

Sisters Christine Mitchell and Sue Mahoney



**WARNING:** This story contains graphic descriptions of the killings of two adults and a teenager and the injuries they suffered and might distress some readers.



# TRIPLE MURDER, SISTERS' GRIEF.

The 2010 Kapunda murders left all but one member of the Rowe family dead. Among many grieving relatives are two aunts who still struggle to comprehend the massacre.



By **Brett Williams**

**Below:** Chantelle and Rose at home in Kapunda in 2009; **right:** Andrew, Chantelle and Rose in 2007



## IT WAS TRUE. **Their baby brother, sister-in-law and niece were all dead!**

Murdered! Innocent victims of a maniacal knife attack by a then unknown killer in their Kapunda home. To Sue Mahoney and Christine Mitchell, the sisters of slain father-of-two Andrew Rowe, it was simply not believable.

Mitchell went into shock, felt her body go numb and could not even think. She had got word of the killings by phone from her granddaughter, Natasha, and became instantly detached from the chilling truth. Deep in her sub-conscious mind, the victims were someone else's family.

Mahoney copped the crushing news from her husband, Chas, the moment she got home from work around 3pm. He was on the phone – and as white as a ghost – just before he turned to her and said: "It's Andrew, Rose and Channy."

Mahoney knew something was wrong, began to tremble and asked: "What are you talking about?" A stunned Chas replied: "Sue, they're dead! It's been on the news. Three people killed in Kapunda, and it's Rose, Andrew and Channy."

Andrew, 45, was the brother Mahoney had had to raise because of their mother's continuous battle with poor health. And "Channy" was the niece at whose birth she had been present just 16 years earlier.

So, after Chas went on to say that news reports had suggested the possibility of a murder-suicide, an emotion-charged Mahoney "lost it". She collapsed on her living-room floor screaming... and screaming.

"I was just a complete emotional mess," she says. "Then, things started happening in my head. I wanted to know why. Why Andy would do this (commit murder-suicide).

"In reality, I knew straight away it wasn't murder-suicide. But you still have that little doubt in the back of your mind and think: 'Was he depressed? Did something go on that we didn't know about?' "



Sue Mahoney

These were doubts that Mahoney need never have entertained. Her beloved brother was as innocent a victim as his wife, Rose, and daughter, Chantelle. All three had died hideous stabbing deaths at the hands of 18-year-old killer Jason Alexander Downie.

Infatuated with Chantelle, Downie gained access to the Rowe family home in the early-morning hours of Monday, November 8, 2010. Major Crime detectives would later conclude that he had entered through the bathroom window.

And, inside, he never had to contend with the Rowes' protective son and brother, Christopher, who was away with his partner, Coralie, in Queensland.

So, in the absence of the man who might have proved the strongest defence against him, Downie went mercilessly about his killing spree. On his victims, he inflicted more than 100 stab wounds.

“In reality, I knew straight away it wasn't murder-suicide. But you still have that little doubt in the back of your mind.”



**Above and above right:** Major Crime detective sergeant John Keane outside the Rowe home after the murders.

“I couldn’t sleep at all that night. You just go numb and, then, you want to know why.”

How long that took remains unclear, even to now retired Major Crime detective sergeant John Keane.

“My impression was that it would have been only a matter of minutes,” he says. “You can do a lot of damage in two minutes. But you just don’t know how long he was in the house.

“There were some pretty feeble attempts to clean up afterwards, so he could have been in the house for half an hour, 40 minutes. It’s just too hard (to tell).”

After the sun rose on Kapunda that day, Keane became one of the first investigators to see the horror Downie had left behind. Today he reflects on the gore-filled scene as likely the worst of the 100-odd he saw over his 22 years working homicide cases.

“It looked like a slaughterhouse,” he says. “We first viewed it from outside. There was just blood everywhere in that place – in Chantelle’s room, down the hallway, in the kitchen, all of the back room... It was on floors, walls... just everywhere.

