

Widow forgives killer driver, saying 'move on'

By [Anna Leask](#)

5:30 AM Thursday Mar 15, 2012



Duncan Meek was travelling at 112km/h in an 80km/h area when he slammed into Petelo Fa'aeteete's van.

Photo / Sarah Ivey

A woman who survived a crash that killed her husband has forgiven the driver responsible and told him it was time to move on with life.

Duncan Meek, 41, was yesterday sentenced to 250 hours of community work after earlier pleading guilty to a charge of aggravated careless use of a vehicle causing the death of Petelo Fa'aeteete on June 30 last year.

He was also ordered to pay Mr Fa'aeteete's family \$3000 for emotional harm and disqualified from driving for a year.

Mr Fa'aeteete, 52, was driving his wife Aida, pregnant daughter Karen and her 6-month-old son Peter home from dinner in the city.

Meek was travelling at 112km/h in an 80km/h zone when he drifted from the outer-most lane across the one to his right. Meek slammed into Mr Fa'aeteete's van, killing him almost instantly.

Baby Peter, who was in the back, was thrown from the vehicle and landed – uninjured – about 5m away on top of a pizza box.

In court Mrs Fa'aeteete chose to read her victim impact statement to Meek.

"To err is human, to forgive is divine," she told him. "If Petelo was here he would say that it's done. Learn from it and don't do it again."

"We met with Duncan Meek. His monumental loss of concentration had dark consequences – it caused the death of our beloved Petelo. His remorseful demeanour left me no option than to live by Petelo's legacy to be forgiving."

Judge Tony Fitzgerald said the impact Meek's offending had on the Fa'aeteete family could not be measured. He said they continued to suffer "immense grief and loss".

In a handwritten statement to the *Herald*, Meek said he was "deeply sorry" for his actions on "the fateful day".

"I feel huge remorse and regret and I am very mindful of the loss and impact on the [Fa'aeteete] family. I don't want to add to that loss by making any public comment, except to say again how deeply sorry I am for what happened," he said.

After sentencing Mrs Fa'aeteete hugged Meek and cried as she said to him "look after your family". He then stood with the family as they prayed.

He also hugged Mr Fa'aeteete's oldest son, who said to him: "Don't speed again".

After court Mrs Fa'aeteete said she was not sure justice could ever be served after losing her husband, but she trusted the court process and accepted no sentence would ever repair the damage caused to her family.

"My husband was a forgiving person. I will forgive Duncan once, I just hope he learns from it. If we achieve that, and he doesn't do it again and if someone else learns from this, then that's more than enough for me."

Tears as family forgive killer driver

Driver who killed boy avoids jail but not guilt



THE PRESS

CRY FROM THE HEART: Ashley Austin hugs Emma Woods, the mother of Nayan Woods, after his sentencing at Christchurch District Court. Nayan, 4, died and his brother and mother were injured when Austin's car hit them on a footpath.

A youth who lost control of his car and mounted a footpath, killing a four-year-old boy, has been forgiven by the child's family.

Ashley David Austin, 18, escaped a jail term when he was sentenced in Christchurch District Court yesterday for dangerous driving causing death and injury and driving a modified vehicle unsuitable for public roads.

He was sentenced to six months' community detention and 200 hours' community work, and was banned from driving for three years.

In May, Austin accelerated hard as he turned out of a junction in central Christchurch. He lost control of his vehicle and mounted a footpath, killing Nayan Woods and injuring his mother, Emma, and brother Jacob.

After the sentencing, Mrs Woods said that she and her husband were grateful for the support they had received, and that Nayan was loved and missed by many.

She said Austin had done everything he could to support them and expressed remorse and sorrow. He could not be punished more, and she hoped that the community would support him.

"Nayan was loved so much and is missed by many people. He loved to laugh and make everyone else laugh. We learned a lot from him and he will continue to influence us. It's easy to raise voices in anger and condemn others for their mistakes."

Austin, a shop assistant, broke down in tears outside court as he tried to thank his friends and family for their unwavering help.

His mother, Brenda Austin, read his statement which said the Woods family had shown compassion and empathy despite

their pain and tragedy, and her son was honoured to have spent time with them.

Austin was extremely sorry and offered his deepest apology to the Woods family.

Nayan's father, Duncan Woods, said he was not with his family when the accident happened. He saw the accident but did not know they were involved, and decided not to "rubber-neck" and went home.

