

“VOCAL” SUPPORT GROWS

Interest is growing in a Canberra-based victims' support group following the murder of Assistant Commissioner Winchester.

The Victims of Crime Assistance League (VOCAL) was formed by the AFP's Constable Bob Cameron (Rural Patrol, Woden) and his wife, Rita, after their son Grant died after being assaulted at a school fete in late 1987.

"I'm on the 'phone every day with inquiries," Mrs Cameron told *Platypus*.

"We're getting a lot of support from around Australia and I'm getting dozens of letters.

"A lot more people are saying that the perpetrator of a violent crime resulting in death may not be sentenced to life but the family of the victim often is.

"The growing interest is particularly valuable in view of the fact that Mr Winchester had written to us a week before his murder giving the group a liaison officer and saying he thought the League was a good idea," she said.

VOCAL was organising a public meeting as this edition of *Platypus* was going to press. It has 30 members in the national capital and many other people have shown interest.

"We just get together and talk and it's as if we have all known each other forever," Mrs Cameron said. "It's wonderful what just talking to people who have been through similar experiences can do.

"Bob and I felt very alone after our son was killed. Hundreds of people were supporting us, but they hadn't 'been there' so to speak. However, after that people who had been through a murder or other violent death in their families came forward. Speaking to them about similar experiences offered us a lot of comfort."

The League in Canberra includes the families of recent murder victims in the national capital, the families of people who have been killed by

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Mrs Rita Cameron with some of VOCAL's letters of support. (Photo: Terry Browne.)

drunken drivers up to 20 years ago and the relatives of children who have been missing for several years.

Mrs Cameron said a common feeling with all members of the League was that the legal process, apart from the sympathy of investigating police officers, often appeared to pay little attention to the plight of the family, particularly in the case of death.

"People feel that the minute an offender is arrested he is protected, but the victims get nothing.

"In the event of a death the family has to find the money for a funeral and wait for the body to be released — if it's found straight away."

Mrs Cameron said some members of the group had suffered very distressing experiences as a result of the legal process.

"In some cases involving the death of a woman, the character of that victim has been brought into disrepute by defence counsel, and families — which cannot have their own representation at such trials — find that very hurtful.

"The League is going to start lobbying to have statements detailing the effect of crimes on victims' families tendered in court, 'impact statements' if you like, which we want the courts to take into account when sentencing perpetrators," she said.

APPEAL

I am the Mother of a dead child. Have any of you ever given a moment's thought to what that may mean?

Suddenly your life, which has been going along quite happily and normally, changes. Never to be the same again.

Your child's life hasn't been taken in a car crash or an overdose of drugs or cancer, not that the pain of the loss is any different, but taken by another human being.

That is something I don't think I will ever be able to accept; that another human being has taken my child's life, for absolutely no reason or gain.

Every time you hear of another murder, and recently that is often, you go all through it again.

You think about the person who has been murdered and your heart goes out to them, and also your prayers, that they are now at peace and away from the wickedness of this world.

Your heart breaks for the families, the relatives and the friends of the victim. You know just how they feel. You know their disbelief, that it has happened to them, the hurt, the anger and all the trauma they are yet to face.

I HAVE HAD ENOUGH.

Something has to be done.

It is too easy for the people who murder others. At the most they will get sentenced to life.

How many of these people stay in prison any length of time?

How many of them are better off than they were?

There has to be a deterrent. Something to fear. Sentences which will not just be a few years in prison.

I ask you to all please think about this and do something about it.

Some of you who read this will one day be in the same situation as we are. I can tell you it is not easy.

**(Mrs) Rita Cameron
45 Tullaroop Street,
Duffy, ACT 2611.**

SEIZURE OF CRIMINAL ASSETS

by Philip Castle

RECENTLY a US Drug Enforcement Administration undercover agent was asked by his drug syndicate to advise on an aircraft type and its equipment for a forthcoming illicit drug importation.

This he did, but not before consulting his DEA advisers, who gave him an exact description. On the aircraft's first drug run it was seized and then put into DEA service; the criminals providing a tailor-made aircraft for the DEA needs.

Such is the effectiveness of the US seizure of criminal assets law, said Mr Bill Snider, an assets forfeiture attorney with the DEA. He, along with a DEA training team, was in Canberra to co-host with the AFP and the Director of Public Prosecutions, a series of seminars on assets seizure for Australian and New Zealand law enforcement officers.

Mr Snider said the US Congress had provided that the majority of criminally seized assets could be put back into law enforcement. In fact the DEA's seizures program means it runs at a profit; the DEA cost \$US484 million to run last year and its seizures totalled more than \$US650 million.

