



STATE CORONER'S COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Inquest:	Inquest into the disappearance and suspected death of Zac Eran BARNES
Hearing dates:	17, 18 ,19 July 2023, 15 July 2025
Date of findings:	15 July 2025
Place of findings:	NSW State Coroner's Court, Lidcombe
Findings of:	Deputy State Coroner Carmel Forbes
File number:	2019/101864
Catchwords	CORONIAL – missing person – suspicious circumstances – finding of death – referral to NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Team
Representation:	Mr T Hammond, Counsel Assisting, instructed by Mr P Armstrong, Ms P Smith and Ms G Liu, Legal, NSW Crown Solicitor's Office

	<p>Ms J Davidson, representing the Acting Commissioner of Police and the New South Wales Police Force, instructed by Mr S Davis, NSW Office of the General Counsel</p>
<p>Findings:</p>	<p>Zac Eran Barnes died on or shortly after 13 November 2016. The available evidence does not enable me to make findings as to the place, manner or cause of his death.</p>
<p>Recommendation</p>	<p>To the New South Wales Commissioner of Police:</p> <p>I recommend that the death of Zac Barnes be referred to the NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Team.</p>
<p>Non publication orders</p>	<p>Non Publication Orders were made on 4 November 2022, 17 July 2023 and 15 July 2025 and are available from the court file.</p>

Introduction

1. This is an inquest into the disappearance and suspected death of Zac Barnes.
2. In cases involving missing persons it is sometimes suspected that the person is deceased. When the police suspect a missing person may have died, that suspected death becomes reportable to a Coroner. Once such a report has been made, the coroner then has an obligation to conduct an investigation in order to answer a number of questions. The primary question which a Coroner seeks to answer is whether the person is in fact deceased. If the coroner reaches that conclusion, then the coroner must also seek to answer questions about where and when the person died and what was the cause and manner of their death. The manner of a person's death means the circumstances surrounding their death and the events leading up to it.
3. Zac's last reported sighting was shortly before 8pm on Sunday 13 November 2016 in Thornton, near East Maitland. Zac was 18 years of age. Zac had not been seen by his family since the previous Friday morning, and he was normally not one to remain out of contact from his family for an extended period of time. All the usual signs of life checks reveal that there has been no activity consistent with Zac still being alive since that date. Unfortunately, all the evidence points to Zac passing away on or sometime shortly after 13 November 2016.
4. The first part of this inquest took place in 2023. Since that time there has been a series of further investigations. In total 10 volumes of evidence have been tendered in this inquest.

Zac Barnes

5. Zac Eran Barnes was born in Gosford on 22 May 1998 to his parents Karen and Ben Barnes. Zac was the third of four boys born of this union. The family lived in Pelaw Main, a suburb of Kurri Kurri. Zac's parents separated and divorced when Zac was very young and in around 2007 Karen met and fell in love with Michael Gudelj. Michael

essentially became the boys' father. Michael and Karen then had two daughters, Zac's younger sisters whom he adored.

6. Zac had very little to do with his natural father and did not see him regularly. Zac and his brothers had a very positive relationship with Michael Gudelj and they respected him a great deal. As Michael puts it, Zac was his right arm, wherever Michael went, Zac went. The family moved to Metford, near East Maitland, and that was Zac's family home until he disappeared.
7. His older brothers used to look out for Zac, and they had a good relationship. He had a close relationship with his mum, Karen, and they shared a lot together. Karen was a fairly strict mum and cracked the whip when she needed to but the relationship with her son was a good one.
8. At school Zac was an exceptional mathematician, a talented footballer, playing for West Newcastle, and very popular amongst his peers. He left school in year 11 and was then employed as a 2nd year apprentice brick layer and had been completing related studies at Tighes Hill TAFE.
9. Zac was well known as being a very gregarious person. He was very well liked, had lots of friends and he lived life to the full. He was seen as an individual, boisterous but caring.
10. He liked to party, attending music festivals and gigs, pubs, and clubs. He took recreational drugs and drank alcohol.
11. Whilst that side of Zac's social life will play an important role in exploring what happened to Zac in the weeks, days and hours leading up to his disappearance, it does not define Zac. Zac was a loving son, brother, and friend. He was larger than life. His absence leaves a huge gap in the lives of those who loved him.