“When you first walked in there you thought: ‘Oh, my God! These poor people.’ We could see where they were lying. You could see Chantelle lying on the bed.

“They (Chantelle and her parents) were all covered in blood, and you could see their numerous slashes and stab wounds, slice marks and puncture marks.”

In an interview with Major Crime detectives who later arrested him at Kapunda police station, Downie spewed out lie after lie. And that was his only post-arrest interview with police, so no truthful account of his murderous rampage ever came from his own lips.

Still, the scenario was already essentially clear from the expert assessment of crime-scene examiners. As Keane explains it, knife-wielding Downie likely launched an initial attack on Chantelle, causing a commotion loud enough to wake Andrew and Rose and prompt them to investigate.

When they appeared, Downie turned his rage toward them, knifing the couple around 80 times. So penetrating were the stabs and slashes that one near severed Andrew’s wrist, and pieces of the two knives he used wound up embedded in each parent’s body.

The crime scene would later indicate that Downie had even stabbed Rose in the back as she tried to crawl away on her hands and knees.

Keane suspects that, with the parents wounded and immobilized, Downie returned to Chantelle’s room. There, it seems, the frightened, bleeding girl had dived under her bed.

“Evidence showed that Downie dragged her out from under the bed and attacked her again,” Keane explains. “There were drag marks in her blood.”

And Downie would show that his depravity was boundless: he vaginally raped the possibly unconscious or even dead Chantelle. “God, poor kid,” Keane says. “Poor kid. What would have been going through her mind? That’s what I often think about.”

Downie, after making his “feeble attempts” to clean up, fled the family home he had turned into that “slaughterhouse”. “So,” Keane says, “when he left the house, there’s every chance all three (of his victims) were still alive but bleeding slowly to death.”

And Keane believes the whole needless massacre had likely begun with Chantelle simply rejecting sexual advances from Downie, who “snapped” in response.



**Above:** Two-year-old Andrew in England just before leaving for Australia; **top:** nine-month-old Andrew (in pram) with his sisters (from left) Marion, Sue and Sally and niece Tracy at the family home in England; **left:** Andrew (left) with siblings at a Father Christmas workshop in 1970; **below:** 14-year-old Andrew (back row) with relatives during a family holiday in England.

**AS THE OVERWHELMED** — Sue Mahoney suffered through her initial breakdown, she began to fear for her nephew, Christopher. She did not then know where he was or whether he knew a murderer had that day killed all three members of his immediate family.

Chas was able to tell her that Christopher was on holiday in Queensland with Coralie. So, sisters Mahoney and Mitchell would not get to see him until late the next evening at Wakefield St police complex, after he had returned to Adelaide and spoken with detectives.

And, before then, the sisters would have to get through the night with the fresh knowledge of the murders of their brother, sister-in-law and niece. "It was just so hard," Mahoney says, "because all you're thinking is: 'It's not murder-suicide, so who's done this?'"

"I couldn't sleep at all that night. I don't think any of us had any sleep. We were all hugging each other: my daughter and me, and Christine with her family. You just go numb and, then, you want to know why."

The Mahoney family and Rose's three brothers waited for several hours to see Christopher at Adelaide police station. Through the wait, they talked, cried and embraced one another.

Major Crime victim contact officer Cris Poppy was on the scene with them. "It was all just so harrowing for them," she says. "The detectives had to ask Chris and Coralie a whole series of questions and it just took a long time.

"They (the families) were trying so hard to get their heads around what had happened, as was everybody else. They just looked like lost souls. I just felt for them."

Finally, on that Tuesday night, Christopher appeared with the detectives. To his grieving aunts, he seemed as emotionally numb as they were.

"I said: 'I love you, Chris,' " Mahoney remembers. "We just hugged him and said: 'We'll always be here for you.' He was standing there but it was like he couldn't hear you. He couldn't comprehend anything."

