

FEATURE {call of duty}

Detective Sergeant Mark Meredith and
Detective Senior Constable Sue-Ellen
Scott. Photo: Firefly Pictures/Alexandra Meyer





Part 2 CALL OF DUTY TO CATCH A KILLER

Last week, three Dubbo-born and raised police officers told JEN COWLEY how being a country copper can be both a blessing and a curse when policing gets personal. For the trio of colleagues and friends, it doesn't come much more personal than the eight year hunt for killer Malcolm Naden. This week, they tell of their involvement in the case that captured a nation's imagination and tore a community apart and of how, for them, it may never be over.

IT'S almost a decade since police discovered the body of murdered young mother Kristy Scholes after breaking into the locked bedroom of a Dubbo house, but Michael "Mick" Willing remembers as if it were yesterday.

Born and raised just 500 metres from that house, the then crime manager of the Orana Local Area Command vividly remembers taking the call. It was a call that would spark one of this country's most extensive manhunts, putting police on the eight

year trail of a psychopathic killer whose continued evasion of the law would first captivate, then horrify a nation.

From the Sydney office of his post as commander of the NSW homicide squad, the Dubbo born and bred Detective Superintendent recalls every word of that fateful phone call, as does the man who made it and the woman who was first through the door of that room in the early hours of June 23, 2005.

Like Willing, Mark Meredith and Sue-Ellen Scott are products of Dubbo. Together, the

three experienced police officers were there at the beginning of the tragic Malcolm Naden saga and they'll be there at the bitter end – whenever, and if ever, that comes.

Naden was captured on March 22 this year, and has been sentenced to life without parole for, among other crimes, the murders of his cousins Kristy, and Lateesha Nolan, whose remains have never been found.

"I remember getting the call from Mero saying, "You'd better come out to this one," and asking why. Then he said, "This is where ►

► Lateesha disappeared from,” says Willing. “We both said, “shit”, and the penny dropped then.”

Naden may finally be in gaol, but until the Macquarie River gives up its secret of the young mother of four’s remains, there’s a family and three particular police officers for whom the quest for justice will never quite be done.

IN his line of work, Mick Willing sees more heartache than most. He’s seen the worst kinds of wrongful death and peered into the dark side of human behavior that most people imagine only in their nightmares.

But when such depravity comes knocking on the back door, it gets personal.

“People didn’t realise for a long time just how connected I was to the Naden thing,” he says. “My mum and dad’s house was less than a kilometre as the crow flies from where Kristy was murdered. I rode my bike around there as a kid. I kicked off the investigations into Naden. Then as fate had it, down the track I ended up being commander of homicide with the responsibility of catching and prosecuting him.

“So yeah, it’s personal. I went to school with members of the Naden and Nolan families, the extended families, as did Mero and as did Sue-Ellen. It’s very personal for all of us.”

In his role as the state’s homicide squad boss – one he’s been in now since late 2011 – Willing says although his team sees to, on average, 100 murder investigations year, it’s vital he maintains a degree of detachment. It’s both a professional necessity and a self-preservation technique, he says.

“As commander of NSW Homicide I have so many people who interact with me and who rely on me. But even without that, you can’t get emotionally involved with each of these cases – it would tear you to pieces to be honest.”

The Naden case was different.

“It couldn’t help but be personal. It was in my back yard; my home town. It involved some of my closest friends – like Mero and Sue-Ellen. I felt responsible at the beginning and in the end I felt responsible for ensuring the prosecution went through.”

Ask anyone who knows him, and they’ll tell you Mick Willing is a surprisingly tough cookie. He’s unfailingly professional in his approach to his work, and there’s a steely objectivity when it comes to making the tough calls.

So his emotional investment in the Naden case makes him vaguely uncomfortable, even though he understands how valuable that local ownership element has been to the outcome of the whole sordid saga.

As locals, Willing, Meredith and Scott all wanted answers.

