

tasweekend

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NATURAL BORN SURFER

A PHILOSOPHY FOUNDED
IN THE WAVES HELPED
MICK LAWRENCE RIDE
OUT THE MOST TRAGIC
OF LIFE'S CHALLENGES

FOOD ODDFELLOWS EXTRAORDINAIRE TRAVEL BICHENO PENGUINS ART WAGNER'S WONDERFUL WORLD

A full-page photograph of Mick Lawrence, an older man with white hair and a gentle smile, standing on a sandy beach. He is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and dark grey cargo pants. He holds a white surfboard under his left arm, with his right hand in his pocket. The background shows a calm sea with small waves, a distant cliff, and a blue sky with light clouds.

Hearts and waves

Somewhere deep in the philosophy of surfing, Mick Lawrence discovered the strength and desire to cope with life's most brutal surprises

WORDS TRACY RENKIN
MAIN PORTRAIT ZAK SIMMONDS

Every morning when he wakes, Mick Lawrence has a few seconds of normality before he remembers. If he's lucky, those seconds may stretch out long enough for him to enjoy the early morning call of rosellas and green parrots and the waves breaking at nearby Clifton Beach.

But as soon as he gets up to let the dog out and opens the bedroom door, he looks straight into a photo hanging on the hallway wall of his only child smiling back at him. Reality hits. "It's an emotional wave that washes over me," Mick tells *Tas-Weekend*. "When I see that photo of Tim, that's when I realise he's no longer here."

The crunch of their driveway gravel alerted Mick and Robyn Lawrence to the worst news they'll ever get. It was 3am on October 22, two years ago, only two hours since their son had died.

When he first heard the police 4WD coming towards the house, Mick thought it was Tim popping back home to pick up his asthma puffer. It was something he often forgot in his rush out the door. Mick stumbled out of bed to go and get it for him and was at the front door just as one of the strangers was knock-

ing on it. He saw their uniforms and then the terribleness of the situation became clear. "I knew," Mick says as he pauses to wipe away his tears, his bottom lip quivering. "It wasn't good news."

Ever since that terrible night, Mick's body clock has been waking him up at 3am.

Tim had been at a birthday party with close friends in the early hours of Sunday morning celebrating at a secluded beach off Marion Bay only accessible by water. A couple of the guys got into an argument. "Tim intervened and tried to calm them down and then offered to take some of his friends back to the spit on his jet ski," his dad says. "It was pitch black and 300m across. He had a headlight and his first passenger Danny Griffiths had a torch and Tim was going across at about one knot. He dropped Danny off on a sandbank and went back to get another friend. All of a sudden Danny heard the jet ski accelerate for a short, sharp boost. Tim had seen an unlit beacon and had tried to avoid it but was too late. The jet ski slammed into it and Tim's leg was severed and he bled out. Danny spent 40 minutes in the freezing water and tried to resuscitate him and had to be pulled away from him when emergency crews arrived."

Even though his surfing heydays were decades ago (he was crowned Tasmanian champion in 1966 and 1967), Mick Lawrence is still well known among Tasmania's 4000 or so regular surfers as one of the pioneers of the sport in this state. Mick was also one of the first surfers that Stormlea property owner Johnno Rhodes showed Shipstern Bluff's intimidating — and now world famous — waves to in 1994.

But here in the far-back corner of the State Cinema cafe, Mick Lawrence blends in with all the other salt and pepper-haired patrons. He's just another 72-year-old chatting with a friend, hunched over his short black.

What the other baby boomers around us don't know is that the two of us have only just met. And that within minutes of settling in, Mick is sharing stories that have been locked away deep inside. He's telling me about losing his dad to suicide and then decades later losing his son — his best mate and adventuring buddy who, he says, inherited his own thirst for adrenalin-inducing adventure sports. It's a difficult conversation for a man who grew up in a home with a struggling war veteran dad who taught his son to keep emotions to himself.



Veteran surfer Mick Lawrence at Clifton Beach.

After just a few minutes of conversation it is obvious that Mick Lawrence is still deep in grief. His weathered-looking face and furrowed brow match his sad-looking eyes. He's dressed in his favourite T-shirt for our interview to discuss the State Cinema premiere of his documentary film called *Rogue Waves*. It's a well worn soft-looking grey cotton with the words "six out of the seven dwarfs were not happy" scrawled across the front.

Early on in our three-hour conversation, Mick tells me the surf was the best teacher he ever had. The documentary film is a story about how the lessons he learned from four decades of surfing breaks all over the world have helped him get through the toughest times of his life.

