

The loss that changed the world

By Ruth Ostrow

"I HAVE come to the conclusion that everything in life is perfect," says Paul Tait, well-known Australian documentary maker, staring straight ahead and speaking without flinching.

We are at lunch discussing the documentary *Cry from the Heart*, which he helped make with his wife, producer and director Jeni Kendell, and which is to be screened on SBS in May. But we soon get off the topic of work to his life story.

Between salads and waitresses and the noise of a canteen, he tells me a tragic story about the death of his beloved daughter in a car accident in 1979 and what the loss has meant to him.

"We just celebrated Emma's 21st birthday the other day. We had a quiet party without her, just to acknowledge her life. We tried to imagine what she would be like.

"But life is a journey. When you look back, you can see that everything is meant to be. Everything happens for a reason.

"When I see what my wife and I have achieved, it is hard not to realise that, had our daughter lived, we would have had a very different life. We would probably have spent our years rearing her, living a more domestic life. We wouldn't have travelled as much nor have made our films."

This is not a statement made lightly. Paul and Jeni are famous for their work. Through their documentaries, government policies have changed, injustices have been dealt with, life has been preserved. So much so that they were given a UN award in human rights for their work.

In 1980, they made the first anti-logging film: *Give Trees a Chance*, based on efforts to save the Terania Creek rainforest. The then NSW premier, Neville Wran, is reputed to have been so moved by the film's message, he was instrumental in changing the government's policy on environmental issues.

"We had stood in this magnificent rainforest with our daughter. It was our first experience of a rainforest and we were completely blown away. After we lost our child, the thought of losing those beautiful, ancient trees touched us deeply. It was the cutting down of life and it was somehow a metaphor for the untimely cutting down of her life.

"It is very traumatic working to save something being logged around you. It is an expression of grief to stand in front of police and bulldozers to save something precious. But it was very healing. We found we had great power to change things."

In 1989, their film *Blowpipes and Bulldozers* threw light on the logging of rainforests in Borneo, which was forcing nomads and fauna out of their ever-shrinking homes. It was highly awarded by National Geographic and the UN for raising consciousness, and is still being shown around the world.

Many other films have helped raise money, and one saved a village in Samoa from being logged and destroyed.

"After the death of our child, we realised we had to look after Mother Earth and ourselves. Our hearts were full of pain and passion. There was no grief counselling in those days. We just dealt with the loss by talking, and sharing together and trying to find ways of helping the world.

"There is a Buddhist mantra which goes: `Breathe in pain and breathe out love.' I just found I had so much to give, to spread compassion and care."

Their most profound work and greatest triumph is Cry from the Heart, about the stolen children. It, too, is about a man's personal journey from the pain of loss into the light of forgiveness and hope.

The raw and riveting film focuses on an Aboriginal artist named Chris, who was stolen from a mother, who was herself stolen by the authorities. We enter the film as he is reflecting on his rage and hatred from a cramped jail cell, and watch him find the strength and love to heal the pain of abuse and find forgiveness, for his daughter's sake.

Paul says: "We wanted all Australians to see the suffering we have given these people and to help relieve the blanket of trauma that sits on them. Without our support and healing, the situation will not improve."

Watching people watching the film is an experience. Everyone weeps. As one viewer said, it is a great privilege to be able to witness such a poignant, honest and hopeful story. It is clearly a film that will open hearts and is already due to be screened at the NSW Magistrates Conference and to members of state and federal parliaments.

"It has been a huge journey for the film's subject, Chris. He was so traumatised, so victimised, it could have ruined his whole life. In fact he did attempt suicide. Yet somehow, through all the blackness, his own beautiful spirit shone through. He found the right way of living for him. He grasped the positive."

Paul could be talking about his own spirit. Those who know him say he gets up every morning grateful to be alive and full of the joy of life. Despite what he has seen and experienced, he can often be heard saying, "Oh, this is paradise" as he greets the day.

He thinks about his daughter often. The way 13-month-old Emma died was an unlucky streak of fate. A tyre in the bullbar of their four-wheel-drive came loose, fell in front of the car, hit a freak pothole and caused the car to roll.

Despite the pain in his eyes as he tells the story, he says: "I do believe everything is perfect. Although Jeni and I feel that it is quite possible to be unlucky, having a life is a gift.

"I ponder on the idea that there is a grander design and that Emma was part of it. She was not meant to be here for long."

He believes we are all alchemists. That we are all "god", all capable of creating great beauty and joy or great suffering and misery. That our attitude to life and death is the secret ingredient in happiness.

As we finish lunch, I retreat to a quiet space to have a little cry. In the distance I see Paul bounding off down to the beach. The last thing I see are his arms stretched high in the air, and I imagine him smiling to himself and saying: "Ah! Life is perfect."

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