“Naden’s crimes had an impact on the psyche of Dubbo, particularly West Dubbo. Look at the time when those offenses occurred, that’s the other thing people don’t realise – that these things happened in Dubbo in 2005 when everything was going to hell.”

Willing is talking about a time many believe was the central western city’s “annus horribilis”.

After being on the run for six months after the murder of his cousin Kristy, Naden was sighted at the Western Plains Zoo, which was shut down and searched on Christmas Eve. Naden managed to slither out from under the police net, and it would be another eight years until he was finally captured.

“People forget that five days after the zoo thing, we had the riot in the Gordon Estate,” says Willing, recalling the New Year’s Eve unrest that divided a community and brought devastating media attention the city is still trying to shake off. “Then we had a succession of horrific road deaths all one after another. It was just terrible.

“Those who know understand that the offenses took place at a time when relations between police and the indigenous community in West Dubbo were strained and there was all sorts of stuff going on in the background.

“Sue-Ellen and Mero understand too – they lived it. These weren’t your run of the mill murders.”

THE now boss of homicide is justifiably proud of the way the investigation, once Naden was finally in custody, was handled and of his team of serving officers and detectives in conducting the arrest and the ensuing interviews.

He talks at length about the way Naden’s confession was carefully extracted in a well-orchestrated operation conducted by two particularly patient detectives, and of the way in which Naden eventually gave up the truly gruesome details of his crimes.

Willing barely draws breath, and it’s like a catharsis as he tells of the depth of Naden’s depravity, and of the horrors contained in the psychopath’s 25

page written confession – much of which will never, and should never, be made public.

But there’s an underlying frustration that remains unresolved for Willing and for many of the officers who over the years worked on the Naden case – the near-mythical persona with which the murderer was endowed, largely by a sensationalist media, lapped up by a public keen to believe in a modern-day Ned Kelly.

He’s also had to bear the brunt of a fickle public ready to see the police as bumbling Keystone Cops thwarted by an “expert bushman” – a complete furphy and an irritation he’s shared many times with me over the years.

“You were the first journalist who came out and said, hang on a minute, this guy’s no Ned Kelly,” Willing recalls. “I still have the article. But most of the media didn’t see it that way and it was really frustrating. If they’d only known some of the stuff we knew...”

Willing, Meredith and Scott recently appeared in a Channel 7 documentary about the case, and it was only then the real depth of Naden’s depravity became public knowledge. Some of the more grisly details are still subject to suppression order – not that they’d ever be repeated here anyway.

I’ve been following the case, albeit very much at arm’s length, as long as Willing has, but I’m still shaken by some of what he’s told me over the years, and what he tells me now. So it’s impossible to imagine how hard it must have been for the families of Kristy Scholes and Lateesha Nolan to hear what Naden – their own family member – did to the girls before, during and after their deaths. And how hard it was for the three local-born police to say those words.

“Mero, Sue-Ellen and I all felt it was the right thing for me to do to go out and personally tell Joan Nolan and Margaret Walker – sit those ladies down and actually tell them what Malcolm had done,” he says quietly, and takes a long pause.

“Over the years cops do that stuff but this time, I’m sitting there, and I felt like crying. I thought, “How am I going to do this?” The old way is just come out and say it. But how do you come out and say those things to a mother?”

“I just said, “Joan and Margaret, we are going to charge Malcolm with Lateesha’s murder, but there’s some things you need to hear that are going to come out.””

Willing recounts talking to the two grieving women about what Naden had done.

“It was devastating for them. There was no easy way of saying it, and I felt dreadful. But I felt I owed it to them. That it just had to come from me, you know?”

Willing’s composure wobbles, and I comment that it’s clearly a moment in his career that will stay with him for a lifetime.

“Yes, it does still bother me. It always will. I just saw these eyes, they had so much pain that they’ve been through and then here I am telling them the worst detail. I just felt very guilty.