Weeks leading up to 13 November 2016

12. On Saturday 29 October 2016, Zac was supposed to go to Customs House Hotel in Newcastle to celebrate his brother Cody's 21st birthday. Zac had also arranged to go on a pub crawl before meeting his brother. Unfortunately, he never made it to the venue for Cody's birthday. Zac later told his brother he had passed out somewhere due to excessive alcohol. This was confirmed by others who saw Zac earlier in the day.
13. On Saturday 5 November 2016, there was a concert called This That, being held at Camp Shortland on Newcastle's Foreshore. Zac had a ticket and was looking forward to attending. He enjoyed going to such gigs. During the week prior to the concert, there is evidence that Zac purchased 50 ecstasy tablets for \$500.
14. The evidence is that Zac obtained the ecstasy for both his own consumption and sale at an upcoming music event. Zac was generous with tablets he bought, and it was thought he often did not try to make money from them, but rather supplied friends, often for free so he could have a good time with them.
15. On this occasion, Zac purchased the tablets on credit, something he had done before. It was not unusual for Zac to get drugs "on tick", that is, on credit.
16. On 5 November 2016, Zac attended the concert. One of his friends thought Zac was already drug affected before attending the concert due to using "ice" the night before. Zac had disclosed to his work friend that he used ice and thought Zac's use had increased in the weeks leading to his disappearance due to his mannerisms and things Zac would say.
17. Zac was seen at the concert by numerous friends and was described as "off his head".
18. On Thursday 10 November 2016, Zac told his mum about money he owed and said that he was concerned that he couldn't repay the debt. He asked his mother for \$1,200 to

pay off the debt and in return it was agreed that Zac would transfer the balance of his building society account to his stepfather.

19. Records from the Greater Building Society Bank indicate that an amount of \$477 was transferred into Michael Gudelj's account on the same day (10 November 2016). Mr Gudelj then gave the \$1,200 to Zac on the undertaking that he would use the money to repay the debt.
20. Zac appears to have intended to repay the debt. He contacted his friend Matthew Hindwood and asked him to accompany him the next day for the purpose of repaying the money.
21. On Friday 11 November 2016, Zac woke late and was driven by his mum to his work site in Chisholm. At lunchtime Zac went to the Regal Hunter Hotel with his work colleagues, and it is understood that he consumed at least three or four schooners of beer without eating anything substantial before returning to work.
22. Once back at work Zac was noted to be somewhat intoxicated and became involved in an altercation with another worker which required the intervention of work colleagues.
23. A colleague drove Zac from the job site towards his home but on the way, Zac asked to be taken to an address in East Maitland where his friend Matt Hindwood lived with his partner Courtney Jones. He remained at this address over the weekend.

Saturday 12 November 2016

24. There was a gathering of Ms Jones' female friends on the Saturday evening. One of the friends described Zac as affected by drugs and alcohol and she thought Zac and Mr Hindwood left the party in a car for about 25 minutes.

Sunday 13 November 2016

25. Mr Hindwood and Ms Jones say that during the Sunday afternoon, they all drove from their house to the train station at Victoria Street, East Maitland. CCTV footage obtained by police shows Zac entering the station at around 3.45pm in the company of Mr Hindwood and Ms Jones. The footage shows Zac drinking from a large brown bottle believed to be a large bottle of VB beer.
26. During this evening, Cody Barnes was being driven back to work in Sydney by his mother, Karen. During the trip she asked Cody if he had had any contact from his brother to which Cody replied that he had not seen or heard from Zac over the weekend. Both Cody and his mother thought that was unusual. When told about the drug debt and the loan of \$1200 Zac had from his parents, Cody became concerned and decided to create a Facebook message asking if anyone knew of Zac's whereabouts. Cody also tried unsuccessfully to contact his brother.
27. Mr Hindwood and Ms Jones are the last two people to have seen Zac before he disappeared. It is not in dispute that he was at their house at 7.20pm, he was seen there by a neighbour at that time. Mr Hindwood and Ms Jones say that at about this time Ms Jones offered to drive Zac to get cigarettes. Ms Jones says that she drove along Haussman Drive, Thornton, and that Zac asked to be let out of the car. Ms Jones stated that she stopped the car somewhere along Haussman Drive and Zac got out. This was the last reported sighting of Zac.
28. Zac was not heard from again that night or since. There is other evidence from other witnesses about events during this period. As this is an ongoing investigation it is not appropriate for me to comment on that evidence.

