaeden into sharing intimate images of himself in return one day, during school hours.

But Bonnie didn't exist. She was a fake profile created by two older male students from Zaeden's school - bullies who ruthlessly targeted the innocent 15-year-old without warning or provocation, his family say.

Bonnie's erotic selfies were porn images they'd downloaded from the internet.

The real sting of the catastrophic plot came next.

The bullies showed and shared around their school the intimate photos they'd tricked Zaeden into sharing - a horrendous humiliation for the teen.

Zaeden had become a victim of "catfishing", a particularly cruel form of online predatory behaviour which is usually a tactic of criminals targeting vulnerable people online with the aim of getting a victim to hand over money.

But the schoolboy wasn't targeted for money - his tormentors wanted to humiliate and embarrass him for no reason other than a cheap laugh.

It was the start of a tragic downward spiral for the kind and athletic boy who loved the Broncos and camping trips with his tight-knit family.

Three months later, in November last year, Zaeden

Clayton took his own life. The boy's final words, penned in his beautiful handwriting, will stay with his heart-broken parents forever: "I am so sorry for letting you down. I love you."

Mick and Tracey Clayton, and their two daughters Amadee, 22, and Mikaela, 17 are living every family's worst nightmare.

They did everything they could to help Zaeden.

Alerted to his catfishing humiliation on the day it occurred, they immediately picked their son and Mikaela up from the school - Concordia Lutheran College - and took Zaeden straight to the police station where they made a formal complaint, though it would be weeks before he was officially interviewed.

The siblings were then enrolled at Mary MacKillop Catholic College with the hope of a fresh start, but in a relatively small city the bullies knew what had happened at Concordia and the torment and torture followed the 15-year-old.

On the morning of what became his final day, November 15, the Claytons say Zaeden was viciously assaulted in a school corridor.

When Zaeden ran into the toilets to escape, he was followed by a group of students who continued yelling and throwing objects over the toilet cubicle at him.

Tracey was called to collect her distressed son at 9am.

The student who physically assaulted Zaeden remained at school that day and was permitted to go about his school day freely.

Zaeden had been up all night the evening before, his parents would later learn, harassed by text messages and phone calls from a bully.

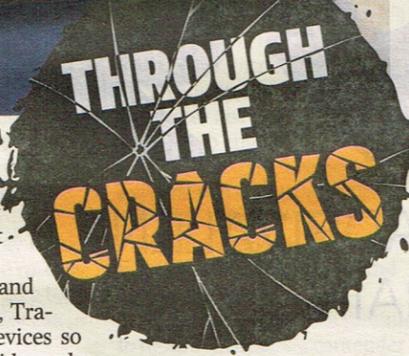
After she picked him up,



A happy Zaeden Clayton with his father Mick and with his sisters Amadee and Mikaela (below). The note he wrote them said: "I am so sorry for letting you down. I love you."

I just so desperately want to reach out, and pull him back to us

Mum Tracey Clayton



Zaeden assured Tracey he was OK now he was home, his safe place. He just wanted to sleep.

Knowing her husband would soon be home, Tracey took Zaeden's devices so he could rest and said goodbye to her son.

It was Mick who made the tragic discovery on that horrific Monday afternoon.

Devastatingly, Mikaela also arrived home soon after, and desperately held her baby brother's hands, pleading for him to wake.

His parents say Zaeden lived with the opposite mentality to his tormentors: He always helped others.

He had dreams of being a school principal, following in his mum's footsteps into education - into giving back.

"We'd like him to be remembered as the beautiful person he was, and to know these sort of things - catfishing, online bullying - can happen to even the most kind and caring people, they can happen to anybody," Mick said.

"The catfishing was what started Zaeden on his downward mental spiral, ultimately leading to his death. I don't understand how people can be so bloody cruel."

His parents feel it was Zaeden's most wonderful qualities - his kindness and love for helping and pleasing

others - that made him an "easy target" for bullies.

"He trusted too many people," Tracey says.

"His willingness to help and please others made him an easy target. He was such a kind and caring human being who never hurt anyone."

The Claytons are adamant no other family should go through what they have endured.

They want tougher laws to crack down on perpetrators, and better education in schools. While the police who spoke to Zaeden were "very supportive", nothing will bring back their son.

"The embarrassment, shame and humiliation they caused to him was horrific, and ultimately led to his death," Tracey says.

"Yet we're the ones who get the life sentence."

The Claytons were also shocked to learn Dolly's Law - cyber-bullying laws named for 14-year-old Amy "Dolly" Everett who took her life after being bullied at her Warwick school - had been passed in NSW but not in Queensland.

Mick and Tracey have proposed a change to the current Queensland Criminal Code, to make "the deliberate online targeting, bullying, stalking and harassment with the intent to

humiliate, embarrass another person" a specific offence.

This would include using a carriage service to create a fake profile to obtain personal information or images, and sharing of that information or images to ridicule, humiliate, isolate and embarrass.

"From his death we should all learn there needs to be some changes made within the laws, within the education of our kids, so that we can prevent this from happening to someone else," Mick said.

And they have found an ally in their push for "Zae's Law", with local Toowoomba South MP David Janetzki in their corner.

He told The Sunday Mail that Zaeden's death was "deeply felt by our close-knit community".

"Zaeden's tragedy reminds us why change is desperately needed to fix the system and better educate the community," he said.

It has been more than three years since Queensland's Anti-cyberbullying Taskforce handed down its 29 recommendations - which were all accepted by the state government - but Mr Janetzki said Queensland kids were "still facing catfishing, bullying and harassment online - often during school hours".

"There is no single answer,

but education and legislative and policing solutions must again be on the table," he said.

Mick and Tracey also want better online safety programs in schools, to educate parents and students about cyberbullying and catfishing, and for schools to consider instigating "no phone" initiatives.

Attorney-General and Justice Minister Shannon Fentiman said the government was "committed to protecting Queenslanders from this damaging behaviour".

Ms Fentiman also said there was legislation which criminalised revenge porn and anyone found guilty of non-consensual sharing of intimate images can spend up to three years in prison.

Both Concordia Lutheran College and Mary MacKillop Catholic College declined to comment.

A coroner's report into

Zaeden's death is expected in the coming months.

At her son's funeral, Tracey wore a dress adorned with red love hearts, for her youngest child who had nothing but love to give. Tracey's voice cracked as she told mourners what she would miss about her boy with the heart of gold.

"I will miss the way he called me 'Mama'," she said.

"I just so desperately want to reach out, and pull him back to us."

Mick spoke to the hundreds who had gathered with them, to farewell their "little man with a heart of gold". He then spoke to his son.

"Zae loved his family. He felt safe with his family. He was happiest with his family," he said. "You are now safe. Suffer no more pain mate. Rest in peace my son, we love you."

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<p>Kids Helpline 1800 551 800 kidshelpline.com.au</p>	<p>Headspace 1800 650 890 headspace.org.au</p>