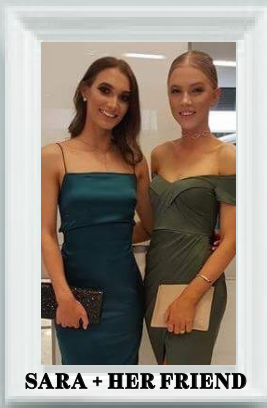


‘WE
NEVER
thought it
WOULD
BE HER.’

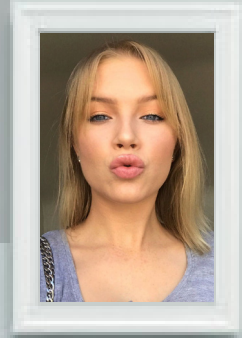
FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF AUSTRALIAN GIRL SARA ZELENAK, KILLED IN THE 2017 LONDON BRIDGE ATTACK, SPEAK TO COSMO'S KATIE STOW ABOUT WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO LOSE A LOVED ONE TO TERRORISM ➔



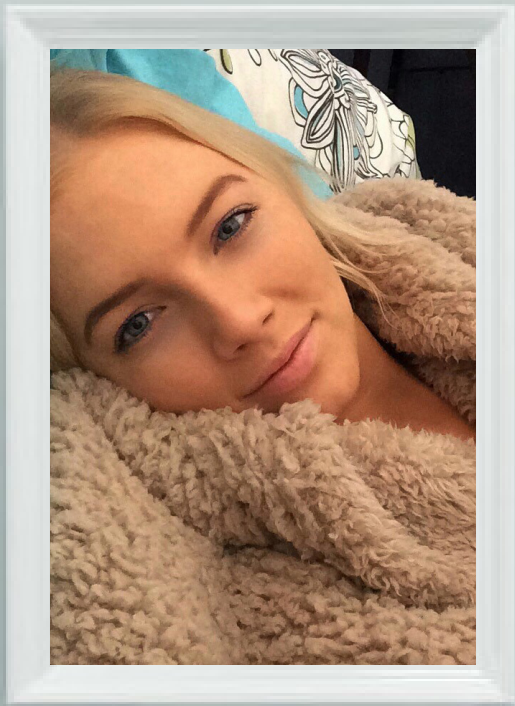
SARA + HER FRIEND



SARA WITH HER MUM, JULIE



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SARA + HER DAD, MARK



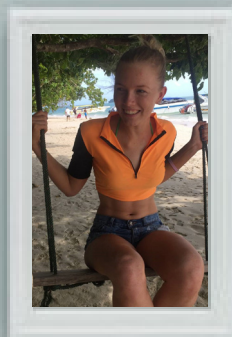
SARA + FRIENDS

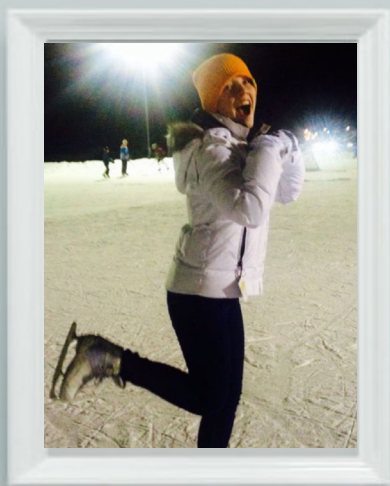
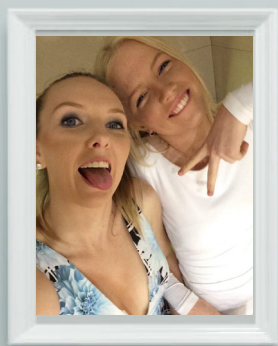
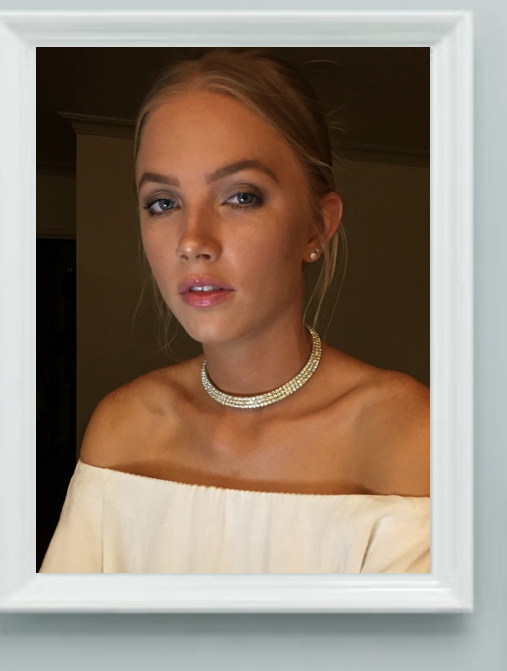