Searches for Zac

29. Mr and Mrs Gudelj reported Zac missing on Monday 14 November 2016. The available evidence is that he was last seen at about 8:30pm on 13 November 2016 when he ran

from a car in which he had been travelling. Senior Constable Morrissey took the report and commenced an Event on the COPS system. Strike Force Glendowda was established in relation to the investigation into Zac's disappearance.

30. On Monday afternoon, Zac's family organised a search of the Haussman Drive, Thornton area based on what they had been told as to where he ran from the car.
31. Senior Constable Morrissey took further information from Mr Gudelj on Tuesday 15 November 2016 following a Facebook appeal. This led to Sergeant Toomer creating a working document dedicated to the investigation that was updated as information became available. Following on from the information received from Zac's family, police spoke to the person who last saw Zac and made a request for CCTV from Thornton Railway Station. There was a handover to the afternoon shift at Maitland police station and again to the following shift resulting in searches being carried out.
32. Investigators used local media releases and social media in the first instance to try to find Zac. On 16 November 2016, there was a canvass near the area where Zac went missing on Haussman Drive and a patrol of the bushland areas was conducted by uniformed officers. Some of the bush area was inaccessible by vehicle.
33. On the evening of 16 November 2016, Sergeant Toomer ascertained the alleged exact location of where Zac ran from the car. This was the corner of Haussman Drive and Tripp Close.
34. Following a meeting of senior officers, further searches took place on foot on Thursday 17 November 2016. Constables were also deployed to conduct a canvass of the local area. A search was done in bushland on the southwestern side of the railway tracks.
35. On Friday 18 November 2016, Sergeant Toomer canvassed local licenced premises. He also requested CCTV from Thornton, Metford, Victoria Street and East Maitland stations.

36. On the same day, police received confirmation that an employee of Maitland Railway Station completed a search of available CCTV from Thornton, Metford, Victoria Street East Maitland railway stations to identify if Zac had boarded a train.
37. Zac's family and friends took part in another search on 19 November 2023. Over the course of the next few days, police conducted several enquiries as further information became available. Local Mental Health Units were checked, social media accounts held by Zac were checked.
38. On Monday 21 November 2016, eight days after he went missing, police conducted an operation involving Police Rescue, General Duties, Pol Air, the Rural Fire Service and State Emergency Service. Inspector Glenn Blain oversaw the land search with Pol Air assisting. The air and land search involved areas including bushland between Thornton and Metford, the railway corridor between the local station and the swamp land area between Thornton and Woodberry. A disused quarry very near the place Zac was last said to be seen was also searched.
39. Investigators received a high volume of reports directly or through social media that required investigation. They also spoke to Zac's family and friends to ascertain Zac's possible movements after he was last seen.
40. Police checked for possible activity on Zac's bank account, mobile phone, social media pages, Birth Deaths and Marriages Registries, government agencies such as Centrelink and Medicare, interstate police forces. None of these signs of life checks proved positive.
41. On 30 January 2017, a police dog handler attended Metford to conduct searches of areas already searched soon after Zac went missing. The dog handler also returned between 27 and 30 April 2017 and searched extensive areas. No indications were made by the dog on this occasion. Further areas were searched with the assistance of the cadaver dog handler on 26 and 28 June 2017. No indications were made, and no relevant evidence was located on these dates.

42. In the bushland between the area Zac was last seen and where he lived, are several dams within an old quarry works not secured by fencing at the time of Zac's disappearance. This is an area used at the time as a thoroughfare for people walking between Thornton and Metford. Between 28 March 2017 and 30 March 2017, police divers conducted searches of several dams within that area.
43. Zac's family conducted their own searches of the areas near where Zac was last seen. During these searches, items of clothing were found and tested by police for DNA, but no connection was made to Zac.
44. On 10 December 2020, with the assistance of the Operation Support Group, police conducted a search of railway tracks in the Paterson area following a tip-off. Some bones were found but these were ruled out as being animal bones. A further search of this area with the use of a cadaver dog was conducted on 21 December 2020. Nothing relevant to the investigation was found.