"The biggest influence on my journey was a direct result of a choice I made as a teenager to go and see a surf movie with a mate at State Cinema," Mick tells me. "Not only did that decision change the course of my life, but becoming a surfer taught me the core values I hold to this day. I learnt humility, to show respect, the joy of living in the moment, and that having mates is a gift of pure gold. And it also taught me that it wasn't always sunny and offshore and sooner or later, and probably when you



Top: Hundreds joined on their boards to make a heart shape on the water in honour of Tim Lawrence at Clifton Beach. Above: Tim's father Mick gets a hug. Left: Mourners at the Clifton Beach memorial.

Pictures: SAM ROSEWARNE

least expect it, you are going to be mowed down by rogue waves."

Rogue Waves is his personal story and the most difficult tale this experienced, Tasmanian documentary maker and storyteller has ever told. He's feeling anxious, he says, as opening night looms.

"I'm standing naked in front of the world," Mick tells me. "Even now there's this great apprehensive feeling in me. Do I really want to be this honest and open? It kind of makes me feel a bit nervous."

Mick started writing his life story into a book he published 11 years ago after his aorta artery split open. He says doctors told him it was inoperable and he says he was basically sent home to die. By then Mick's surfboard was already collecting spiderwebs in the shed rafters. Being that unwell and knowing that most people with the same condition don't make it, he says, gave him the opportunity to take the time to really remember. Recalling all the epic surfing adventures he and his mates had experienced in their heyday right through to his 50s was his therapy, and helped him to recover.

In writing *Surfing on the Inside*, Mick says he realised how grateful he was for the choice he made after his 42-year-old father took his own life when Mick was just 19. At the time Mick had only been a weekend surfer. His father's passing made him decide to put surfing first. He says reliving his life as he wrote the stories for the book made him feel grateful he had chosen to ignore his mother's advice to stay in a job he didn't enjoy and instead consciously attempt to always live in the moment. It's a decision his now 92-year-old mother recently told her son she is only just now understanding the value of. Writing about the adventures in his life at that time made Mick realise that he'd had such a full and adventurous life that he was actually ready to go if that's the way it was to play out, he tells me. He'd fulfilled the promise he'd made over his dad's coffin: that he was going to make up for the shitty hand his old man had been dealt and really live. He was at peace with dying and wasn't afraid.

The pages of *Surfing on the Inside* are filled with short stories like the time as a 17-year-old "paper pusher" at the Hydro he decided to accept an invitation from his friend Wayne Gough to see that movie about surfing. "I didn't even know what surfing was," he laughs. "Seeing that movie was the most defining mo-

ment of my life. The lights went out and the curtains drew back and I saw someone surf for the very first time and I was lifted out of my seat. The movie faded to black, the lights came on and I stood up a surfer. I spent three weeks of wages then and there to buy my first board. That movie, *Surfing Hollow Days*, shifted my destiny. It had an incredible impact on my life."

The book was always intended as something special Tim could someday read to his own children after Mick was gone. But fate intervened and a father outlived his son. "That's just the way it is," Mick says. "When our elders die, we are preconditioned to that. But when it's your children and the baton is dropped. Then there's no picking it up. Now I ask the question — 'who is going to bury me?' — that's the stark reality of my situation."

Mick drops his head as his eyes fill with tears.

The seed for *Rogue Waves* was planted by 92-year-old NSW adventurer Ken Forster, who read *Surfing on the Inside* one evening after the first day of a tour through the South West Wilderness. At Bathurst Harbour the old man encouraged Mick to bring the book to life through a documentary. He said he was looking forward to watching the film one day and asked Mick to promise to send him a copy. At the time Mick laughed off the suggestion because he'd always vowed he would never make a film about surfing.

And he says *Rogue Waves* is not really a surf movie. It may have some of the most incredible surf footage ever seen of the rugged beauty of Tasmania's coastline and its hidden beaches, highlighting what a surfing paradise this island really is — but it is not a traditional surf movie. *Rogue Waves* is much deeper than the stories that fill the pages of his book. The movie isn't just about the joys of reminiscing his countless "adventures to nowhere" and four decades of road-tripping around Tasmania and the world in search of the next epic wave.

Co-editing *Rogue Waves* was confronting and brutal and sometimes just plain awful. Mick walked away from the film more than once after Tim died — because it was originally just for Tim anyway — and almost gave up on it for good.

It was his long-time friend, musician, sound designer and film creator George Goerss who convinced Mick to keep going with it. George has spent more than three years part-time editing the film that TasWeekend watched at the same time both Tim and George saw the completed film for the first time. ▶

That sound and music that George has produced for *Rogue Waves* is as much a star of the movie as the scenery. The music blends with the footage and is embedded so beautifully, Mick says, that he doesn't know how on earth he will repay his friend.