SARA + HER DAD AT WORK



SARA OUT WITH HER GIRLS





The third of June, 2017, was a day like any other for Sara Zelenak, a 21-year-old from Brisbane who had moved to London to work as a nanny like so many Aussies do after finishing high school. She had put the kids to bed and was given the rest of the evening off. A typical 21-year-old, she decided to call her Au Pair friends to organise a night out. When kicking on to a different bar, Sara was caught up in something she could never have predicted: A terrorist attack.

Sara was the life and soul of the party. She loved to dance, knew how to twerk, and would just light up a room the second she walked in,' explains Sara's mum, Julie. 'She played representative basketball her whole life, but she was equally as obsessed with watching *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*,' Sara's dad, Mark, chimes in. 'She knew far too much about celebrities – who they were, what they were worth, what they were doing at any point in time.'

Obsessed with shopping at Zara and berated by her parents for spending too much money on eyebrow products, Sara was just like any other *Cosmo* girl! – hard working, fun-loving and excited about what the future had in store for her. She had her sights set on being a flight attendant one day, with Emirates being her dream airline, but as her best friend Sarah Beverley explains, she felt a bit lost after high school and decided to take a year off to go travelling.

'When I found out Sarz was going overseas, I was really happy for her,' Sarah says. 'Lots of her other friends, myself included, jumped straight into uni – but that was never Sarz. So I was happy that she was going to travel and be a nanny.'

Sara packed up her bags, and headed off to London to work as an Au Pair for a couple of months before travelling around Europe with her friends and family. Prior to jetting off she had some farewell hangs with her best mates on her night off. Nothing special, just chilling out at a friend's house. Looking back, her best friend Sarah admits, 'If I knew that was the last time, I would have made so much more effort.'

Sara settled into London life quickly, falling in love with the energetic streets of Soho, in London's West End, and using any spare seconds she had to book mini trips to Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Her mum explains that she had a pretty hectic day with school pick-ups and drop-offs and often volunteered to do overtime on the weekends, so when she was given an unexpected night off from her Au Pair family, she would organise dinner and drinks with her

other nanny friends. On the night of June 3, her decision to switch venues to meet up with another group of mates saw her walking across London Bridge.

'There were a thousand sliding doors that meant that Sara ended up being exactly where she was going to be,' says Mark.

By some tragic twist of fate, it was at that moment a white van suddenly veered off the road and ploughed into pedestrians. Obviously terrified, but unaware at this point that this was a terrorist attack, Sara tried to make a run for it and escape the chaos. As she attempted to get away, three violent attackers leapt out of the van, chased and caught Sara and stabbed her in the throat.

Sara did nothing wrong. She did not provoke her attackers; she was not involved with the terrorists in any way, shape or form. She was just a girl on her gap year, walking across a bridge.

Sara's parents, Julie and Mark, first heard about the attacks from a friend who simply said, 'Did you hear about the London terrorist attacks?' and they freely admit that they weren't even slightly concerned. 'We hadn't heard from Sara, but it was the middle of the night for her, so we just assumed she was asleep.'

'We knew Sara was in the city, but she was there with 13 million other people. She was a smart girl. She was an athletic girl, so if anyone was going to get away, it would be Sarz. We really weren't worried about her safety,' explains Julie.

Her best friend, Sarah, reacted in a similar way, simply seeing news of the attack on the telly and innocently dropping Sara a message on a group chat with a pic of the TV, saying, 'Oh Sarz, you're all good, right?' While back in Brisbane, Sarah admits, 'I didn't really think anything of it because we had all

done the same thing when the Ariana Grande concert bombing happened literally a month before, and just a few hours later Sarz texted back with, "Yep, I'm all good girls!" But this time we didn't hear from her.'

When Mark and Julie didn't get their regular WhatsApp update from their daughter, concerns were raised. They received a phone call from Sara's Au Pair family saying that she hadn't come home from a night out with her friends. Panicked, Mark and Julie contacted one of Sara's mates in London who confirmed that their daughter was definitely in and around that area the night before.

It was then that Mark and Julie phoned the police and officially lodged Sara as a missing person.

'There are a million things running through your mind during a time like this,' Mark explains, but on the days that followed Sara's disappearance, he frantically rang every single hospital in London to try and find his daughter. Soon

enough, the Australian Federal Police were knocking on their front door.

