

'The system failed us': Aboriginal families describe what it's like to lose loved ones in custody

In their own words, families tell of the trauma they have suffered and their complicated search for answers



A Black Lives Matter painting made for Stanley Russel's family. A portrait of Russell is to the left.

by Lorena Allam
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Five hundred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody in Australia in the 30 years since a royal commission handed down a report aimed at preventing Indigenous deaths in the justice system.

Here we share the stories of three Aboriginal families who have lost a loved one this year in traumatic circumstances – and who are now faced with complex legal processes that may stretch on for years.

In their own words they talk about how they are feeling at the end of a year that has taken a terrible toll.



Gordon Copeland died aged 22.

‘It just shattered us all’: Gordon Copeland, Moree, July

Gomeri man Gordon Copeland, 22, was missing for 80 days before he was finally found in the Gwydir River, just 500 metres from where he was last seen by police, who saw him go into the water in the early hours of 10 July.

His family say he was a passenger in a vehicle that was pursued by police. They want answers to how Gordon ended up in the river and what happened in his final moments.

Police called off the search after three days but his family never stopped looking for him. After prolonged public pressure, including a march through the streets of Moree, the police reopened the search on 11 October, and found his remains the next day.

Josephine Brown (Gordon’s partner): Gordon was funny, just lovable. He loved his little boy, he’d do anything for him or for us as a family. He’d go out of his way for us. That’s what I loved about him.

There was so long when we didn’t know where he was. Looking for him every day, it was just hard. I just wanted him to come back through the door. That’s what I kept saying: “you’ll come back”.

Losing him was heartbreaking. It just shattered us all. Life isn’t the same. I was four months pregnant when he went missing and I had my baby on the 25th of October, a happy baby boy. He’ll be two months old on Christmas Day. It just breaks my heart that Gordon never gets to meet him, that my little boys now have to grow up without a dad. It doesn’t even feel like Christmas at all, but we just have to get through it for the boys.

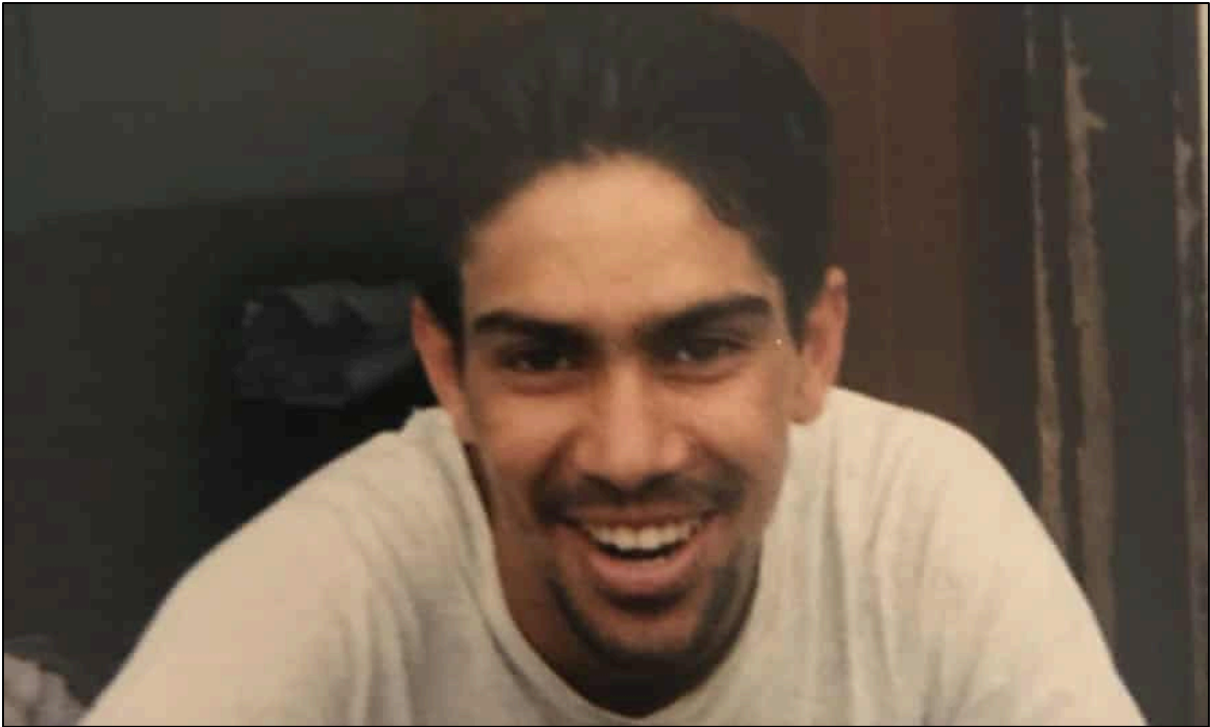
We just want justice for Gordon. He's not here to do it, so we'll do it for him. He's not here to tell his story.



