

Photo by
Rebecca McLeanPhoto by
Kelly Kolodziej

forget me not

The death of a child through stillbirth, premature birth or serious illness is an unthinkable thought. But for the families who experience these events the unthinkable becomes their reality. Thankfully we have moved on from days past where grieving parents were advised to 'just forget' about their loss. It is now understood that a healthy grieving process involves acknowledgement of the baby or child and a celebration of their existence - however brief. One organisation has stepped in to help parents faced with the unthinkable to honour and remember their cherished children. **Jayne Kearney** looks at the work of the Australian Community of Childhood Photographers.

Family photos are often taken at the best of times – birthdays, Christmas, Mother's Day, Father's Day. Or even the most simple of good times – playing in the backyard, curled up with the dog, splashing in the bath. It is how we record our lives. Visual memories have the ability to take us back to a time and place where we recall smells, sounds and emotions along with the images. For many of us the photos of our baby are like an echo of the toddler, teenager or adult growing before our eyes. But for families who have experienced the loss of a child, photos become a precious touchstone to a little one who is no longer with them, and for some they may be among a mere handful of mementoes.

In the worst of times – times of illness and death – the last thing on a parent's mind may be taking photos, so intent are they on making each moment last. It is at this time that a group of dedicated photographers discreetly steps in to offer their talents to grieving families. The Australian Community of Childhood Photographers (ACOCP) is a volunteer organisation with over 100 members nationwide. These photographers provide the gift of photographic memories to families who have experienced stillbirths, premature and ill infants and children in the Neonatal Intensive Care Units of their local hospitals, as well as children with serious and terminal illnesses.

NSW President Casandra Anguita Deep says of the ACOCP photographers, "We are generally mothers and fathers who have experienced something and are sympathetic to the cause. As photographers we are really big on the

printed memories and treasured images of children and, especially for bereaved parents, they can often turn out to be some of their most treasured possessions. It's a way, with our ability as photographers, to give back to the community in the best way that we can."

Casandra's connection to the ACOCP began because her own son was six weeks premature. She says, "I was lucky he was never in NICU but I still had to go home without him. He had to stay there for two weeks and that was as close as I came to a traumatic situation in my family. I know how it feels to have a baby who is not 100% perfect. Many parents suffer a lot worse than what we went through, but my experience is what made me feel great empathy for the cause."

Another ACOCP photographer, Gavin Blue from Melbourne, was also drawn to the cause by his own experience. Gavin says, "Three years ago my wife and I went through the trauma of having a stillborn child - a beautiful baby girl, Alexandra Charlotte Blue. Being a professional photographer we had many beautiful photos and a video of us with Alex."

Gavin continues, "But the hospital photographer also came and took photos of our daughter and they were unfortunately brutally forensic, with our Alex looking horrible. My wife burst into tears when she saw them."

"I began to see that many people who go through similar circumstances often are left with only a few images," he says, "We went to a grief counselling group and one mother had an illustration as the only memory of her child

and another mother had a single treasured Polaroid. I thought I could make a difference with my skills."

"At first I offered my services through SIDS and Kids to retouch parent's photos of their child. I also began to offer photography to the hospitals I knew, then I found out about - and joined - the ACOCP."

Gavin says, "Having beautiful photographs goes a long way in healing the pain of losing a child. It also makes it easier to share the photo with friends. We have Alex's birth photo up on the wall with the birth photos of our other three children and visitors sometimes ask about it and comment on it, keeping her memory alive."

In the Newcastle and Central Coast regions the ACOCP is just starting to take flight with the help of the NSW branch of the organisation. There are currently four members in our region but as Casandra Anguita Deep says, "Like many institutions these things take a long time to roll out. I need to find members who are as enthusiastic as I am and get them on board and get them out there. We don't want to start if there are not enough people to service the area. You don't want to say no to families."

Being an ACOCP photographer can be a challenging role. Casandra recalls some of the shoots she has done for grieving families. "I have attended two stillborn births – not the actual birth but I was called in later. One was a hospital shoot and one was a family shoot where the families were saying their goodbyes the night before the funeral."

Such situations can be confronting for even the most empathetic or experienced person. Casandra says, "We don't attend without a social worker present. These are traumatic situations that we're not really equipped to deal with but I had a wonderful social worker."

With this support Casandra is able to fulfill her ACOCP obligations. "For my first one I was terrified as I'd never been with a person who had passed before, but it was a lovely experience - there was so much love in the room. We barely spoke; it's not really a time for conversation. I just do my job quickly and the best I can."

She says, "My social worker called me the next day to find out how I was dealing with it and we are free to call her at any time. She worked closely with me afterwards but I was fine. I was pleased that I was going to be able to do this long term."

At the moment, as NSW President, Casandra is trying to implement a buddy system to provide an extra level of support for ACOCP photographers, "so that everybody has someone to hold their hand the first time and then you pass that favour on to someone else." Having support mechanisms in place ensure that ACOCP photographers are able to continue offering their services.