George's pitch that convinced Mick to keep going with *Rogue Waves* after he quit when Tim died was that his story was a really important one to tell. He told him that he knew strangers would watch it and would recognise aspects of his story in their own life. It would be meaningful and relevant to many, George assured Mick, and would help them on their own journey. As a documentary maker, George told Mick he knew that for him personally it was the one story he was destined to make. "We wanted it to be an hour and a quarter of thought-provoking-stuff," George says. "Mick really lays his soul bare. It's not a look-at-me type film. It's more about his observations and experiences and we both hope that people come away from the film and just stop, and take the time to think about their own life."

State Cinema owner John Kelly describes the cinematography of *Rogue Waves* as incredible. As soon as he saw it, he knew he wanted to be the one to screen it.

George and Mick sat for around 10 sessions at a Battery Point studio drinking Victoria Bitter from cans and chatting. Afterwards, George recorded what Mick describes as his "ramblings" which became the voiceover for the film. It is at times raw and heart wrenching. "He doesn't mince his words," says George. "He tells it as it is and says what he feels and what he remembers. He's a really good storyteller, even an awesome storyteller and he narrates his life just like he's telling you a story."

"*Rogue Waves* wouldn't be here without George," Mick confirms as he sips from his second short black. "He made me talk about things that I just didn't want to talk about. And he somehow unlocked me."

"We talk about humanity," George says. "We talk about what it is to be human in the good times and also in the bad times. And that's what the whole thing about *Rogue Waves* is really all about. We have no control over it. It's about the relationships between human beings and about what we go through. It's just a good opportunity to stop and remind ourselves about who we actually are and what we actually represent."

Mick says when doctors sent him home to die, a week later he was dealt another blow — he was back in hospital and diagnosed with severe depression. The black dog "bit him on the arse hard" he recalls, after creeping up on him like a sneaky cat. He battled with it for five long years and, he says, dealing with his depression was worse than being sent home to die. "Suddenly, I entered this incredibly dark place where I no longer knew who I was and that was terrifying," Mick says. "You can't see and you can't think. There was all this empty space in my head and that was the breeding ground for the black dog. Depression was my dark abyss. I was ravaged by it. I was lost. I was scared."

Mick had grown up with a grandfather who fought in World War I and a father who had fought in World War II, and men like that were stoic and didn't talk about their depression or their post-traumatic stress disorder. So Mick kept quiet, he says, not even confiding in his wife Robyn - who he told me was his rock.

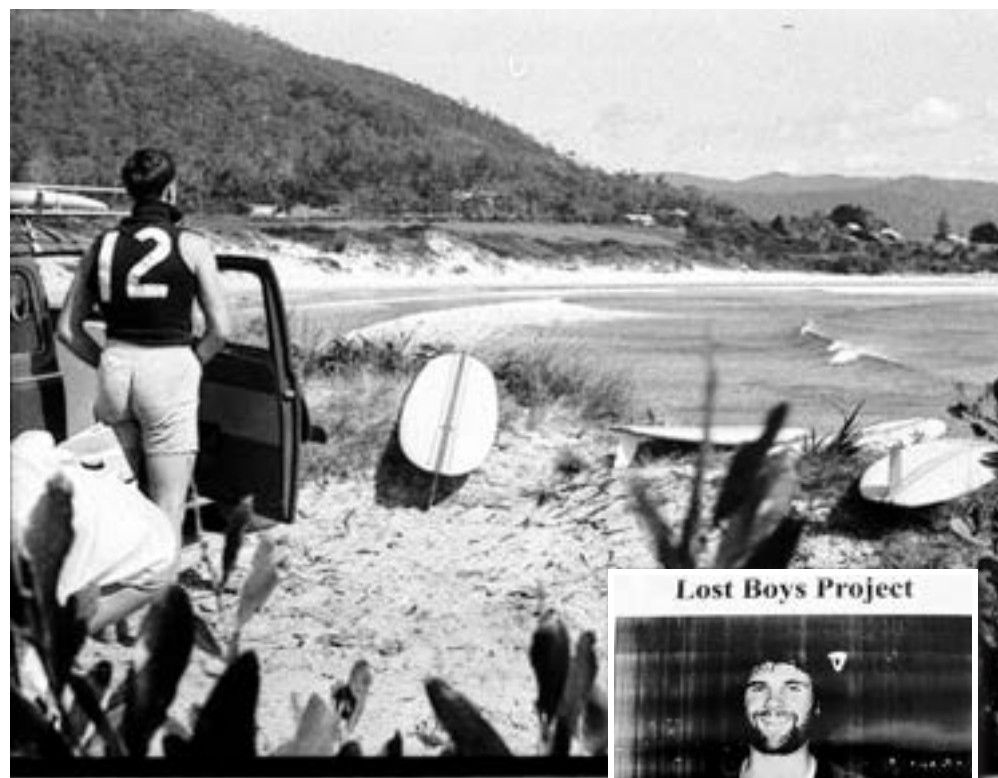
Kayaking saved him. He took to the kayak easily and paddled his way out of his depression in two-week blocks over five years. His Tardis, the name he gave his kayak, took him to places of pristine and untouched beauty as he paddled 12,000km through the South West Wilderness. He filmed a lot of the adventures he had at the time, which he had no idea would one day end up in *Rogue Waves*, and ended up working as a tour guide. "I just drifted and went where I was inclined to go," Mick recalls. It was only when he was at Big Fall on the Franklin River, looking into rocks that had been hollowed out into 1m, perfectly round limestone bowls that Mick wrestled the black dog and won. "I realised that what I was looking at had taken countless millennia to form and here I was worrying about myself," he says. "That was

