

Losing breath – the Adam Sager story

Video transcript

Opening scene: Young couple sits on a bench and look at a memorial plaque.
“Wow, he was young.”

GENERAL TITLE SLIDE: Losing breath: the Adam Sager story

Julie Sager: It was exciting. We, we were only babies, and

Don Sager: married two years, eighteen month old son, our first home

Julie Sager: And we wanted to do it ourselves! It came in the kit form, but part of was that you had to pay for someone to paint it, or you could paint it yourself.

Don Sager: the only thing we could do to save some money, was to paint it.

Julie Sager: and we had to sand the walls first and 24 years later...

Julie Sager: Adam was leading a very fast life. He was training to go to the world championships for his martial arts that he was doing.

Don Sager: yeah, probably the fittest he'd, he'd ever been, and probably just starting to get his life together, going in the right direction

Julie Sager: And he'd rung me and said, 'I'm just not feeling very well; I keep having this flu, and it won't go away'.

Don Sager: he'd been to a doctor, and the doctor said he was just training too hard; to, to slow up. And then he was at work one day, and he leant forward, and he got a pain up under his rib cage.

Julie Sager: So he went to a different doctor who took x-rays.

Don Sager: And he went straight to have the x-ray and found fluid on his lungs. She sent him to emergency and they drained the fluid off his lungs and said go home now, you're ok now.

Two days later, he was feeling a bit sicker

Julie Sager: And we took him straight to his doctor, who did an x-ray, and the fluid was back; straight to the Emergency. And I think it was six or seven weeks before he was out.

They just did test, after test, after test. They had no idea.

Don Sager: They, they found some, what they said was mesoth-mesothelial cells, but ... that they took one look at him, and said he's too young; that they can't be right.

Julie Sager: This is just impossible, so that's why they just kept testing, and testing.

Don Sager: After being in hospital for five weeks,

Julie Sager: all he wanted to do was go home, and have a shower in his own shower, so he went home.

Don Sager: he went in for a shower and then his phone rang...

Julie Sager: and I picked it up, and it was the specialist that used to be with him in the hospital. And she said, 'I'm just ringing to let you know that I've got the test results back, and I need to tell you that Adam has got malignant mesothelioma, and he's going to be in great pain.' I said 'So... but he's gonna be okay? We just need to learn how to manage this pain.'

And she said, 'No, he'll be dead in six months'. And I remember closing his phone, and thinking, I'm pleased I took that phone call, but how do I tell my son he's gonna die?

Don Sager: And so, we broke, broke that to him, and he said, 'Oh well...'

Julie Sager: And he said, "it's all good, they don't know me; it's all good".

Tegan Mallett: No, I had no idea what mesothelioma was. No idea.

Don Sager: That mesothelioma that he got is an asbestos disease. Well, we where told there was nowhere else to get it from.

Dr Keith Adam: The diseases that people potentially get from exposure to asbestos, there are three main diseases. There's asbestosis, which is a, a dusting or a scarring of the lungs... bronchogenic carcinoma ... that's doctor-speak for the ordinary sort of lung cancer ... and also mesothelioma, which is a, a nasty tumour, which arises on the membrane that surrounds the outside of the lungs, and the inside of the ribs.

So far as asbestos is concerned, people need to appreciate that the disease results from exposure to very, very f-fine particles. And they're usually produced when people are cutting it with a saw, or an angle grinder, or something like that. When it's just sitting there, it's a potential risk. But that potential is usually not realised unless someone starts damaging it, or breaking it, or cutting it.

Don Sager: We were racking our brains trying to figure out why or where and the only thing that I could remember was being covered in dust, when we were painting our new first home;

it was just sitting in the air where we were working

Julie Sager: Adam was with us on certain days.

And he'd had this...this little pink dustpan and brush and he used to have a great time, he was always busy.

They traced it back, that our home was one of the last ones that was produced using the asbestos sheeting.

