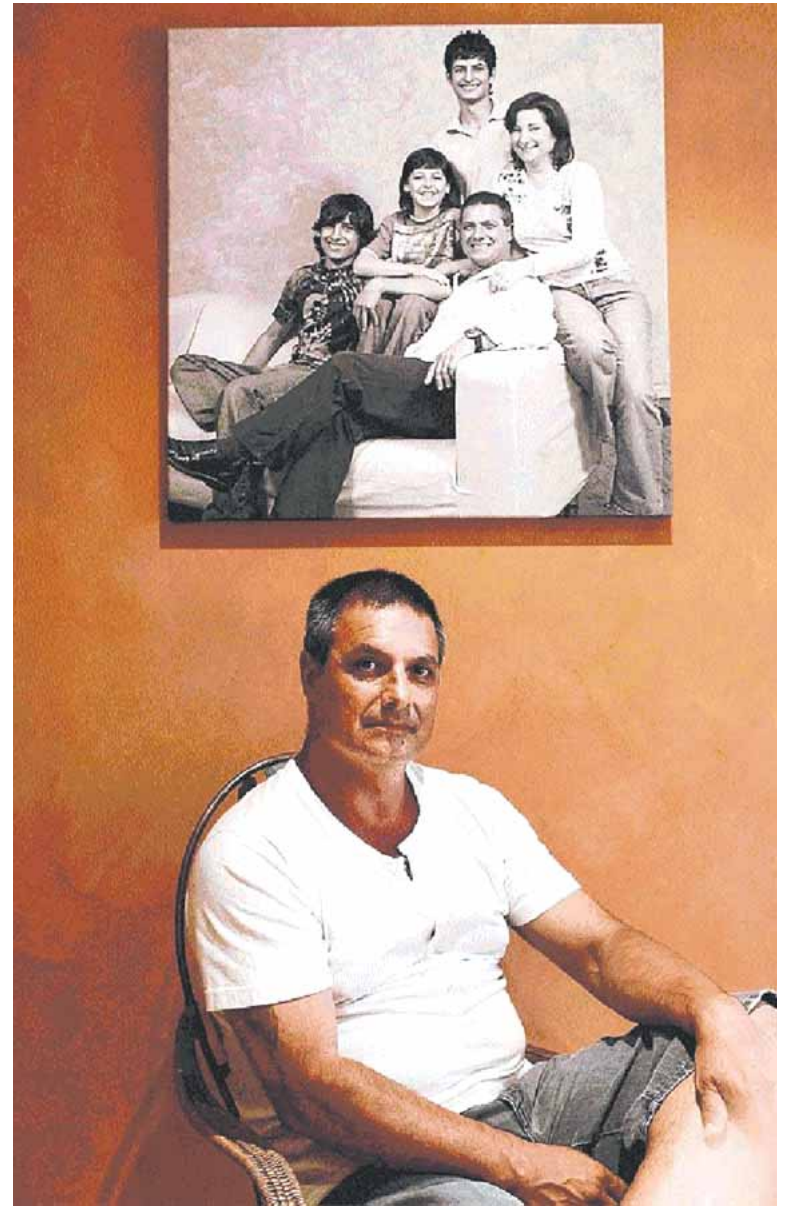


# My heart will go on

Oliver Zammit handed over the rings in a Sydney church, knowing that his son's heart was beating inside the bridegroom beside him

BY SIMON BOUDA



Raising awareness: Oliver Zammit talked to his children about organ donation before the tragic death of his son Doujon. Picture: Brendan Esposito

The Homicide Victims' Support Group (HVSG) holds an annual fundraising ball in Sydney and I've been honoured to act as its Master of Ceremonies for the past few years. At last year's ball I met Oliver Zammit, a man still emotional over the loss of one of his three sons.

Twenty-year old Doujon had been travelling the world when he was viciously bashed after leaving a nightclub on the Greek Island of Mykonos in 2008. The assault made headlines in Australia. After three days on life support, Doujon showed no signs of recovery and his parents made the agonising decision to adhere to Doujon's wishes - he had pledged to donate all his organs should he ever be in such a catastrophic situation.