the moment I realised that the world was going to continue whether I was miserable or not and that I needed to get myself together. I started filling that black space in my head. I let my connection and involvement with the natural world cure me."

Tim was 32-years-old when farewelled in a traditional paddle-out surfers send off at Clifton Beach in the waters across the road from his childhood home. While his ashes were scattered into the surf by his best mate Mikey Brennan, Mick straddled his own surfboard alongside the love of Tim's life Katelyn Williams. Surrounding the trio were more than 200 mates who formed a heart shape around them. The friends used both hands to splash the ocean on either side of their surfboards to bid their friend farewell. "As the ashes were scattered I remember an amazing rush of hot air," Mick recalls. "It went through my body and out

through my head and I'd never felt anything like it. I think it was a collective spirit of having all my friends around me."

Friends are what got him through this lowest of lows. After the paddle-out Mick packed his bags for a tour guide trip in the South West Wilderness at Port Davey, and during a three-day break after that tour spectacularly fell apart. "I hit the wall and I didn't stop crying," Mick says. "I didn't sleep. I just wandered around and I was lost. I doubted I would be able



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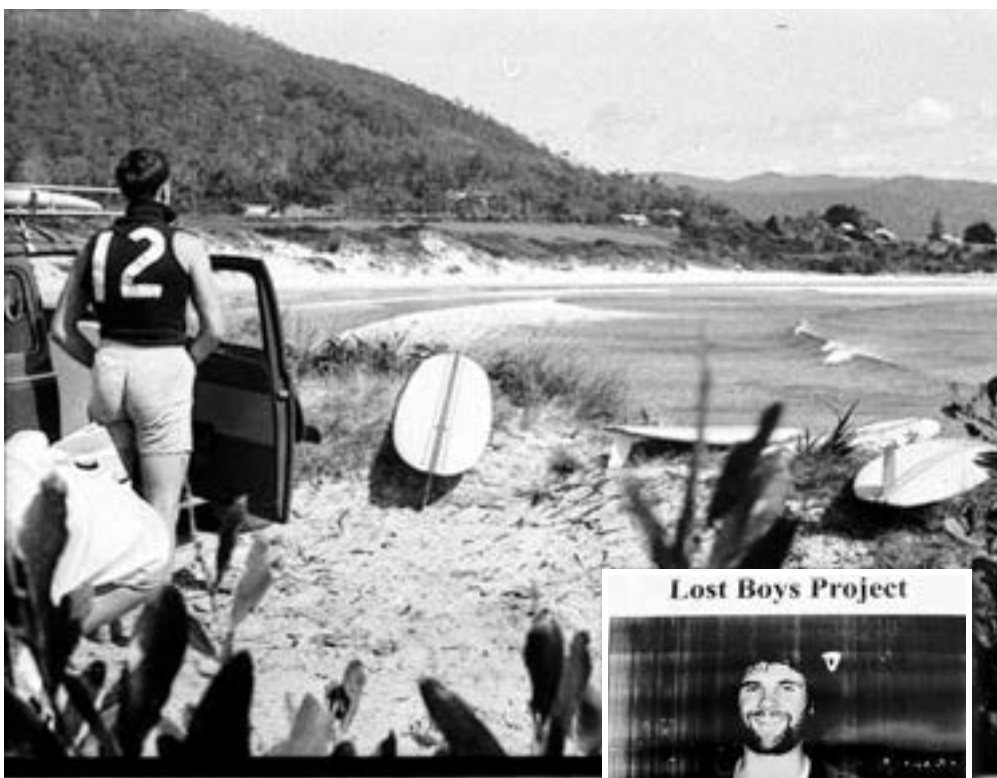
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