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SADDLING UP FOR AWARENESS: 'RIDE IN SHORTS FOR LEAH'

HIGHLIGHTS HIDDEN ASBESTOS DANGERS

Every year more than 4000 Australians die from asbestos-related diseases. In 2024, mother of two, Leah Smith from Mackay, was among them because she'd been exposed to asbestos fibres as a 3-year-old while pottering around the new family home her parents were building, unaware Leah was inhaling asbestos fibres which would one day take her life.

In 2023, when 48-year-old Leah began struggling to breathe with an unknown illness, she and her loved ones could not have imagined that the tests she underwent on her 49th Birthday would reveal malignant mesothelioma - a deadly cancer caused by her exposure to asbestos fibres as a child.

Sadly, on 22 August 2024, just eight months and one day after Leah's diagnosis, her husband Phillip and their family were left devastated when Leah lost her battle with this terrible, but preventable, disease.

Clare Collins, Chair of Advocacy Australia and the Asbestos Education Committee said, "When Leah was little, asbestos-containing building and decorator products were popular among young couples when building their own homes, not knowing they could be risking their lives and the lives of their children."

"What most people don't know is that although asbestos was banned in Australia in 2003, asbestos had been used extensively in the manufacture of more than 3000 building and decorator products that could still be lurking in any brick, fibro, weatherboard, clad home, apartment or shed built before 1990.

"Asbestos is not only in fibro sheeting. It could be under floor coverings including carpets, linoleum and vinyl tiles, behind wall and floor tiles, in cement floors, internal and external walls, ceilings and ceiling space (insulation), eaves, roofs, around hot water pipes, fences, home extensions, garages, outdoor toilets, backyard and farm structures, chook sheds and even dog kennels. It was used everywhere!"

"With many of these products remaining in 1-in-3 Aussie homes, if disturbed during renovations, demolition or maintenance, they pose a serious health risk to whoever is present or nearby," she said.

Leah's husband, Phillip Smith said, "Until Leah was diagnosed with this hideous disease, we knew a little bit about asbestos, but we'd never even heard of mesothelioma or that it was caused by asbestos fibres.

"Don't think this can't happen to you. Everyone needs to stop and assess their premises before renovating or demolishing structures to identify the potential dangers that may lie within," he said.

"Importantly, if you do have any breathing issues and there is the slightest chance that you may have been exposed to asbestos, make sure you notify your Doctor, as they don't regularly associate asbestos to illnesses unless told so," Mr Smith said.

"Until someone you know is affected by it, most wouldn't know much about it, either because there's less awareness of mesothelioma than there is for other cancers like breast, skin and prostate cancer.

"With mesothelioma diagnosed between 20 and 40 years after exposure, to help save lives, one of Leah's wishes was to create awareness of asbestos and the diseases associated with it," said Mr Smith.

"With no known safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres, the only way we can prevent asbestos-related diseases including mesothelioma, is to increase awareness of the dangers of asbestos and how to manage it safely," he said.

“Everyone who knew Leah, knows how deeply she loved animals, particularly horses. She was extremely well known in our local horse community, so we’ve created an event for people to learn about asbestos while doing what Leah loved - riding in shorts and a singlet or T-shirt when not competing,” he said.

“When it came to creating an asbestos awareness event in Leah’s honour, we thought what better way to do it than through inviting all horse lovers to have fun with their horses and friends and *Ride in Shorts for Leah*,” said Mr Smith.

“I’m doing this for my beautiful wife to increase life-saving awareness about the dangers of asbestos and to raise vital funds to support the Asbestos Education Committee’s national Asbestos Awareness campaign.”

Phillip hopes to make “*Ride in Shorts for Leah*”, a national annual event and has started a Facebook page and a Facebook event where people can learn how to hold a “*Ride in Shorts for Leah*” event, take photographs and upload them to share their celebration of Leah’s life while raising funds and increasing awareness of the dangers of asbestos in their communities.

“If everyone from across Australia who loves horses, gets involved through their local equestrian or horse-riding group, together we can make a positive impact in creating awareness of asbestos to help save lives while honouring my beautiful wife who loved horses and riding with a passion,” said Mr Smith.

The inaugural “*Ride in Shorts for Leah*” event will run from 7-15 December.