[Click here to read Mr Wood's statement](#)

He was called by the hospital. When he got there his four-year-old son was dead and his six-year-old son was battered and broken. He had to plan and attend his son's funeral, which was the final act of parenthood, he said. His pain was immeasurable and unending.

"I'm tormented by the prospect of maybe having to live another 50 years.

"At the hospital I was taken to a corner to visit Nayan and had to see his dead body covered in blood and bruised, with grit in his teeth.

"The light in his eyes was gone. I was not able to pick him up and hold him. He was not ours any more. He was evidence to determine cause of death."

He said he did not want Austin to go to prison and that living with the weight of the death of a child on his conscience would be sentence enough.

Judge Phillip Moran said Austin did not leave the scene of the accident but stayed and took over the CPR from Mrs Woods. He had made a recent attempt on his own life

Sophie Elliott: I can't forgive

ADAM DUDDING



MEMORIES: Lesley Elliott, above, and in Sophie's room, below, which is still almost how it was when she slept there.

Since the murder of her daughter Sophie, Lesley Elliott has been a reserved but relentless campaigner. Yet she's also had to battle her own demons. Adam Dudding spends a day with her at her Dunedin home.

Lesley Elliott suspects she's going to Hell. But she's OK with that. To get into Heaven instead, she'd really need to forgive Clayton Weatherston for coming into her house and knifing her daughter Sophie to death in front of her, for mutilating the body, and for trying to destroy Sophie's reputation during the ensuing murder trial.

"The Lord's Prayer says you should forgive. But when I went to church after Sophie died I couldn't say that part ... The bottom line is, if I have to go to hell then so be it. That's my payment. I don't care. I will never give in on that."

But ..."I feel a bit sad about it, because I want to be with Soph."

It looks a bit hellfire and brimstone once you put it in print, wild-eyed even, but that's not how it sounds when it's being said by Lesley Elliott, 64, neonatal nurse, lactation consultant, one-time union rep, wife, mother and reluctant media celebrity.

She's contained, measured, matter-of-fact. Her life was bent out of shape that day in January 2008 when Sophie's ex-boyfriend talked his way in then stabbed the 22-year-old 216 times, but she has diligently built a new one on the wreckage. She has set up a foundation in Sophie's name devoted to educating young women about relationship abuse, has co-written a book about Sophie, and she and her husband Gil have given a million and one interviews offering their forthright opinions about tutor-student relationships, the defence of provocation, and

victims' rights in the justice system. They forge on – grim-faced at times – but they forge on.

The Elliotts still live in the house where Weatherston killed Sophie – a comfortable home in the quiet and unflashy Dunedin suburb of Ravensbourne, up a steep windy road from the harbour. Gil is usually home only at weekends; he runs the laboratory at Dunstan Hospital in Central Otago, a couple of hours' drive away.

On Tuesday morning, the sky was an almost cloudless blue, the air crisp. In the sitting room, though, there was a woodburner roaring and it was toasty. Elliott ushered me in, disappeared briefly to get some tea and biscuits, then took her armchair next to the fire.

The skinny coffee table in the centre of the room is covered in candles, flowers and framed photos of Sophie. There's a small plastic Christmas tree next to the china cabinet, festooned with cards and tiny soft toys, bird and butterfly decorations, and a deflated red balloon. It's not a Christmas tree, says Elliott – it's a "memorial tree" to Sophie.

Sophie was cremated. Where are the ashes?

She points over my shoulder.

"She's listening to you right there."

Ah, right. Sure enough, just behind my seat there's a small lace-covered table. On it is a tray holding potpourri, flowers, little dolls, a red candle and a blue

wooden box a little smaller than a shoebox. That's Sophie.

"She doesn't live there all the time; she lives in her room. But Nick's in her room at the moment so she's down here with us. If other people don't like it, stiff cheese."

(Nick, one of Sophie's two older brothers, was back from Australia for last night's formal launch of the book and the foundation, on what would have been Sophie's 26th birthday.)

"I used to cart her all around the country as well, in a carry bag. The first time I flew out of Dunedin and went through the scanner the guy called me over and said 'oh, there's something a bit solid in here'. I said it's just ashes, and he said 'oh, I'm so sorry, off you go'. I don't know how many people cart ashes around, but nobody seemed to turn a hair."

When Elliott dies she wants to be interred in the grounds of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, and Sophie's ashes can "go down with me".