“The other thing that haunts me is asking those ladies to tell the kids their mum’s not coming home. I said, “We’re going to charge Malcolm, and those kids need to know before that comes out.” Until then, the children had believed Lateesha was coming home.

“I was really worried they’d hear it on the news. I rang Mero the next day and said ‘You have to talk to Joan and make sure she tells those kids.’ And she did, God love her. It must have hurt her deeply.”

Willing readily admits to feeling a deep connection with the shattered family, but says it’s his two offiders – still based in their home town – who really carry that weight of responsibility.

“Sue-Ellen did a tremendous job and she is very close to the family, as is Mero. They talk to the family and with those kids regularly and they’re in touch all the time. But I feel it more from a moral point of view because of the position I’m in – because I’m responsible.”

It’s a responsibility that usually sits comfortably on Willing’s shoulders, but the emotional connection to the Naden case gives it extra weight in this instance.

“I felt... feel... guilt for the grief I brought to them that day. I know that’s unreasonable, but when I heard them say, during that documentary, that that was the hardest day of all, it really hit me. Yeah, it’s just a burden.”

Mick Willing hasn’t spoken with the family of Lateesha Nolan or Kristy Scholes since that day, but they’re never far from his thoughts. He makes a regular pilgrimage home to Dubbo where he still has close family and friends, and where his roots will always run deep.

There are many details of the case that have deliberately been kept from the public, and will remain so until Lateesha’s remains are found.

It’s a hope that Willing accepts may never become a reality, but he’ll never stop searching.

“When I was home last, Mero, Sue-Ellen and I went out quietly, just by ourselves, to the river and had a little bit of time together. The three of us had a look. We can’t help it. But the river has changed so much and there’s so much dirt that’s been dumped on there by the floods in different areas...,” he shrugs sadly.

LIKE their friend and colleague Mick Willing, Detective Sergeant Mark Meredith and Detective Senior Constable Sue-Ellen Scott will never be free from the stain of Malcolm Naden.

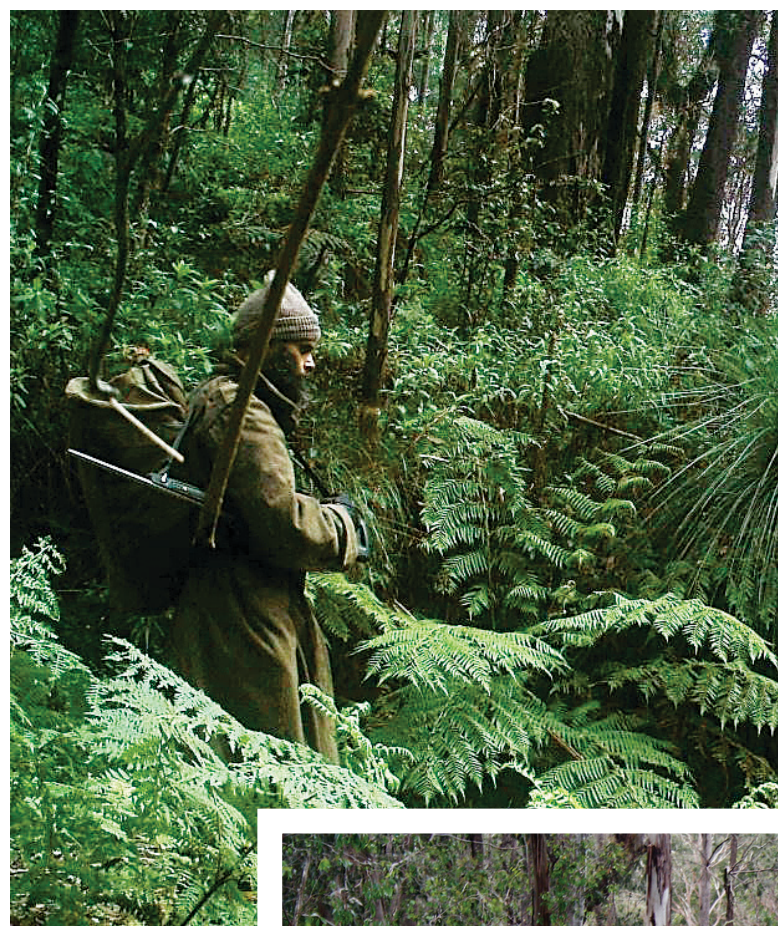
Both born and bred in Dubbo, they feel the weight of a city’s grief perhaps even more keenly than Willing, who at least now has the benefit of physical distance.