Gordon with his partner, Josephine, and their son.

Narelle Copeland (Gordon's mother): Gordon loved everyone. He was a good person. It was horrible waiting for him to be found, so many sleepless nights. I'm never going to heal – it's something I wake up every day with. I want someone to be accountable for my son's death.

Chris Copeland (Gordon's uncle): The system failed us. There's nothing else to it. The police reacted too slow. We had to go out and look for Gordon ourselves. The resources they provided were too little, too late. If we had the resources they had, we would've found him quicker, but they just didn't listen at all. It was lacking in every single way. We're gonna keep fighting until we get some sort of justice for him.



Frank 'Gud' Coleman, 43, was found unresponsive in his jail cell.

'Left to pick up the pieces': Frank 'Gud' Coleman, Long Bay Jail, July

Ngemba man Frank Coleman, 43, was found unresponsive in his cell at Long Bay jail on the morning of Thursday 8 July.

Coleman had served 18 months of a three-year sentence when he died suddenly. He had been moved to three different NSW jails before being sent to Long Bay. A coronial inquest is pending but a date has not been set.

Coleman's family say he had suffered mental health issues exacerbated by the death of his 20-year-old son, Ricardo Coleman, who was shot and killed in the street near his home in 2016. Three years later, his killer was convicted of manslaughter and is serving a 16-year sentence.

Coleman's family say they have been told Frank did not die of natural causes. Police would not comment on the nature of his death, saying that "as the matter is now before the coroner, we are unable to provide further information".

Skye Hipwell (Frank's partner): I've got two kids that have been traumatised by the combined effect [of Ricardo and Frank's deaths]. I've got my son, who hasn't spoken about it, but who has been deeply affected by his father's passing. It's Christmas, normally when we come together, and we've got all of this hanging over our heads.

Lakota Coleman (Frank's daughter): You don't really know how to process these things, like a death that happens normally. Death is a normal thing, but when it happens in unusual ways, you don't really know how to hold it all together.



Frank Coleman's partner, Skye Hipwell.

Skye: I think the whole process is really overwhelming. In regards to Ricardo's death, I was involved with the coronial process there, so I've got an understanding to some degree, but there's a lot of onus put on the family. Not only do you have a death in custody, you've had a death within the family, you've got something that's in the media, you've got the general public saying, "oh, he was in jail anyway, if you do the crime, you do the time", and then you've got the costs and everything like that.

We are a very normal, everyday family. We were that when Ricardo died, and we never expected that this could happen to us. My son was [killed], and none of us thought that would happen. And then to know that Frank, who I've always thought was a really quite a strong man, dies in prison, how do you respond to that? For some mistake they've made, they could be in jail and they may never come out and it's not through any fault of their own, or yours, that you are left to pick up the pieces.

Lakota: With deaths in custody and the timeframe of when there's a death and when an actual inquest is done, you really don't get any closure whatsoever. I know that they get backlogs but I think it's pretty disgusting how long you have to wait to find out how a loved someone died.



Lakota Coleman, daughter of Frank 'Gud' Coleman.

Skye: It causes me a lot of anxiety. To keep going on with this for up to five or so years is absolutely excruciating. It's actually causing more trauma than the actual death because you're reliving it every day. You're so afraid. You don't want to remember it because it's so traumatic, but you also don't want to forget it, because you know that at some stage you're going to be called upon to testify about this evidence, so you're living in a constant battle in your head.



Stanley Russell.

‘So many questions’: Stanley Russell, Sydney, November

Gomeroi man Stanley Russell, 46, was shot and killed by police in his aunt’s Sydney home where they had gone to serve a warrant. Police say there was a “physical confrontation” at the house before a number of shots were fired. The circumstances surrounding it are now the subject of an internal investigation.

In 2014, in sentencing Russell to jail, a NSW district court judge found he had a history of drug addiction and had been deeply affected by his brother’s custodial death.

His parents, Helen and Ted Russell are devastated. He is their second son to die in custody. Stanley’s older brother, Edward, died in Long Bay jail in 1999.

Stanley Russell’s funeral takes place in Walgett on Friday. An extract from the statement they released at the time of his death in November is reproduced here.



Helen and Ted Russell.

Helen and Ted Russell, Stanley's parents: We have already been to hell and back during the investigation into Edward's death in custody. Now we have to go through the same pain and trauma all over again.

For 30 years we have struggled to help stop Aboriginal deaths in custody. We have now lost both our sons in NSW custody. There are many questions about the killing of our son Stanley by police that we will seek to have answered through the coronial inquest.

It is terribly painful for us to learn suddenly that we will never see Stanley's smile again. His children will suffer from never seeing him again. We will keep going in our struggle for justice, to ensure that deaths in custody must stop.