ELLIOTT IS a handsome, strong-boned woman in half-rimmed glasses and sensible clothes – white satin top, black slacks and socks and shoes. She's not sure yet what she'll wear for the Saturday launch.

"I've lost confidence in my own appearance, in what I wear and that. Sophie was always: 'Oh God mum, you look bloody awful. You look like a fuddy duddy.' She'd come shopping with me. She had great clothes sense."

Elliott has that Kiwi knack for talking without appearing to unclench her teeth and is utterly composed, whether describing some atrocious detail of Sophie's death or a bureaucratic detail of her new foundation.

"Sometimes I feel when I am talking that I come across as a bit hard. People say 'oh, I couldn't do that'. But I've had a lot of counselling to get to this stage, where I can just talk like this."

The credit, says Elliott, should probably go to celebrity shrink Nigel Latta, who, aside from his TV turns as a child-rearing guru and criminal psychologist, is also a competent clinical psychologist. He cured her of the post-traumatic stress which left her plagued with incessant visions of the murder.

Also, early on her doctor gave her a big stash of drugs and she took them all – "antidepressants and sleeping pills; something to get you up; something to get you going; something to get you to sleep; Valium. I don't know how I was standing up for the first few weeks". She takes only sleeping pills now, "but that's possibly just old age as well".

Despite therapy and drugs and appearances though, the grief isn't far away.

"I had a weep last night. It doesn't take much to turn it on. My emotions are sitting just under the surface, that's for sure, but I can focus quite easily."

She needs that focus when the media come calling, looking for outrage. Would Lesley care to get

quotationally upset about the art competition featuring a big drawing of Weatherston's smug face (February 2010), or the edgy Shortland Street plotline about a uni lecturer stalking a character called Sophie (August 2010), or the news that Herald on Sunday reporter Carolyn Meng-Yee had gone to a fancy dress party as a blood-spattered Sophie (March 2011)?

Most of the time, says Elliott, she "couldn't give a damn" about those sorts of stories (though the Meng-Yee costume was "a bit close to the bone").

"A lot of it's been designed to try and make me cry, I'm sure, in public. And so far, touch wood, I've managed not to. That's what they want; they want to see us upset."

There were private tears while writing the book, entitled *Sophie's Legacy*, with author and former cop Bill O'Brien.

O'Brien, a balding, big-eared gent of 65 who lives just over the hill in Mosgiel, is here today too, perched on the third bit of the three-piece. An experienced true-crime writer, he was disturbed by the defence attempts to blacken Sophie's name during Weatherston's 2009 trial, and wrote to the Elliotts suggesting a book to set the record straight. A month into the year-long collaboration, and deep into Lesley Elliott's diary, O'Brien realised the book would work best as Lesley's first-person story.

It's a powerful book – the account of the murder is vivid and claustrophobic, as Elliott stumbles out into the street, legs buckling and vision blurring, having just watched Weatherston calmly stabbing her daughter with one hand while shoving Elliott out of the bedroom with the other. It lays out the Elliotts' concerns about the justice system but then, remarkably, contains a chapter of counter-arguments. Not just a howl of anguish and complaint, the book is also a solidly argued and broadminded piece of journalism.

When asked which was the toughest bit to write, Elliott just looks pensive (she's not about to break three-and-a-half years of dry eyes) but O'Brien's eyes go glassy.

"I'm a gnarly old cop," says O'Brien. "In 35 years I've seen a fair bit. But the more I got into the book the more emotional I became. I never met Sophie, but boy, do I know her."

He and Elliott "spent an awful lot of time together. There were times when I'd come up and we'd put the tape recorder on and say 'let's talk about this'. And then I'd look at her eyes and I'd turn it off and say, 'Let's just go for a walk.'"

The words are essentially hers; the shape and style his. "It's very much a good partnership," says O'Brien.

Gil and Lesley have appeared a solid team, even with him living and working in Central Otago during the week. Gil has led the activism around justice and Lesley has focused on abusive relationships. But family tragedies can ruin marriages. How have Gil and Lesley fared?

"Things were pretty tough at times," say Elliott. After all, it was she who actually let the killer in.

"Gil found that really difficult. Also that Clayton had attacked Sophie 10 days before, and I hadn't told him, because she didn't want me to.

"There was a lot of anger around that, but we've sort of worked through that. He's come to the realisation that Sophie and I had a really close relationship. She told me stuff because she knew I wouldn't tell anybody.