For the Zammits it was a torturous decision - but a decision they knew Doujon would have wanted. Facing the Greek TV cameras outside hospital, Oliver revealed the organs would be given to Greek recipients. "This is going to tie my family and myself to Greece", he told journalists.

As in Australia, organ recipients aren't usually identified in Greece. But a few days later when the parents and fiancée of the heart recipient asked if they could meet the family of the donor, they came together in an emotionally charged encounter.

Fast forward to September 2009. During our conversation at the HVSG ball, Oliver told me an amazing tale. The man who had received Doujon's heart, Greek-Australian Kostas Gabrielas, was planning to marry his Australian girlfriend, Poppy, and would be flying to Australia for the ceremony. He had contacted O-

liver and asked him if he would be his best man. It was an extremely hard invitation for Oliver to accept. He told Kostas he was flattered but didn't feel he was the right person. Still, if Kostas really wanted Oliver at his side, he would be there.

This was truly a remarkable twist on the story, so I asked Oliver if I could cover this extraordinary wedding for the Nine Network.

I met Poppy in Sydney shortly before the wedding when she, Oliver and I shared a coffee at a Leichhardt cafe. However, I didn't get the chance to meet Kostas until I



in the whirlpool of emotions. Father Nicholas Bozikis summed it up beautifully: "A guardian angel is with us today".

After the ceremony I briefly spoke to Oliver, Kostas and Poppy. "I am blessed from God that there are people on this earth like the Zammit family," Kostas told me.

For Oliver though, there were still grief mixed with the goodwill. While he was proud to be the best man, he couldn't escape the fact that he wouldn't have been there but for the fact that his son had been murdered.

"He's [Kosta] here because of my son's unselfishness," he told me.



A few weeks later, I boarded a flight to the Greek island of Lesbos to cover the trial of the men charged with killing Doujon Zammit.

On the first day of the trial, Oliver and Kostas were side by side again. This time, the roles were reversed, with Kostas supporting the Zammits. Oliver and his wife Rosemarie sat clutching each other's hands and a photo of their son. In the dock sat the accused: nightclub bouncer Marios Antonopoulos and nightclub workers George Chatzioannou and Dimitris Varonas.

The following days

saw him at Hurlstone Park's St Stephanos Greek Orthodox Church on the day of the wedding.

Seeing Oliver standing alongside Kostas was something I'll never forget. Our cameramen were given permission to be inside the church for the ceremony and when I saw Poppy walking down the aisle with her father, like just about everyone else in the church I found my tears were close.

While this was a news story, it was hard not to get engulfed

were a rollercoaster of feelings. I sat in an area designated for the media, away from Oliver, Rosemarie and their two sons Zeake and Laurent. While I had to cover and report the case like any other trial - impartially - I found myself often glancing at the Zammits, making eye contact with them both. I suppose I was hoping they might draw comfort and support from my presence. (They later told me they really appreciated seeing a friendly face in an environment that was so alien to them).

All the evidence was presented to the court in Greek - making the ordeal even harder for the Zammits as neither could speak the language. Kostas stepped in as translator. But they did give evidence - about the case and Doujon's character. They were determined to seek justice. As Oliver told me later, "Doujon didn't have justice the night they took his life; there was no court, no justice, no jury".

The jury and a panel of three judges found Antonopoulos guilty of assault leading to death but not guilty of intending to murder Doujon. The other two were also found guilty of lesser charges. For Oliver and Rosemarie it was a bittersweet verdict.

"We've been dealt a life sentence", said Oliver. Holding back her tears, Rosemarie added. "We have to abide by what the jurors and the judges have dealt out to us and we'll do that with dignity and honesty. We have dealt with the death of our son right from the beginning in this way, and will continue to do so".

A few days after I returned to Australia Oliver rang me.

"Simon, there's some news," he said with a tone of hope mixed with apprehension. "We have appealed and a retrial from the charge of murder has been granted".

I hope to be there for the appeal, again offering a familiar face in support. The Zammits shouldn't have to face that ordeal alone.

*Editor's note: A date for the new trial has yet to be set*

A Sydney based TV reporter and foreign correspondent, Simon Bouda began his career in newspapers before moving to the Nine Network in 1990. He is the author of four books.

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