Still in a partial state of disbelief herself, Mahoney visited her brother's home the next day to lay flowers outside. This, for her, was a means of accepting reality, that she and her sister had indeed lost Andrew, Rose and Chantelle to a murderer.

And their deaths had come 43 years after Mahoney, Andrew and four of their six other siblings immigrated to Australia with their parents as Ten Pound Poms. Mitchell, who was then married with children, followed five years later.

The Rowe children's now late father, Harold "Bas" Rowe, wanted a better life for his family. Mahoney was 12 and Andrew just two when he brought them out to Australia by sea. "It was the best move we ever made," Mahoney says.

"My mum (Alice "Peggy" Rowe) had chronic lung disease and needed a better climate because it was always cold and damp in England. All of us loved Australia straight away."

In Australia, Harold initially found work in a factory but later became a mail-sorter with Australia Post. The now late Alice was frequently sick in hospital but worked as a cleaner when her health allowed, and gave birth to her last child, Louise, in 1969.

Harold bought his family a home in Gepps Cross and his daughters went to Gepps Cross Girls High School. The boys, Phillip, Leslie and Andrew, attended Enfield High.

"When Mum was sick, I would have to stay home from school and help out," Mahoney says of her premature mothering role. "And mum was put in hospital for another three months not long after Louise was born.

"So, as well as Andrew, I raised my little sister for a while. Then, when Christine came out to Australia, it was a Godsend because that took pressure off me."

Mitchell adds: "Basically, we both brought up the kids (Andrew and Louise) from when they were babies."

“It was the last big bear hug I ever had from my brother. I’m so glad that I had that moment: it was only about five or six weeks until they got murdered.”

## WITH HIS SISTERS

to nurture him, Andrew grew into a fun-loving Aussie-larrikin type with many friends, first as a schoolboy and later as an adult. A joker, a talker and a great socializer, he got others laughing, even his parents to whom he became a kind of favourite child.

And he remained particularly close to Mahoney, who can recount many incidents which showed the depth of their bond.

She and her husband, unable to afford a honeymoon, spent the day after their wedding having a barbecue in Belair. “So who tags along?” Mahoney asks. “It was Andrew.

“And, when we moved to Port Lincoln in the 1990s, Andrew moved to Port Lincoln. Anywhere we went, Andrew always seemed to be there and was always the life of the party. That was his character.”

Golf, fishing, cards, motorbikes and the Adelaide footy club became great passions for Andrew, as did socializing with mates over a barbecue. And, as a young man, he had ambitions, dreams of one day moving on from factory work and other jobs to running his own business.

But whatever he was to accomplish it would be with the great love of his life, Rose, by his side. He had met the young woman of Italian descent through one of her brothers in the 1980s. Back then, her father, Rocco, still took a very strict line with his only daughter.

Says Mahoney: “Andrew used to sneak Rosie out and, one day, he brought her home on his motorbike and introduced her to Mum and Dad and us.

“Mum and Dad were quite shocked by her very colourful language, but she was bubbly and everyone was her mate. ‘How are you, mate?’ she would always say.

“And then Rocco came to love Andrew and they got on so well together. They had a lot of things in common.”

Andrew and Rose would later marry, soon after the birth in 1987 of their first child, Christopher. And, in 1994, the couple became parents to Chantelle. Her aunt Sue (Mahoney) watched her enter the world.

Mahoney saw how delighted the now extremely protective parents were to have created a pigeon pair. And, over time, she saw Chantelle develop into a “beautiful young lady” with a bubbly, engaging personality, just like those of her mum and dad.

“She had lots of friends, teachers loved her, and she was very caring,” Mahoney explains. “If someone had fallen down she would care for them; and she didn’t like other children being picked on.

“And when my mum and dad were very sick she always brought them little gifts.”

Precious to Mahoney now are her memories of Chantelle. The loving aunt thinks of the times she and her own children babysat their niece and cousin, watched her play netball, and took her out fishing.