The DEA has been told that no new vehicles can be bought this year. So, according to Mr Snider, all its new or replacement vehicles will be met from seizures.

"We don't have carte blanche," he said. "The use of seized assets has to be approved. Other law enforcement agencies also have access to the funds which are held in a Treasury account. The funds, for example, can be used to pay informants, provide advance technology or specialist equipment for vehicles, aircraft or boats."

The FBI seizes assets as well. Some time ago it seized a topless bar and for a time until the case was resolved, had to run it.

"The media had a lot of fun with that," he said, "asking questions such as whether the waitresses were then government employees or not."

"The DEA seized an airline in Pennsylvania which constituted a number of transport planes and an

airfield. This was given to the US Marshal Service which now use the aircraft to transport federal prisoners and the airfield as a transit centre.

"The whole idea, of course, is to take away the motive for drug dealing, the profits. It is a deterrent and in the US it is a very effective way of defraying the enforcement costs from the taxpayer.

"Some criminals, the drug kingpins, may consider it worthwhile going to prison for some years provided they come out as millionaires. If we take away their profits, they may think again before committing the crime.

"We have the authority to designate the equipment seized to our agency, such as aircraft, automobiles, properties, enterprises and electronic equipment. We can even seize other legitimate enterprises and property as a substitute for the criminal assets if these are inaccessible."

Mr Snider said that the US Marshal Service maintains the properties and enterprises until the court outcome. As a result, many profitable businesses were still run and last year these paid a dividend of \$95 million which was put into maintaining the US Prison Service. Another \$30 million went to the Attorney General for legal costs.

"Early in the piece we had a problem with some horse studs," Mr Snider said. "Most of the DEA people were city kids who knew nothing about running horses. We had some prize horses starving to death. My own opinion is we shouldn't seize anything that has to be fed."

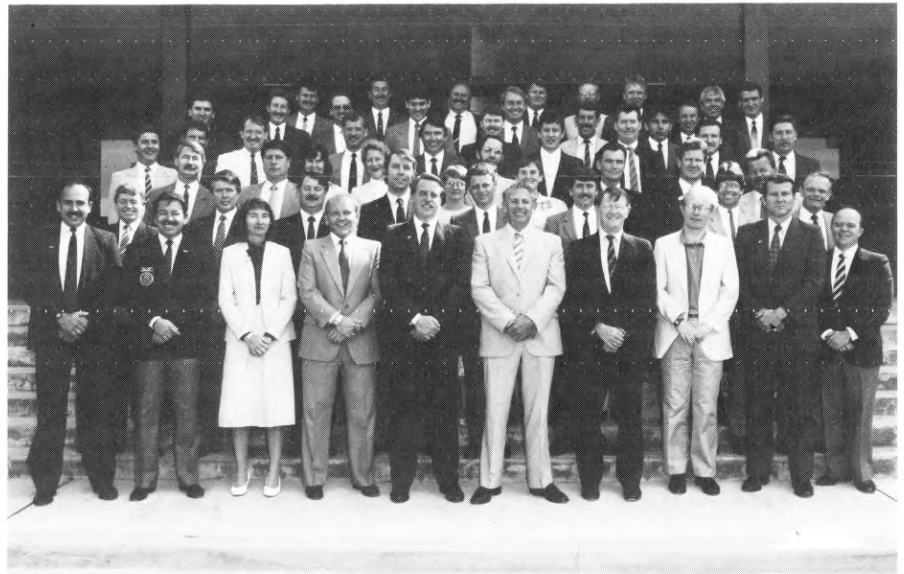
What all of this has taught the US authorities is that there has to be significant pre-planning in line with the mainstream investigation. The DEA uses a multi-disciplined task force approach which includes other organisations such as the Internal Revenue Service (Taxation).

Its seizures strategy also targets the smaller criminals where, for example, the vehicle used by a street-pusher can be seized if it can be shown it was used for drug dealing. This is all part of the deterrent.

"The seizures have given the drug pushers another thing to worry about," he said. "Of course they are taking counter-measures, trying to hide their assets. They realise what is happening.

"But we are having enough success to suffer growing pains and have almost too much work. As we become more effective the criminals will look to move out, perhaps to a country such as Australia, which to a drug kingpin would be an attractive country to invest his criminal profits.

"That is why we are happy to provide whatever help we can to Australian and New Zealand law officers. We can give you the benefits of our experience."



Deputy Commissioner (Operations) Roy Farmer (centre front) and other officers at a DEA seminar in Canberra.