Mark and Julie still didn't know whether Sara was injured, missing, or even alive. Frustrated, concerned and terrified, they decided to book the next flight to London – to get themselves to Sara's side as soon as possible.

However, as Sara's parents touched down in Abu Dhabi ready for their flight transfer, they received a phone call telling them that their daughter had been killed.

'We still had our seatbelts on when we were being told that our Sara was dead. I went into complete shock and started screaming. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't hold myself up. I was completely hysterical. It was the worst moment of my life,' says Julie.

A painful realisation for the parents was that while they were in the air, media outlets had already started covering the news of Sara's attack, meaning that the rest of the world

knew about their daughter's death before they did.

Sara's best friend was in denial when she heard the news: 'I just didn't think that it was her, because reports were coming through that she was wearing heels at the time of the attack and that slowed her down, but she could outrun me any day – even if I were in flats!'

'It still confuses me now how this happened to her because she was fast, she was street-smart and she always had her wits about her. Even on nights out back home in Brisbane, she was the one that would look after all of us – like no matter how drunk she got, the second one of us wasn't OK, she was there and ready to look after us. She was such a strong, powerful person. Clearly this was just an awful case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time' says Sarah.

Arriving in London, Mark and Julie had to wait four days until they could 'see' Sara and identify her body. They both agreed that even though she had been confirmed as a victim of the attack, they still shared a glimmer of hope that it wasn't her lying in the morgue and that this was all just a dreadful mistake. ◆◆

This is an awful case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time'





SARA WAS KILLED WHILE WALKING ACROSS LONDON BRIDGE



However, walking into the room where Sara's body was being held was a moment neither Mark nor Julie would ever forget. 'I saw her stab wounds and that broke my heart. I know this sounds strange, but she looked like she had been crying for hours. All I could do was just hold her hand and say, "Goodbye, my beautiful girl!";' says Julie.

The logistics of getting Sara back home to Brisbane were hideous to manage, and were tinged with a painful irony as Sara took her first ever Emirates flight – the airline she'd dreamed of working for – in a body bag.

In the months following the attack, adjusting to life without Sara was handled differently by each of the family members. 'All four of us [including Sara's two brothers] have gone down different paths with our mourning,' Mark explains. Julie threw herself back into working, admitting, 'I couldn't stand the fact that I was never going to see Sara again for the rest of my life,' while Mark focussed on building Sarz Sanctuary, a charity in memory of their child, eventually quitting his job so he could work on the sanctuary full time.

The aim of Sarz Sanctuary is to provide families with the same services and support that Mark and Julie received



SARA'S PARENTS MOURN THE LOSS OF THEIR DAUGHTER.

in the UK when they were dealing with the devastating loss of their daughter. Pairing up with wellness experts, therapists and support groups, Sarz Sanctuary will become a haven for those who are dealing with the dramatic loss of a loved one, meaning parents, friends and families won't be left alone during such a tough time.

Sara's friends have struggled to come to terms with life after Sarz, saying that while her death has brought together old friends, it has also made them scared to travel.

'Since Sarz's attack, I haven't had any desire to travel overseas, and I think of London as a place of

terror now. It has made me more fearful,' explains her best friend Sarah. 'I was scared of terrorists before Sarz's attack, but now it's on a whole new level. I can't believe that people (if you can even call them that) could steal a young girl's life.'

I couldn't stand the fact that I was never going to see her again

However, when discussing with her friends, Sarah knows that she can't live this sheltered life forever, because, 'Then that means they win'. Plus, she knows Sara would go ballistic at her if she let this loss stop her living her life. 'I can always hear Sarz in the back of my head telling me what to do. I can always imagine exactly what she'd say, and she'd want me to be brave.'

Sarah is keeping her best friend alive in her thoughts, but she's also determined for the world to remember Sara for the right reason – declaring that if there was one thing she wanted people to remember Sara for, it's her laugh.

'I don't want Sarz to be remembered as a victim of terror. She should be remembered for all the light she brought into the world before that tragedy. Sarz wouldn't want her name to be associated with terrorism, she'd just want to be remembered as Sarz, the girl with the crazy laugh.'

This, combined with the work her devoted parents are doing in her honour at Sarz Sanctuary, will help the scars left by Sara heal a little quicker.

'So many people ask me, "Are you the friend of the girl who died in the terrorist attack?" Sarah says. 'And I say, "No. I'm the friend of a girl who lost her life while she was away and doing what she loved. I'm a friend of Sara".'

► You can make a donation to Sarz Sanctuary to help those just like Mark, Julie and Sarah, by visiting their website, Sarz-sanctuary.org.