Review of the Missing Person Investigation of Zac Barnes

45. One of the issues outlined for exploration in the inquest was the adequacy of the initial police investigation after Zac's disappearance and whether it complied with the New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) protocols that existed at the time.
46. The manager of the Missing Persons Registry (Registry), Detective Chief Inspector Glen Browne, provided information on the Registry and the changes that have taken place over the last nine years, and he conducted a review of the police investigation into Zac's disappearance. He is experienced officer with 34 years of policing in the NSWPF including within various detectives' offices, the Homicide Squad, Professional Standards Command and most recently his appointment as manager of the Registry.
47. Part of the process in establishing the Missing Persons Registry (which replaced its predecessor the Missing Persons Unit) was creating a set of Standard Operating

Procedures (SOPS) to replace and improve previous procedures to assist officers during investigations into missing persons by setting out roles and responsibilities, timeframes for actions and oversight of all missing persons investigations by the Registry.

48. In November 2016, unfortunately, the NSWPF was not as well equipped and resourced in this area as the new Registry. The creation of the Registry, rewriting and evolution of the missing persons SOPS have improved police methodology over the years which has resulted in better outcomes for missing persons cases.
49. The Risk Assessment Model in place since 2023 means that all officers in NSW are now given training about missing persons and the importance of immediately conducting a risk assessment and recording that on the Computerised Operational Policing System. The process requires consideration of “Red Flag” questions, particular vulnerabilities and situational/contextual questions.
50. Now, each Police Area Command or Police District has a dedicated Missing Persons Coordinator. That officer is responsible for monitoring all missing persons cases within their Police Area Command or Police District, provide advice and guidance to other officers, liaise with the Registry, conduct case reviews for all long-term missing persons and assist in establishing local procedures with relevant stakeholders.
51. In recent years, the use of triangulation of mobile phones, geo-targeted SMS messages and live CAD which allows officers to access virtual real-time information from a missing person’s device to see if it is being used to communicate.
52. The NSWPF missing persons database has been in operation for 25 years, but the establishment of the Registry has led to improvements in the usability of the database and updated it. There is also liaison with the National Missing Persons Victim Services database and the National Missing Persons Database run by the Federal Police.
53. Detective Chief Inspector Browne reviewed Zac’s investigation and whether it complied with the protocols in place at the time of his disappearance. The 2016 SOPS did *"set out the minimum standards for NSWPF officers in their day-to-day management of*

missing person matters" and provided police with guidance regarding when and how to take a missing person report and the roles and responsibilities of police who might engage in a missing person investigation. Detective Chief Inspector Browne stated that there are four critical matters that require immediate consideration with all missing persons reports:

- a. Immediate and ongoing risk assessment.
- b. Timely engagement of a land search coordinator when a search is relevant.
- c. Canvassing, including CCTV canvassing; and
- d. Appropriate handover of investigation to ensure it progresses in accordance with relevant SOPs.

54. The SOPs that existed in 2016 required a risk assessment to be conducted and recorded. A risk assessment form was provided as a guide. There is no record of that being done either at the time Zac was reported missing or as the investigation progressed. Detective Walker said in evidence that police conducted ongoing informal risk assessments during the week following Zac's reported disappearance. The difficulties with informal risk assessments are that they do not record what criteria were used to make the assessment. Further, they are not recorded and cannot be handed over to, or referred to by, officers assisting in the investigation. Informal risk assessments do not provide for a categorisation (e.g. high, medium or low risk) so do not assist in determining the appropriate resources to be allocated.

55. It is unfortunate, the prescribed risk assessments were not completed when they should have been. Recent updates to the COPS system provides for a new risk assessment each time a narrative is entered to the event. This will now prevent a similar situation occurring again in the future.

56. Detective Chief Inspector Browne was of the opinion that a decision should have been made to conduct a search for Zac immediately, given the circumstances of his disappearance, and officers should have engaged an accredited search coordinator as soon as possible. However, while this did not occur it is noted, as set out in para 31-37 above, there was canvassing of the neighbourhood near Hausmann Drive and informal

police searches in the area in the period from 16 November to 21 November 2016 when the formal search took place.

