

Sandgate. Even today, most of the population of Brisbane ignore this neighbourhood. Semi-submerged, Sandgate is the home to much of the city's lower and middle-class aquatic residents. Originally a regular suburb, this neighbourhood attracted a large population of aquatics due to its easy access to Dowse Lagoon, Bramble Bay, and Tighgum Creek. This was the early 1900s, mind you, so with the influx of aquatic residents, many non-aquatic residents left, so as not to have to interact with their new neighbours. It wasn't long until Sandgate, and the nearby suburb of Shorncliffe, had a near 100% aquatic population, and not long after that, the two suburbs successfully appealed to convert the area into a semi-submerged neighbourhood to ease the lives of the aquatic residents.

But I am getting side-tracked, recounting history. It was July of 1999 when I first stepped foot into Sandgate. Normally, a jackal like me wouldn't venture into the neighbourhood; they had their own aquatic division of the force, due to the lack of ability for cars to venture into the area. Cars were the reason I had to venture into Sandgate, well, one car in particular. On July 15th, 1999, the car of Debra and Simon Ashbury was involved in a fatal accident on the M7 while heading home from work in downtown Brisbane. I was given the task of breaking the news to their child, a young boy of 8 known as Christian Ashbury. So, putting on the waders provided for me to keep my fur dry, I took one of the small boats used by the aquatic division, and with their accompaniment, I made my way to the Ashbury home. What I found broke my heart.

The young Christian didn't want to answer the door. He had been home alone, for hours as far as I could tell, and was scared. His parents had instilled in him the caution not to open the door to strangers. Eventually, I convinced him to open up by passing my badge through the mail slot of the door, and we entered the home. The aquatic officers later told me that his house was like many of those in the area, a good foot of water covering the ground, a deeper section somewhere in the rear, and all the electrics run in such a way that they would never come in contact with the water. The furniture was all plastic, weighted down in the water

and any cushions covered in more plastic to keep them dry. And here was this young kid, who had obviously gotten himself home from school, a plate on the nearby couch covered in crumbs from whatever he had eaten, and a nervous look all over his face.

We took him down to the station and did what we could for him. He had no family left, and no real inheritance to speak of. The house was rented, and they weren't well off. He took only one thing with him from his home, a basketball that he kept hugged to his chest right up until I watched the DCP walk him out of the station, to whatever home he would end up in.

I wish I could say that the story gets better from here, and it does, but not for a while. I didn't think much about Christian in the years that followed. I wish I had tried to keep up with what happened to him, but biases are a hard thing to work through. Invertebrates still aren't the most well-respected members of society, prejudice and speciesism slips through all the time. The amount of times I heard "What do you care what happens to him, he's just a bloody shrimp?" in the days that followed our second meeting discouraged me, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Christian had slipped into the foster system, and unfortunately, it was not a good place for him. He was shipped from home to home, no place wanting to keep a filthy invertebrate, or not having the resources to care for an aquatic species. In May of 2005, we received a call from a home in the Grange suburb about a violent domestic situation. They heard sounds of heavy fighting and cries of pain from the house next door, and were worried that one of the family's foster kids might be causing an issue, as had apparently happened before. We hear tales of it; kids that are just beyond help and lash out at everybody. That is what I expected, but not what I found.

What we arrived to was chaos. In the foyer of this house, about five feet apart were three people. On the one side there was the foster family, whose names I omit out of courtesy, not respect. The wife was huddled against her husband, a dark brown wolf that was pressed against the wall and a small shelf, a lamp and vase shattered on the floor beside it. He was choking on his breath, clear even to me that he at least had a few broken ribs. On the other side, almost hiding behind the curve of the staircase, was Christian, curled over with his back to me. He was not in good shape. Just from where I stood, a large crack in his carapace crossed what I still assume is his shoulders, small spider webs of cracks lacing down across the rest. He wasn't making many sounds. Thankfully, an ambulance was not far behind us, and the paramedics managed to get the shrimp into it, though only by promising that they would keep 'it' close by.