“That huge array of emotions?” says Meredith. “That eight years of personal attachment? It continues with us – for Sue Ellen and me it will go on ‘til our careers finish, that connection with the families.”

The two experienced detectives are still visibly moved by the depth of grief Naden’s psychopathy caused.

“They were so torn apart,” says Meredith of the Nolan and Naden families and of seeing Naden’s grandparents devastated.

“I’ve discussed this with the family, and I have no doubt Flo passed away from illness still thinking Malcolm could do no wrong. She was grief stricken, but she didn’t see the outcome, ►



Actual footage of Naden in the bush. Right, the search for Naden. Photos: NSW Police Media





“Naden has been taken away to spend the rest of his life in prison, where he should be. He has to deal with his own demons but this family, how do they put their lives back together?”

– Detective Sergeant Mark Meredith



Detective Superintendent Michael "Mick" Willing
Photo: NSW Police Media



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– Dubbo born and bred Detective Superintendent Mick Willing

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► which is probably a blessing. But I have no doubt Jack died from a broken heart and that is just sad, so sad.

“Naden has been taken away to spend the rest of his life in prison, where he should be. He has to deal with his own demons but this family, how do they put their lives back together?”

Like Willing, Meredith is still demonstrably troubled by the case and his body language speaks volumes of the personal attachment he’s felt stretching back to that awful day in June 2005.

“I’ve seen these children grow up; they were aged down to nearly one at the time, and now here we are eight years later, and the eldest is nearly 15 so a lot of time has gone by. But the heroes out of this are Margaret and Joan. They’re just extraordinary; I can’t come up with the word that summarises these women. Their whole day, each and every day, is consumed by love and focus on those kids and making the best possible life for them.”

I T was Meredith on the end of the line when Mick Willing took “that” call – the one that changed countless lives. Just minutes before, Sue-Ellen Scott had stepped through the door of a locked room in Bunglegumby Road in Dubbo and straight into a near-decade long case that screenwriters would struggle to replicate.

“I know exactly the moment he is talking about when Mick says that’s when the penny dropped,” says Meredith. “Mick and I are the best of mates, we know how each other feels and thinks. We don’t have to say anything, it just happens. That day started out like any other investigation, as a missing person report – but all three of us knew at that moment this was going to be something out of the ordinary. We just didn’t know then how big it would become.”

The cop of 26 years’ experience says that day began with what he, and most police involved at that time, thought would be another case where someone is reported missing but turns up and all will be well.

“We deal with that kind of scenario almost every day, and every morning I read all the synopses of what’s happening and get a feel for things. Missing persons reports are always a priority, because every moment counts in those cases and often by the time I see the report, the person has already been missing for 24 hours or more, because people tend to wait before contacting police, rather than raise a false alarm.”

Most of these cases have a quick and happy conclusion according to Meredith. Kristy Scholes’ would not.

“This report felt different. And I had a nagging feeling something wasn’t right. Then I had a call from Sue-Ellen and that feeling grew.”

Scott told her boss that the usual enquiries had failed to turn up any leads on Kristy’s whereabouts, and that she believed something simply didn’t “sit right”.

“Sue-Ellen is impeccable, one of my most experienced detectives. You can trust her instinct, and when she says she has a worried feeling, I worry.