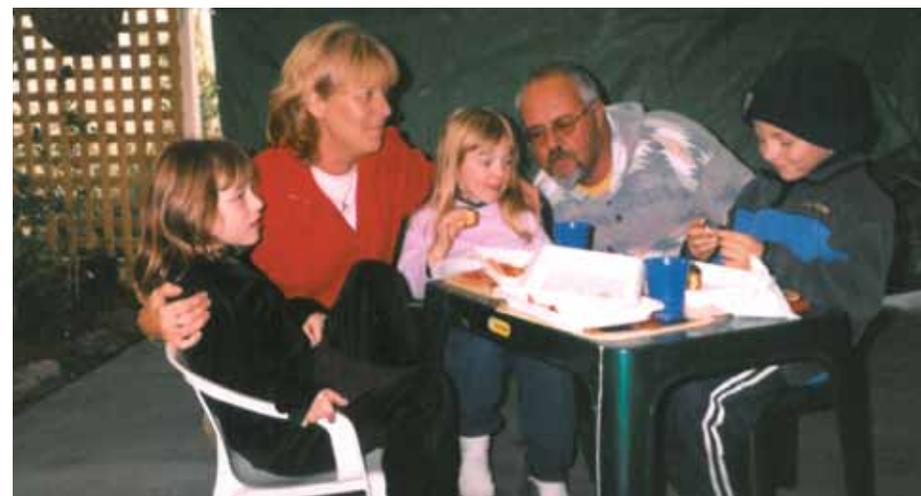
But the image she is most certain never to forget is the one she has of the last time she ever saw Chantelle, Andrew and Rose. That was at the South Gawler Football/Netball Club, where she had gone to watch Chantelle play netball.

A happy Chantelle joked with her aunt about how she had inherited her derriere from Rose, and Mahoney and Andrew greeted each other with a warm embrace.

“It was the last big bear hug I ever had from my brother,” Mahoney laments. “I’m so glad that I had that moment: it was only about five or six weeks until they got murdered.”

Mitchell, too, remembers her last moment with Andrew but regrets that it was more than a year before his murder and at another time of grief. The setting was their father’s funeral in early 2009.

Busy with their respective lives after that, the brother and sister had unintentionally lost contact but remained close. “I feel guilty now,” Mitchell says, “because I didn’t try to (re-establish contact). But you can’t foresee things.”



**Clockwise from top right:** Andrew and Rose on their wedding day in 1988; celebrating Christopher Rowe's sixth birthday during a family fishing trip were (back row, from left) Mahoney's daughter Kylie, Andrew, Harold Rowe, Mahoney and (front row, from left) Alice, Mahoney's son Shaun with Christopher on his lap, and Rose; Chris with then two-year-old sister Chantelle; celebrating Chantelle's birthday in 2002 were Chantelle (far left) and Mahoney and husband Chas with granddaughter Mikhaela and grandson Tyson; Andrew and Mahoney at a family barbecue in Freeling in 2002; Rose and Sue and Chas Mahoney with baby Chantelle on the day of her birth at Lyell McEwin Hospital.



Christine Mitchell

**AS THE TIME** drew near for Downie to face courtroom justice, the then Major Crime boss, Detective Supt Grant Moyle, invited the families of Andrew and Rose to his office. Mahoney and Mitchell were among them.

Moyle set out to prepare these secondary victims for the horrific details they did not yet know but would hear in court. Says Mahoney: "We sat around a table, the whole family. He said it was going to be very graphic, and he did explain things to us."

As the family members listened to Moyle, Cris Poppy saw "tears rolling down their faces".

In the end, Downie pleaded guilty. And, on the day Justice John Sulan sentenced him to life in prison

with a 35-year non-parole period, the sisters were there, in the Supreme Court.

They listened to Sulan speak of the multitude of stab wounds to all three of their loved ones, and the sickening rape of their dying or dead niece.

Mahoney and Mitchell, themselves victims of the murders, now live with ghastly mental images of Downie butchering their brother and Rose and Chantelle to death.