A second ambulance came soon after to collect the father, but I followed the first to the hospital. I knew who the kid was, and I knew nobody else would care what happened to him. The father said that Christian had gone crazy and just attacked him. "You know how those fucking insects are, close to bloody feral," he said. I would like to tell you that my office didn't want to just arrest the kid, but that would be a lie. Still, I waited for him to get out of surgery, I wanted to hear his side. And he told me.

He had spent the last six years being shuffled from home to home, the only possession he was allowed to keep that basketball he had taken from his home that night six years previous. It had long since become practically unusable. And still, he kept it. A year he had been with this family, and I guess they tried to take it from him, to throw out the last connection he had to his parents, and he fought back. You see, Christian isn't just a shrimp, he's, as he said, a peacock mantis shrimp. They have these hardened knuckles, and hands in general, and the muscles in their arms let them punch harder and faster than you'd expect. They don't have the same skill as feral counterparts, who at a tiny size can shatter aquarium glass and create cavitation bubbles (I had to look it up), but a punch

from a mantis shrimp can still be pretty deadly. I'm surprised that the father only got away with broken ribs. But the father went into a rage after that. He tore two of Christian's antennas more than in half, and shredded, well, the doctor called it an antennal scale. And that was before Christian curled around the ball to protect it and the father began wailing on the shrimp's back, only stopping because those broken ribs were starting to hurt through the adrenalin.

I really shouldn't go into the details, but the attack was ruled as self-defence, and I took temporary custody of Christian. Soon after, we managed to locate Christian's maternal grandmother, who agreed to move to Brisbane and look after Christian.

Apparently, Christian took on part time work to help support his Grandmother for a few years before more tragedy struck him. At the start of his third year of high school, his grandmother passed away in her sleep, and Christian was forced into a homeless shelter. Now truly without family, it is a wonder that he managed to make his way through high school. Though that was as far as he made it. Every school he applied to rejected him. Meanwhile, I once again didn't know what was going on in his life. I checked on him for a year following his grandmother's move to Brisbane, but after that, it just, well, wasn't a priority.

Apparently, a scout from Underwood University in the states, on vacation in Australia, saw him practicing 3-point shots on a neglected court, and approached him, eventually offering him a full scholarship. And from there, those that care likely already know his story. After all, his entry into the draft and signing into the FBA alone make knowledge of his university career into something rather openly available. But his past, while not hidden, wasn't exactly known. Then again, remember that whole invertebrate hatred I mentioned earlier? It's still alive and well, and many could not get past his rather... odd appearance to wonder about the visible damage on his face, and the less visible damage on his back.

I'm sure you're wondering how I know all this, given that I fell out of contact after a year. Well, you'd be right to question this. It was when I heard his name on the radio, mentioned as a participant in the now annual H2O tournament for aquatic basketball players. I started searching for information on him, and I sent a contact through Underwood. He remembered me, and contacted me back, and he filled me in on what had happened in his life over the previous half decade. He still keeps in contact, though now by mail rather than email. As much as I try to convince him otherwise, he refuses to buy himself a cellphone or laptop. I think he'll come around eventually, when he realizes that he can let himself enjoy things. He's been so deprived for so long, I don't know how he handles the excess of money he now makes.

But he's the one who told me I should write this story. To share his story. Apparently, before getting signed into the FBA, he got a degree in social work. He said that he wants to help people where he was failed, try and help all those kids who are shuffled through abusive foster homes when the system no longer cares for them, and that goes double for the neglected classes of us, the aquatics, the invertebrates, all those for whom stigmas still exist. He says that if his story can inspire even one kid to reach out for help, to try and follow their dreams even though they might seem hopeless, than this story about him and his past is worth it.

So the next time you decide to tune into a Montana Howlers game, and find yourself flinching at the sight of the multi-coloured 'abomination' on the bench, maybe take a look at yourself and wonder why you just thought that, and if you should change, just a bit. And then, go and grab something dark blue, and show a little support for our boy from back home, the shrimp that, against all odds, made his way to the FBA.

~ Robert Thorne