“So I went over there and we went over all the information again. And when we found there was a locked door in the house, I think we all had a feeling. We forced entry into what we’d later find out was Malcolm’s room, and that’s when we found Kristy’s body.



Malcom Naden under arrest. Photo: NSW Police Media

And that’s when I called Mick.”

Eight years later, it’s still hard for Meredith, as experienced as he is as a detective and police officer, to relive those moments, and to put into words his thoughts and emotions.

“It’s an empty feeling, it really is – it’s a helpless feeling. You start thinking was there something we could have done to stop this? The “what ifs” start – and that happens with every homicide. Remember too, that a lot of time had elapsed between her being reported missing and being found. Like all murder victims, Kristy couldn’t tell us anything and I knew right then we’d have to work as hard as we could to do the very best, and only thing left for us to do for her.”

In those very first few seconds, human overrides cop, Meredith says. The very natural instinct is to feel the emotion of distress and disappointment, but that’s what police training is for.

“Yes, you feel those things of course, but then the job starts. You start ticking your boxes and dealing with the facts. And that’s when I made that 2am call – that was the “penny dropping” moment. The moment that sparked an eight year manhunt and, well, a lifelong case for me.”

FOR her part, Sue-Ellen Scott – herself a mother to young children – says the Naden case helped hone her skills in balancing between the empathy vital to being a good detective, and losing herself in the emotion of a case that strikes so close to home.

“You can’t do this job properly if you can’t empathise, but people also need to know they can rely on you to be strong, to take the responsibility. And that’s a fine line. You can’t let empathy turn into so much sympathy that it consumes you. That’s hard when there are children involved.”

Scott – who has now been on the force for 16 years – says that’s what’s made the Naden “job” such a personal thing.

“That and the longevity of the case. It’s the longest I’ve been attached and connected to victims and families – eight years is a long time in this job.”

The prospect of never finding Lateesha makes Scott immeasurably sad, and it’s one she won’t let herself entertain.

“I’m realistic, but everyone – the family most of all – needs that sense of closure. The three of us – Mick, Mero

and me – we think about it and we prepare for it because we’re attached. We’re connected to the family.

“I will always feel connected to those kids. Always, always, always. With the Scholes kids in particular. I found their mum’s body. Could there be a more intensely personal connection?”

THE connection the three Dubbo-born and raised cops feel not only to the case, but to each other, is unshakeable, and each knows that while the accolades and back-patting surrounding Naden’s eventual capture and life-imprisonment were certainly welcome, the case will not be over in their minds until Lateesha’s remains are found.

It’s why they’re drawn time and again to the Macquarie River, and why every time Scott and Meredith cross it, or pass it, or walk its banks, they’re watching. Looking. Hoping.

“When Mick was here last time we went back out to Butler’s Falls,” says Meredith, referring to the reserve on the river where Naden says he dismembered and dumped his cousin’s body. “Mick’s like us – he won’t really ever let it go. It’s the local in him. The connection with this town and that family, and the gut feeling that won’t go away until we find her.”

Mark Meredith shifts his gaze to the murky water of the flowing Macquarie River, peaceful and rustically beautiful in the late Spring afternoon sun. He and Scott stand looking down from the bank, and we’re all silent for a few minutes while the busy world goes on around us.

“No,” says Meredith. “I don’t think I can ever stop looking. I am a professional person and I have to be in the job we do. I’m a realist I guess and it is a possibility that we will never find her, but there is certainly a possibility we will.

“And yes, I will always have a connection with that family and those kids – ‘til the day I don’t exist, I guess.” ■

***Police media generously allowed Weekender access to some of the photographs and stills from footage taken throughout the duration of the hunt for Malcolm Naden and his ultimate capture and arrest and the interviews and investigations that followed. We have made the decision not to publish most of those images, in a bid to minimise the already deep distress of the local families of Kristy Scholes, Lateesha Nolan... and Malcolm Naden.*

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