Don Sager: Because it' the outface that you paint, and all that sort of stuff, all the warnings were on the inside.

Julie Sager: I always felt that once we found out where it came from ... that our job as parents, are to protect our children, and we didn't do that.

Helen Colbert: When people find that they're diagnosed with an Asbestos-related disease, they feel very confused, very isolated, very frightened, and they really don't know where to turn. And this is where the Society comes into its own.

The support and the services that the Society offers, is medical; legal advice; occupational therapy services; dietician and nutritional advice; phone support; support groups; people may need financial assistance and when things are really tough, they are just marvellous

Julie Sager: They were sensational, to be honest. They ... the Asbestos Society gave us so much information, and so much help.

Helen Colbert: There 'is' no cure for any of the Asbestos-related diseases. There's only management. And so, when you're living with that, knowing that there 'is' no cure, you try to make the very best of every day that, that you have, because you really don't know how many that you're going to have.

Tegan Mallett: he would only have minute moments of panic. And, you know, like, Christmas was a really hard time for him. We were all positive, because of him. So he was boosting us all up. And then, all of a sudden, he's a mess out on the stairs! And we were like, 'Hang on a minute, like, Christmas is great! We're ha-having fun at Christmas!' But he knew he was his 'last' Christmas. So he just had this wave of, yeah, sadness. I think he just was kinda taking it all in, as if that would be the last time he would celebrate Christmas with his family.

Julie Sager: He loved his family. And when he 'was' sick, all he wanted, was all of us around. He didn't want to do anything else. let's just us. We're good.

Tegan Mallett: We had lots of conversations, Adam and I, that he couldn't have with Mum and Dad. So I was a little bit more aware of where he was at, in terms of thinking whether he was going to fight it or not.

I'd say, you know, 'What do you wish you could do right now? Like, if you could change right now, what do you wish you could do?'

And he said ' I don't want to have to, you know, struggle to breathe to get out of bed, and struggle to walk down the hallway, and not be able to get down the stairs; I just want to be able to go [snaps fingers], and be there'. And so we were able to have those conversations. That was just two days before he died.

Don Sager: he went to bed the night of the 28th of April. But then he woke us all up, having trouble breathing, at about 3:00 o'clock, on the 29th of April,

Julie Sager: When we got him to the hospital yet again. His eyes were really milky and just... nothing. There was nothing.

And, they tried to put a tube down his throat to get more oxygen into his lungs, but he, he'd obviously decided that it was his time to go

Julie Sager: And I said to the nurse, you know, 'Is this, is this it?' And he said, 'Yep.'

Don Sager: All I could say was, 'Oh, oh mate!' Just keep breathing! You can breathe!'

Julie Sager: and Adam closed his eyes, and I thought, Oh, okay ... so, that's it'.

And then he opened his eyes, sorry ... and they were crystal clear. Beautiful blue. And he looked at Don, and he looked at me, and he smiled at both of us, and then he just closed his eyes again. And I just think how much energy and courage that would have taken to do that; to let us know that he was okay, and that he wasn't in any pain. And that it was ok for him to go.

Don Sager: Well we had to tell...had to tell everyone.

And now we're 'still' telling everyone, don't let it happen ... please don't...

Tegan Mallett: the guilt just eats away at them. I think they deal with it better now.

Julie Sager: Don was devastated. He used to feel very responsible

Don Sager: I know at the time, I thought I was saving our family some money,

Julie Sager: people have said to me, 'What 'were' you thinking?' 'Well, we didn't know!

Don Sager: I was thinking that I was doing the best by my family at the time.

Julie Sager: I wish we had of been more aware.

Peter McGarry: You know, 30, 40 years ago, asbestos materials were, were commonly used in, in new building materials. There was definitely a lack of awareness ... and it was not just the Sagers; you know, it was ... most, most of the community just weren't aware

Helen Colbert: Even today, people do not know what asbestos is, or where asbestos can be located. And that is a very frightening thought.