57. The evidence suggests that there was not strict compliance with the Missing Persons SOPs in force at the time of Zac's disappearance and better decisions could have been made. This probably hampered the investigation in the very early stages when it was most critical to obtain timely evidence. However, it is important to bear in mind that these circumstances are now being looked at with the benefit of hindsight and it is easier to view things more critically now, than it is as the events unfold in real time. The newer systems in place will ensure the prescribed steps are now taken in a timely manner.

58. Given the constant evolution of the NSWPF's SOPs dealing with Missing Persons cases, the better training and systems and the establishment of the Missing Persons Registry, I do not propose to make any recommendations in this area.

What conclusions can be reached regarding the disappearance of Zac

59. The evidence establishes that Zac was a well-loved, intelligent young man, who was raised by a strong independent mother and supportive and loving stepfather. Zac got on well with his siblings and was very popular amongst his peers.

60. They have all had no contact from Zac since 13 November 2016.

61. Zac has not used his bank accounts since that night.

62. Facebook subscriber records indicate that the last time Zac logged in was 11 November 2016 and Snapchat on 13 November 2016. The available evidence shows Zac was a regular user of Facebook and Snapchat, often relying on them as his main means of communication.

63. Zac was only 18 years of age when he went missing and did not have any reason, the means, or connections to disappear.
64. He has had no dealings with Police in NSW or any other state of Australia since that day.
65. Checks conducted with Centrelink reveal that no records are held in relation to Zac.
66. Checks conducted with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection reveals that there are no records of movements by Zac in or out of Australia.
67. Checks conducted with financial institutions reveal Zac has not operated an account since 10 November 2016.
68. Checks conducted with Medicare and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme indicates that he has not made any claims.
69. Checks with the New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages produce no record in relation to Zac since 13 November 2016.
70. Checks conducted with the records held by New South Wales Missing Persons Unit confirm that no match has been made with any identified deceased person or remains.
71. Since 13 November 2016 all relevant activity that you would expect from Zac has ceased.
72. There is evidence supporting the proposition that Zac was quite deeply involved in the purchase and supply of recreational drugs and that he had accrued drug debts. The available evidence is that his drug involvement was escalating in the weeks up to his disappearance. As I have previously stated, this is an ongoing investigation, and it is not appropriate for me to comment on that evidence.

73. I am satisfied on the balance of probabilities that Zac is deceased. I am also satisfied on the balance of probabilities that he died in suspicious circumstances.
74. The available evidence only allows me to make findings in relation to his identity and date of death. At this point of the investigation, I am unable to make findings in relation to the place, cause or manner of his death. I therefore recommend that his death be referred to the NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Team for ongoing investigation in accordance with the protocols and procedures of that Team.
75. Zac's disappearance and apparent death is a tragedy, and his family has clearly been deeply affected by his disappearance from their lives and the unanswered questions surrounding his disappearance. I acknowledge the painful and persistent uncertainty felt by them in not knowing what happened to Zac and the anguish around not being able to give Zac a proper funeral, burial and farewell.
76. I offer my heartfelt condolences and sympathy to Zac's family and thank them for participating in this inquest when it has been so difficult and sad for them. I hope that the inquest has assisted by bringing them some measure of closure, and I hope that in the future the necessary evidence can be uncovered to provide more information about what happened to Zac.
77. I acknowledge and thank the Officers in Charge of the NSWPF investigation, who conducted a thorough investigation and prepared a lengthy coronial brief of evidence and particularly acknowledge the helpful assistance of Detective Sergeant Peter Davis, Plain Clothes Senior Constable Tegan Denniss, Detective Senior Constable Regan Powell and Senior Intelligence Analyst Kellyn Crump for their assistance with the coronial investigation.
78. Finally, I thank my counsel assisting, Mr Tim Hammond and his instructing solicitors for the work they put into assisting me in this inquest.

Findings pursuant to s 81 (1) *Coroners Act 2009*

The findings I make under section 81(1) of the Act are:

Identity

The person who died was Zac Eran Barnes

Date of death

Zac died on or shortly after 13 November 2016

Place of death

The available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the place of Zac's death

Cause of death

The available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the cause of Zac's death

Manner of Death

The available evidence does not allow for any finding to be made as to the manner of Zac's death

Recommendation

To the New South Wales Commissioner of Police:

I recommend that the death of Zac Eran Barnes be referred to the NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Team, State Crime Command.

Magistrate Carmel Forbes

Deputy State Coroner

15 July 2025