

Aboriginal family dies in house fire: a tragedy caused by poverty

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In early June, a young Aboriginal woman and her three small children died after fire engulfed their Sydney home. The blaze broke out in an impoverished housing estate at Matraville, about 10 kilometres from the city's central business district and a stone's throw from some of Australia's wealthiest suburbs.

Newspaper and television reporters filed dozens of stories from the scene of the fire. Yet despite what they found about the cause of the blaze, not a single journalist investigated the terrible social conditions responsible for the deaths of the young Aboriginal family. 26-year-old Joanne Luland and her young children were victims of the growing social divide in Sydney between rich and poor.

Although Australia is largely spared sub-zero winter temperatures, June nights in Sydney can be bitterly cold. Joanne and her children had no blankets of their own, so Keith, aged 7, his younger brother Glen, aged 2, and their sister, 4-year-old Brenda-Lee, huddled together under a single bed cover.

An electric fan-heater—the family's only additional source of warmth—caught fire while they slept. Flames and smoke woke them, but deadlocked doors trapped the mother and children inside. Neighbours say the doors on the rundown house were faulty.

In every respect the fire and its outcome has poverty writ large. Joanne Luland was alone with her children when the blaze broke out because her partner was in jail. Glen Mason, her husband, was jailed shortly after the couple moved into their Department of Housing townhouse and she found it difficult to cope alone. One year after his imprisonment the two-storey home was still largely unfurnished.

Mason's conviction and punishment was itself a product of entrenched poverty and racism. Born and raised in neglected public housing for Aborigines in nearby La Perouse, he was working as a landscape gardener in the federal government's CDEP work-for-the-dole scheme. Locals say police regularly harassed the Aboriginal man. Brother-in-law Ken Foster recalls Glen was just thirteen when police first searched his bag on the way home from school.

The media unanimously—and incorrectly—claimed that Glen Mason was jailed for burglary. He was, in fact, convicted of grievous bodily harm and a separate count of affray, having recently completed the first twelve months of a six-year prison term. His relatives say Mason was charged after he tried to defend himself from an attacker. Rates of Aboriginal imprisonment are 18

times that for non-Aboriginals, despite the fact that Aborigines represent only 1.3 percent of Australia's population.

After tragedy struck, the injustice continued. Glen Mason attended his family's funeral on June 21 accompanied by a plain-clothes prison officer. After the service he was taken back to his Silverwater jail cell, unable to be present at his own family's wake. It is hard to imagine a more heartless action.

The impoverished conditions in which the Lulands lived form a stark contrast to the glamorous and savvy image that Sydney's business and political elite projects internationally. The state's Labor premier Bob Carr boasts of a "cosmopolitan" and "prosperous" city—"Global Sydney"—yet presides over an electorate where thousands of families struggle on the brink of destitution.

Only a relative handful of Sydneysiders have benefited from the state's economic growth. According to *Business Review Weekly's* latest Rich List, 22 members of Australia's "Rich 200" live in the harbourside or coastal suburbs of Vaucluse, Darling Point and Point Piper, just a short drive from Matraville. Those on the list have seen their wealth grow by 13 percent in the past year alone.

Nearby postcode 2027 includes Darling Point, Edgecliff and Double Bay, whose residents boast a mean taxable income of \$A112,160 per annum. And the net worth of these individuals is even greater with the price of a home in the leafiest of Sydney's eastern suburbs reaching into the multi-millions.

By contrast, most of the families living in Matraville's public housing estates are unemployed or on a single parent's pension. Federal government payments for single parents are a maximum of \$470 a fortnight—regardless of how many children a parent supports—leaving recipients far below the poverty line. According to the Australian Housing Research Institute, more than 90 percent of public tenants in NSW rely on government welfare as their sole source of income.

WSWS reporters recently visited the scene of the fire. Life for the Aboriginal family, living in a rundown Department of Housing townhouse in Matraville's Soldier Settlement estate, was difficult. Built on reclaimed land, the Settlement once housed World War I and II veterans. Its streets still bear battle names, like Somme, Lone Pine—and Armentieres; where the Lulands lived. The housing is dilapidated. Broken and sagging fences, front yards like dustbowls, exposed electrical wiring. Conditions inside are even worse.

Little indication of these conditions ever appeared in the press.