"Maybe it's a good thing that he lives there and I live here. It hasn't been easy."

Have they come out the other side?

"I think so. I've had the drugs and the counselling and that kind of support. Gil's done it cold turkey and he's still very angry. A lot of his focus is around the anger.

"He says, 'I have a right to be angry – I lost my daughter', and that's fair enough. But we can't let Weatherston destroy us for the rest of our lives, because he's got to all of us then.

"I never really felt that angry. I mean, I hate the bastard, but I don't feel the sort of anger that [Gil] feels."

What about Judith Ablett Kerr, then, the barrister who presided over Weatherston's notorious provocation defence, during which he spent days in the dock preening and smirking and painting Sophie as a manipulative fantasist who'd attacked him with a pair of scissors? Does Elliott feel bitter towards her?

"Not really. She did a bloody good job for that guy. You mightn't like her tactics but she did a damn good job in a very difficult situation."

Elliott recounts in the book the startling experience of finding herself in an airline seat next to Ablett Kerr last year. Rather than change seats, the pair had an "amicable" discussion, the contents of which Elliott won't repeat. But it was what Ablett Kerr didn't say that was revealing.

"[Weatherston] controlled that trial, there's no doubt in my mind. She didn't say it to me, but I would suspect that he was advised not to go on the stand, but he wanted to. He wanted his opportunity for grandiosity. I'm sure she was totally mortified when she saw him."

So no, Lesley Elliott's not angry. Not bitter. Sad, though. She's got her laptop out and is fiddling about with the media player. "I'd like you to watch this, because this is the epitome of Sophie."

It's a shaky home video, from two days before Sophie died, shot at one of the many farewell outings before her intended move to Wellington for a coveted job at Treasury. Sophie's doing a karaoke version of Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now", singing and smiling and horsing about with the mic. She's very beautiful, full of fun, full of life, full of potential.

It goes on and on, sweet and painful, with lyrics so pointedly ironic a fiction writer couldn't have got away with it: "Don't stop me now. I'm having such a good time, having a ball. Don't stop me now..."

Elliott clicks on the volume control to make it a little louder, picking a little harder at that scab.

"That's Sophie. That's her. It says more about her than anything I can say."

WE WALK up the stairs to the bedroom where it all happened. The police got the bloody carpet replaced and the walls cleaned before the Elliots moved back in, and the heart-covered bedspread was a gift from Elliott's nursing colleagues, but by and large it's just how it was when Sophie slept here – Marilyn Monroe pictures on the wall, a DVD rack of vintage Hollywood films, some cartoon doodles by Sophie, the odd soft toy, loads of photos.

Living at a murder scene is only natural, somehow.

"A lot of people think we're mad," says Elliott. "But we had the house blessed and up here as well. To me, this was Sophie's room. She loved her room."

She comes up all the time. She points to a spot between the bed and the bookcase.

"This is where she died – this corner... I used to sit on the floor here a lot of the time with a book. I don't do that so much now. But I light a candle most nights if I remember. Which I do.

"It's like if you're going to a cemetery I suppose, and people do that."

ONE MORE pilgrimage. We pile into Elliott's little red European hatchback and head for the Otago University campus. Near the music building there's a small brass plaque in Sophie's name, and a cherry tree.

O'Brien drives and Elliott's in the passenger seat as we head along the water, past the vast new stadium that looks like a plastic greenhouse, past the Commerce Department buildings where Sophie and Clayton struck up a shaky romance built on a shared love of economics.

As we round the final corner, Elliott suddenly tuts. "Darn it! I should have brought the Brasso!"

She used to come and polish the plaque regularly, but hasn't for a while. It would be good to get it shiny in time for Sophie's birthday and the book and foundation launch.

She runs a critical eye over the tree – one branch has been broken and it's still just buds, but at its base the daffodils she's planted are starting to push through. Then she takes a closer look at the plaque.

Actually, says the mother who still worries she may not join her daughter in heaven, it's looking OK, even though it's not been polished for a bit, as the weather is giving it quite a nice dark patina. Maybe, she says, she doesn't need the Brasso after all

For more on Lesley Elliott's campaign to educate young people about relationship violence see www.sophieelliottfoundation.co.nz

Sophie's Legacy – A mother's story of her family's loss and their quest for change, by Lesley Elliott with William J O'Brien, is published by Random House, \$39.99.

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