To mark Leah’s 50th Birthday on 11 December, Phillip, Leah’s family and friends will ‘Ride in Shorts for Leah’ in Mackay and are encouraging people to make a tax-deductible donation via: www.mycause.com.au/ride-in-shorts

Clare Collins welcomed the initiative saying, “Because Australia was one of the highest consumers of asbestos-containing materials globally, the importance of continuing to increase awareness and developing practical resources that build community knowledge about asbestos cannot be overstated.

When it comes to asbestos-containing materials, if sealed and in good, stable condition they don’t pose a health risk. However, when disturbed during demolition, renovation or maintenance and microscopic fibres are released, this can lead to a range of life-threatening diseases including malignant mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer, while evidence suggests links to ovarian and laryngeal cancers and increased risk of breast, stomach and colon cancers.

“The main message we want people to hear is what NOT to do with asbestos! Don’t cut it! Don’t drill it! Don’t drop it! Don’t sand it! Don’t saw it! Don’t scrape it! Don’t scrub it! Don’t dismantle it! Don’t tip it! Don’t waterblast it! Don’t demolish it! Don’t dump it! **And whatever you do... DON’T remove it yourself!**”

With many Australians still unaware of asbestos risks and the asbestos-related death toll predicted to rise, the Asbestos Education Committee is urging Australians to visit asbestosawareness.com.au because it’s not worth the risk!

DONATION LINK: www.mycause.com.au/ride-in-shorts

-ENDS-

HASHTAGS: #AsbestosAwareness #RideInShorts #RideInShortsForLeah

INTERVIEW REQUESTS

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LEAH'S STORY – ASBESTOS JOURNALIST NOTES – IMAGES, GRAPHICS & FOOTAGE

DETAILED ASBESTOS JOURNALIST NOTES: <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/media-releases>

IMAGES & GRAPHICS:

- ◆ **Leah Smith Photographs** - <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/Leah-Smith-Photos>
- ◆ **Asbestos-Containing Materials**
 - **IMAGES & GRAPHICS:** <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/AsbestosAwarenessImages>
 - **FOOTAGE:** <https://asbestosawareness.box.com/v/Asbestos-Footage>

LEAH SMITH'S STORY

By Phillip Smith

Mrs Leah Smith - 11 December 1974 – 22 August 2024

Leah Smith was born on 11 December 1974. When Leah was around 3 years old, her mother and father were owner-builders of their home in Gympie, Queensland. At the time, little did they know that most of the building materials they were working with contained asbestos and in the process, these materials were releasing asbestos fibres that could be inhaled.

An inquisitive child, Leah loved to be around her Mum and Dad and regularly pottered around the building site and at the end of each day, she'd help her parents during clean-ups.

This is where we believe Leah was exposed to asbestos fibres.

In 1990 I met Leah. We started courting on 26 September of that year and were then married on 29 April 1995 in Gympie. We have two sons, one born in 1996, the other in 1999. Both were the joy in Leah's life.

It was toward the end of 2023 when our world began falling apart. From August to December, Leah began her struggle with an unknown illness that made it difficult for her to breath amongst other things and she was initially diagnosed it as pneumonia. But even with treatment her condition didn't improve. It got worse.

In November Leah saw a lung specialist who identified some fluid in her lung cavity and he referred her to a specialist surgeon in Townsville to have the fluid drained on her 49th Birthday. 600ml of fluid was drained from Leah's lung and sent for analysis to identify the root cause of her illness. At the same time, they also identified a kidney mass.

On 21 December 2023, we received the devastating call to inform us that Leah had malignant mesothelioma which is caused by inhaling asbestos fibres. It is an aggressive cancer for which there is no cure.

In January 2024, Leah started immunotherapy infusions but the specialists advised it wasn't stopping the growth and her treatments ceased on 23 April 2024.

We'd been told by Leah's oncologist that the "standard prognosis" for this disease was 7-12 months following diagnosis. On 22 August 2024, just 8 months and 1 day after Leah was diagnosed, sadly she lost her battle with this terrible disease and we lost a dearly loved wife, mother.

Everyone who knew Leah, knows how much she loved animals, and particularly horses. Leah was extremely well known in our local horse community and one "quirk" of Leahs that she was well known for by family and friends, was that when she wasn't competing, she loved to ride in shorts and a singlet or T-shirt.

To help prevent others from exposing themselves or loved ones to asbestos fibres that can kill, we've created a national event in honour of Leah that we've called, "*Ride in Shorts for Leah*".