Dr Keith Adam: Even now, I, unfortunately I see examples where, particularly tradesmen, either through naivety, or, or, or perhaps because they're not being careful enough, just go in and start cutting it or drilling it, without giving it the, the thought it needs.

I think the problem is that people don't see that there's an immediate hazard, and so just proceed, hoping it'll be okay.

People often think of it as an old person's disease... there's a very, often a very long lag time between exposure, and development of disease. So while the disease might be affecting older people, it's the exposure when you're young that may be responsible for that disease. So, young people can't afford to ignore it.

Helen Colbert: our big concern now is the home renovators, the DIY, because they don't necessarily know where there 'may' actually be Asbestos in their, their home.

Peter McGarry: there was approximately 3,000 different products that contained Asbestos.

We should actually make the assumption that Asbestos materials are present in houses or buildings, particularly built before 1990,

Helen Colbert: Awareness saves lives.

Dr Keith Adam: It is, yeah. I mean, awareness is, is the whole solution. If, if we're aware of it, and think of it, we can, we can take appropriate steps to either avoid it, or work with it safely

Julie Sager: So find out what's in the house. Just, take a moment to just gather all the information.

There's no excuse for being ignorant now. There's so much information about it.

Peter McGarry: we recommend that anyone contemplating doing some work on a on a building that was built before 1990, that they should have the material tested. It's a relatively simple test...

Julie Sager: Find out what's there, learn how to remove it properly

Helen Colbert: make sure that the people that you're getting to do the work they are professional qualified licensed people.

Peter McGarry: so the clear message is, you don't know what your future exposure will be. So every time you're working with asbestos containing materials, use the controls that prevent fibres

from becoming airborne and breathed in. Its not only your own health that you're putting at risk. You can potentially put at risk the health of people who are, who are nearby.

Tegan Mallett: And that's kinda what you need to remember, when you tamper with it ... is, who am I impacting?

Julie Sager: Just do what you need to do, to keep your family safe. That's our, that's our aim in life, I think, isn't it? Keep the ones you love, safe?

Don Sager: We're still picking up the pieces.

There 'is' that thing in the back of your mind saying, 'I-if I 'hadn't' have done it, we would still be having these great Christmases; we would probably be a-, a lot better off; a lot better off'.

Julie Sager: And, people used to say to me, 'It's okay ... everything happens for a reason'. And I haven't quite worked out the reason why I'll never hear the sound of my son's voice again. How do you reconcile the fact that you'll 'never' hear their voice? That you'll never feel them hug you; that he'll never know his nephew.

Tegan Mallett: he reminds me of Adam.

Julie Sager: I definitely see shades of Adam, yeah; cheeky little monkey.

Tegan Mallett: Just him being here makes me feel like Adam's closer.

We have a photo on our fridge, and we say goodnight to him every night, and tell him that we miss him, and we wish he was here. So it's kind of bittersweet, 'cause it's nice that he's around, and brings a lot of joy into our family. But it's also incredibly sad that it's not Adam's, and he's not having any kids, and he'll never meet Fletcher.

My brother's always been into Asian inspired things, and he loved the Japanese Gardens at Mt Coot-tha Botanical Gardens, and would always go there, even before he was sick.

Julie Sager: and then, particularly after he was unwell. He used to find a lot of solitude there.

Tegan Mallett: they've allowed us to put a bench seat out the front of the Japanese area, under a big clump of bamboo. And it's a beautiful spot.

I love sitting on benches and knowing that a guy's made it and dedicated it to his wife. I think that's nice. And I hope that people feel the same way, when they get to sit with Adam, yeah.

Julie Sager: I hate lookin' at his name. Just to see those dates in print, are terrible.

Dedicated to Adam

RUN TIME: 16 mins 38 sec

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

 www.qld.gov.au/asbestos

 **13 QGOV (13 74 68)**

Asbestos Related Disease Support Society Qld

 www.asbestos-disease.com.au

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