Casandra says that a key coping strategy is to keep 'a tiny little bit' removed from what are often heart-breaking situations. "We feel a lot of empathy but we need to be able to act professionally as well, and do our job quickly and the best we can." She believes that, "If we



Photo by
Jessie Broome - [studios]



Photo by
Casandra Anguita Deep - Caspix



Photo by
Gavin Blue - Gavin Blue Photography

Heartfelt:

an exhibition from the Australian Community of Child Photographers

In order to raise awareness of the service they offer and to tell the amazing stories of everyday people with whom they are privileged to work, the Australian Community of Child Photographers (ACOCP) is holding an exhibition of a selection of their photographs.

When: 22nd June - 3rd July 2009. Open Monday to Friday 11am to 6pm & Saturday 12 to 4pm.

Where: MLC Gallery - 449 Harris Street, Ultimo NSW.

www.acocp.org



burden ourselves with too many emotions we may not be able to continue the service – so it's about finding that balance."

Having said that she acknowledges the difficulty in maintaining that distance. "As a parent you feel so much. You want to help on so many levels. It can be difficult walking away and leaving them to go on their journey – you can't imagine what some of these families are going to go through. But you try and do your little bit and hope they're in good hands and that they have lots of support."

And it is that support which is so essential in the grieving process - the support to acknowledge your child; to talk about your child; to remember their birth and their death. Sharing beautiful images is part of that process. By creating visual memories ACOCP photographers ensure that the child is always remembered.

In 2001, ABC aired the documentary *Losing Layla* by filmmaker Vanessa Gorman which dealt with the conception, birth and death of Vanessa's newborn daughter. It also documented the intense grief which followed. Viewers were amazed at this very raw and profound look at the process of remembering.

In her book of the same name Vanessa writes, "We cannot control fate; we can only control how we respond to it. Opening myself to the gifts of Layla's death was one way to make it bearable and to honour all that she had bestowed on me. Making meaning does not have to involve some grand act. I made a documentary and wrote a book because that's what I knew how to do. Making meaning can be a private affair, a small gesture, like planting a tree or gluing things into a scrapbook."

Beautiful images from the ACOCP may seem like a small gesture but their value is immeasurable.

Memories of Hope

The loss of a baby brings a pain of the deepest, darkest kind through which, occasionally, the tiniest shard of light shines. For Sally Heppleston, ACOCP photographer Gavin Blue was one of those lights.

When we got the message during my labour that a friend was sending a photographer to the hospital for us, we thought it must have been a mistake. Worried she had the wrong idea thinking I was having a 'regular' birth, I got my sister to make a few calls to see what this was all about. The message was right. A photographer was coming to take photographs of our dead baby.

I was four days overdue when our lives changed forever. We'd been to hospital three days before, in early labour, to listen to the glorious whooshing of our first child's heartbeat, but were sent home – I wasn't far enough dilated. Days later when we returned for a routine check-up, we got the news no parent wants to hear. Our baby had died.

My husband and I drove to the hospital in silence the following morning - our brand new car seat proudly installed in the back. We knew we'd soon return home empty handed, and resume our lives as a childless couple. However we wouldn't be childless, we'd be 'babylost'.

At 4:35pm on Tuesday 19 August, 2008, our daughter Hope was born silently into this world. She was eight pounds and perfect, with Daddy's toes and Mummy's nose. The only thing missing – life.

The photographer arrived. He was gentle, and kind. He set up some lights but I still thought it was all a huge mistake. "You know she's dead," I said, confused and out-of-it from the cocktail of drugs I had during labour.

"Yes," he gently replied.

"Do you have any kids?" I asked.

"Yes. And my wife also had a stillborn baby girl."

"Really", I thought. "What a coincidence." I was already not as alone as I thought. This photographer in my delivery ward had been through this, too.

Gavin buzzed around and took dozens of photos of us - the new family of three. Some of Hope, some of me holding her, some of my husband. Our family stood around and cried.

When he left, he refused our payment for his kindness, and we were still confused. Days later when I returned home from hospital with empty arms to an empty nursery, I put the pieces together after receiving an email from Gavin. He was from the Australian Community of Childhood Photographers (ACOCP), and I was incredibly lucky my friend knew of their services and called him when she heard our heartbreaking news. His photos arrived just in time to use in the funeral booklet for our sweet daughter, held six days after I birthed her.

When you lose a child you cling to anything to keep them real. The photos aren't designed to make her look alive, or asleep, but they are real. They are her. And I wanted the rest of the world to see how beautiful she was, and how proud I was to be her mother.

Many photos of Hope now hang in our house. I know it makes others uncomfortable, but I don't care. Babies die, and will continue to die, we are just 'lucky' now to have such a wonderful service for bereaved parents to help keep our babies front of mind when people would much rather forget.

A little kindness

- Each year 1 in 20 babies are born prematurely, with almost half of these babies needing life support in a neonatal intensive care unit.
- 1 in every 140 babies born in Australia is stillborn.
- Each week three Australian children die of cancer.

Factor in other terminal childhood conditions and it is clear that many Australian families are dealing with grief and loss each day. The work of the ACOCP goes a small way to helping these families.

Other organisations which provide support for grieving families include:

- Bonnie Babes Foundation - www.bonniebabes.org.au
- SIDS and Kids - www.sidsandkids.org
- Stillbirth Foundation - www.stillbirthfoundation.org.au
- Children's Cancer Institute Australia - www.ccia.org.au



Image of Hope Heppleston by
Gavin Blue Photography