"I can see Rosie on her hands and knees, crawling to get out," Mahoney says. "I can picture Andrew with his wrist nearly severed."

Neither sister goes through a day without visualizing her relatives' vicious, bloody end. In bed at night is when each one's mind becomes the most flooded with thoughts and images.



**From left:** Rose, Andrew and Christopher with newborn Chantelle; Mahoney on her 40th birthday with 11-month-old Chantelle; brother and sister, Christopher and Chantelle Rowe.



Says Mitchell: "I think I'm still in denial because I hadn't seen them for such a long time. I can't imagine not bumping into them in the future. It's hard for me to accept. I have to make myself believe they've gone. That's how I deal with it."

Among the thoughts that relentlessly strike Mahoney, the moment she climbs into bed, is the pain of the 100-plus stab wounds her loved ones suffered. "You lay your head on the pillow and you cry," she says.

"You don't want your husband hearing you cry. We can't do that to our husbands, either of us. Some nights are worse than others, but you can't sleep at night."

Not even with the advice of several counsellors has Mahoney been able to bring peaceful thoughts and sleep to her nights. "How can you ever be the same?" she asks.

"People say that you move on or that, one day, you'll get over it. But I want people to understand: don't come up to victims and say: 'It'll be all right tomorrow. You'll forget all about this.'

"It's never going to leave you, no matter how many pills you take or how many counsellors you see. It will always be there. You try to cope every day, for work and for your family, but how can anyone get over it?"

## THE QUESTIONS

Downie has left unanswered – and chooses to leave that way – continue to "torture" both sisters. Each longs to know if he went to the Rows' home actually intending to murder and rape.

"Did he really go into Chantelle's room first and start stabbing her?" Mitchell, 66, asks. "Was Channy listening there under her bed, hearing him murder her parents?"

"If it was Chantelle he was after, why didn't he just ring her and ask her to meet him somewhere? Why go to the house, knowing Andrew and Rosie were there, and climb through the window?"

"Why doesn't he just tell what happened?"

If it were available, Mahoney would take the opportunity to confront Downie and bark these questions at him. "I don't know if that would help me adjust but I just need to know why," she says. "Why the whole three of them. Why one of them."

For killing Andrew, Rose and Chantelle, Mahoney and Mitchell have nothing but hatred for Downie. Their first sight of him, in court, sickened them as did his obvious lack of remorse.

"I don't even call him a human," Mahoney says. "What human does that (murder three people)? I know I'm not going to be around when he gets released. I hope he dies before I die. I hope something happens to him. Then I'll have closure."

The reduced sentence Downie received for pleading guilty appalled Mitchell, as did his letter of apology. In it, he wrote of all that he had lost as a result of his actions. One item he included was his car.

"To put that in the same (letter that relates to)

murdering three people!" Mitchell exclaims. "I mean, my God! That was about himself."

One of the most meaningful forms of support for the sisters comes from the Homicide Victims' Support Group. Each draws comfort from her fellow victims at the group's monthly meetings and annual candlelight vigils.

Mahoney made a brave, emotional address at the last vigil, in December 2012, with Mitchell by her side. "It's such a good group to go to," Mitchell insists, "because you're trying to help other people as well (as yourself)."

And both sisters describe as "absolutely brilliant" the way police went about the investigation and supported the secondary victims. Mahoney speaks of the insight she now has into the role of homicide detectives and wonders how they cope with murder after murder.

"I don't think it's a job I could do," she says. "I've got a lot of respect for detectives Grant Moyle, John Keane, Anthony Van der Stelt, (victim contact officer) Cris Poppy... all of them. They were so respectful to us."

But one sad part of all the flow-on damage from the murders is the trust Mahoney has lost in other people. "You lose faith, too," she says. "I've lost a lot of that. Your whole life does change. Our lives are never going to be the same." **PJ**

Christine Mitchell and Sue Mahoney pre-read and approved the publication of this story.