Journalists concluded that the house fire was simply a tragic accident caused by deadlocked doors. Police were interviewed on radio warning residents not to deadlock doors overnight without leaving a key in the inside lock. This, they said, was the major lesson to be drawn from the tragedy.

Claims by neighbours that the family's doors were faulty were either completely ignored or quickly dropped.

"I didn't like the way it was reported that Joanne had deliberately deadlocked that door," said Luland's next-door-neighbour Debbie Martin, "because I knew that the door was faulty. The only way she could open it was through the window. She'd unwind it, put her hand out, and unlock the door from the outside."

Martin said the lock on her neighbour's back door was also broken, forcing them to pass grocery shopping through the rear window. When an inspector visited Martin's property in March, Luland leaned over the fence to explain that her own locks were faulty. She was told to phone NSW Housing's maintenance "hotline"—despite telling the inspector she had no telephone.

Local residents say calling the NSW Housing hotline is often futile as maintenance requests are frequently met with inaction. Public housing has been starved of funds by successive federal and state governments. The situation is now so dire that NSW has a maintenance backlog of \$600 million.

At the Matraville Settlement a staggering number of maintenance breaches were evident—some of them potentially deadly, including broken power points, exposed electrical wiring and water leaking through light-fittings. A Department of Housing spokesman claimed that 48 hours was standard turnaround time for essential repairs, yet residents say they often wait years.

Martin, who has lived at the Settlement for 14 years, described the area's deterioration: "They were nice when I first arrived. They were well maintained. The lawns were kept. We used to have sprinklers. The gardens were looked after. But they don't do that now. When the trees die they just leave them. You either do it yourself or you just watch them rot."

The townhouses were built in the early 1980s from the shoddiest materials. Their walls—painted gyprock (plasterboard)—are now filled with holes that are no longer fixed by the government housing authority. "You just have to bang and you're through them," Martin explained, "and no-one here's a plasterer so you can imagine what the repair jobs look like. Everyone's holes are stuffed with newspaper—as a backing to put the plaster onto—and that's another fire hazard. We're not going to go out and buy hunks of gyprock, because we can't afford to."

Joanne Luland's cousin Michelle Griffiths pointed out glaring problems in her own townhouse. The property is missing a front fence, with much of the back and side gates crumbling from a white ant infestation. "The carport's falling down too—it's all rusty," she said, indicating toward the jagged metal guttering and sagging structure, "All it's going to take is a big gust of wind and if the kids were playing out here ..."

Water leaks from the upstairs shower into the laundry's light fitting: "I'm worried. What if my kids try and replace the light bulb when I'm not here? It could be tragic."

Some residents have questioned the efficacy of smoke alarms

installed by NSW Housing in their townhouses. The alarm fitted in Luland's house appears not to have worked.

Debbie Martin spoke about some of the difficulties that Joanne Luland faced, "She was always broke, struggling each week to get groceries. She'd find a way to get whatever she needed though. She'd either door-knock or ask strangers on the street—which I thought was pretty sad. You shouldn't have to do that in this day and age."

But poverty was a way of life for many residents, "Our pensions do not match up to living costs" she explained. "Since the GST came in it's a real hard struggle. I'll shop at Franklins, Woolies and Coles to get the specials. My average grocery bills are between \$100 and \$150, and it costs me another \$30 for milk and bread. There's nothing left. I put \$10 each week on gas and electricity and \$20 a week on the car. And if it breaks down I've got to save up."

The Luland family had virtually no furniture in their two-storey townhouse. "She had a two-seater lounge and a hutch for the TV. That's all." A broken washing machine meant a weekly one-kilometre walk to a Maroubra Beach laundry.

Martin provided breakfast for the Luland children each morning, otherwise they would have gone hungry. "They were lovely. Little Brenda would come in and want to touch everything in the house. She was full of questions. And the baby was just starting to get his words together." She said their brother "KJ" looked out for them, "he was the one who instigated bringing the younger two in for breakfast, through the fence there." Martin pointed, "They were like little ducks."

Martin said Joanne Luland had plans for the future, "She wasn't working but she was looking to better her life. She was hoping to do courses next year. She wanted to do a landscape gardening course and she liked flower arranging."

On June 21 more than 1,000 mourners attended a funeral service for the young family at Dapto's Lakeside Memorial Park Cemetery. Glen Mason is currently serving the remainder of his prison term at Silverwater jail and is not eligible for parole until June 2006.



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