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Teacher's Pet: culture of targeting students for sex tolerated on Sydney's northern beaches

By **KATE MCAULEY**

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Tomorrow, a crowd will gather at Long Reef Beach on Sydney's northern beaches for a memorial walk for Lyn Dawson, the mother of two who went missing under mysterious circumstances in 1982 and was never seen or heard from again.

Long Reef Beach is one that I know well. I loved swimming there in the early 1980s, venturing beyond the break, diving under or soaring over the waves. Between swims, my sister and I would watch the hang-gliders set sail from the headland above or fossick in the many rock pools that dotted the shelf, our tiny fingers poking at anemones or trying in vain to prise stoic limpets from their homes. I don't have many happy memories from my childhood, so these are cherished.

Long Reef is also a short distance from Cromer High School, where Lyn's husband, Chris Dawson, was a schoolteacher. As those familiar with Hedley Thomas's hugely popular podcast *The Teacher's Pet* will know, this is also where Dawson met Joanne Curtis, the 16-year-old student he fell in love with and who would move into his Bayview home just two days after he alleges Lyn left her beloved two small daughters to join a religious group.

Discover the [Teacher's Pet series](#) from *The Australian*.

Like the more than 20 million people who have downloaded the podcast since its launch in May, I have been engrossed. The almost universal disbelief over the facts surrounding the case, however, is not a position I share. No, I am not surprised. Nor

am I shocked. Instead, I oscillate between fist-clenching anger and the sadness of recognition. The names, places and voices are all too familiar — as are the experiences.

The suburb of Cromer is where I grew up in the 70s and 80s. My father liked to drink at the Time and Tide hotel, a nearby pub where Chris Dawson and other teachers bought alcohol for their underaged students. I attended Beacon Hill High School, where Dawson was quietly transferred after his relationship with Curtis was no longer an open secret. It is also one of the three institutions at the centre of a new police investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct — and where I was bullied, beaten up and targeted for sex by a teacher.

When I started at Beacon Hill in 1987, aged 11, a permissive culture of teacher-student relationships was still flourishing. This was after Dawson's tenure had ended (he and Curtis had already moved to Queensland with his and Lyn's two young daughters), but he was not the only teacher on the northern peninsula who used their position of power to lure adolescents into bed (or on to gym mats during a free period).

In hindsight, I was an obvious target for my teacher who, like Dawson, was living with a girl he had developed a relationship with while she was a student at our school and had installed in his house on her graduation.

I was far from popular. A quirk of the school zoning system meant I'd had to leave my Cromer Primary pals behind and attend a school where I knew very few people. I tried to make friends, but the other students could smell my desperation and I was bullied and often physically attacked.

Things were worse at home, where I was at the mercy of an abusive and alcoholic father.

Small acts of kindness, the tried and true method of many a predator, should have been all it took for my teacher to reel me in.

He began by trying to talk to me about my problems, offering to drive me home and

help me with my homework. He asked me to stay after class and gave me special tasks to do. He would leave his hands on my arm or thigh a second too long.

On my 14th birthday, he bought me a cake and stood behind me, rubbing my shoulders, while my classmates were forced to sing and I held back tears as I blew out the candles.

I was humiliated and mortified. I didn't want or need the extra attention. I'd already experienced abhorrent abuse at the hands of men elsewhere. I also didn't want to give my fellow students more reasons to taunt me.

Eventually, after months of me hiding or not responding to his advances, he stopped pursuing me. There were plenty of other girls to choose from. For him, this was nothing but a numbers game.

I did try to get help — I told my mother. Her advice was to “just ignore him”, which was an impossibility as I had classes with him several times a week. I did not complain to the school, as my teacher's behaviour was well-known to students and staff, and so it seemed to me that the institution was complicit.

A friend recently told me that another teacher from our school had warned her to stay away from the teacher who had targeted me because she was “his type”. Like me and the former student he was living with, she was tall, blonde and athletic.

Yes, a teacher knew. More than one did. David Clark, my kindly geography teacher, seemed to say as much in a podcast episode: “I've worked in six different high schools and in five of them there were relationships between students and teachers.”

Clark was one of the good ones, but hearing him say this filled me with rage. We were not worth protecting. We were not worth defending. Teachers could do what they liked to us. These were the lessons we were taught at Beacon Hill.

The teacher I have described was not the only one known to prey on students. There were other men and a woman — Lee Dunbar — who were just as notorious. I am able

to name Dunbar because in 1997 she was found guilty of committing indecent acts with one of her female students who was under 14 at the time. Beacon Hill was also known as the dumping ground for faculty members with dubious records from other schools. "Mr Pedo" turned up in 1992. I can't remember his real name but I do remember his hands. "Just stay away" was our mantra.

I don't know what it was that made the northern beaches such a hotspot for this type of malevolence. I've spoken to friends from all over the country and although there is always the odd incident of teacher-pupil relations, there is yet to be anything reported that is as endemic as it was where I grew up.

Many have purported that Dawson was able to behave as he did because of his good looks and minor celebrity status on the sports field, but that doesn't ring true for the teachers at my school. I think the answer is far more prosaic: their behaviour was permitted.

Thankfully, Beacon Hill High no longer exists — it was closed permanently in 2002, the land rezoned and the buildings torn down to make way for the homes that now fill the space it left behind. If only it were that easy to repair the damage done to us.

In 1992, I escaped the predators at school by graduating. I escaped my father by kicking him out of our house a year later. And I escaped the northern beaches by leaving the country a year after that. I remember making two promises to myself at the time. The first was that I would never live there again. The second was that I would not let this upbringing define me.

Since leaving high school 26 years ago, I have lived and travelled all over the world, with more than my fair share of scrapes along the way: I survived a plane crash; I've been caught in crossfire between rival gangs in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea; I've had an AK-47 rifle pressed against my forehead in Cameroon; and I've faced off with neo-Nazis in Bulgaria.

But never have I felt as unsafe as I did every day growing up on Sydney's northern beaches. This is not hyperbole. Living in a state of constant hyper-awareness as a

result of persistent threat, particularly when you're a child and have no power to self-determine, is insidious and pervasive and far worse than any danger I've knowingly put myself in. For the most part, however, I've succeeded.

My life continues to be an amazing ride, but this is despite my upbringing, not as a result of it. I still have issues when it comes to self-worth that continue to affect my relationships as well as my career, but I'm dealing with these through therapy.

I know that what happened to me doesn't compare with Lyn Dawson's likely fate or that of my fellow students who suffered far worse than me at the hands of predatory teachers, but this environment affected us all.

I'm glad the police are finally taking action in both the case against Chris Dawson and the teachers who abused us, but there are no winners here. All we can hope for now is justice and the acknowledgment of what has been covered up for far too long.

I'm based in New York now, so can't be at Long Reef on Sunday, but I will go on my own walk of remembrance for Lyn, for her family, for us all.

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