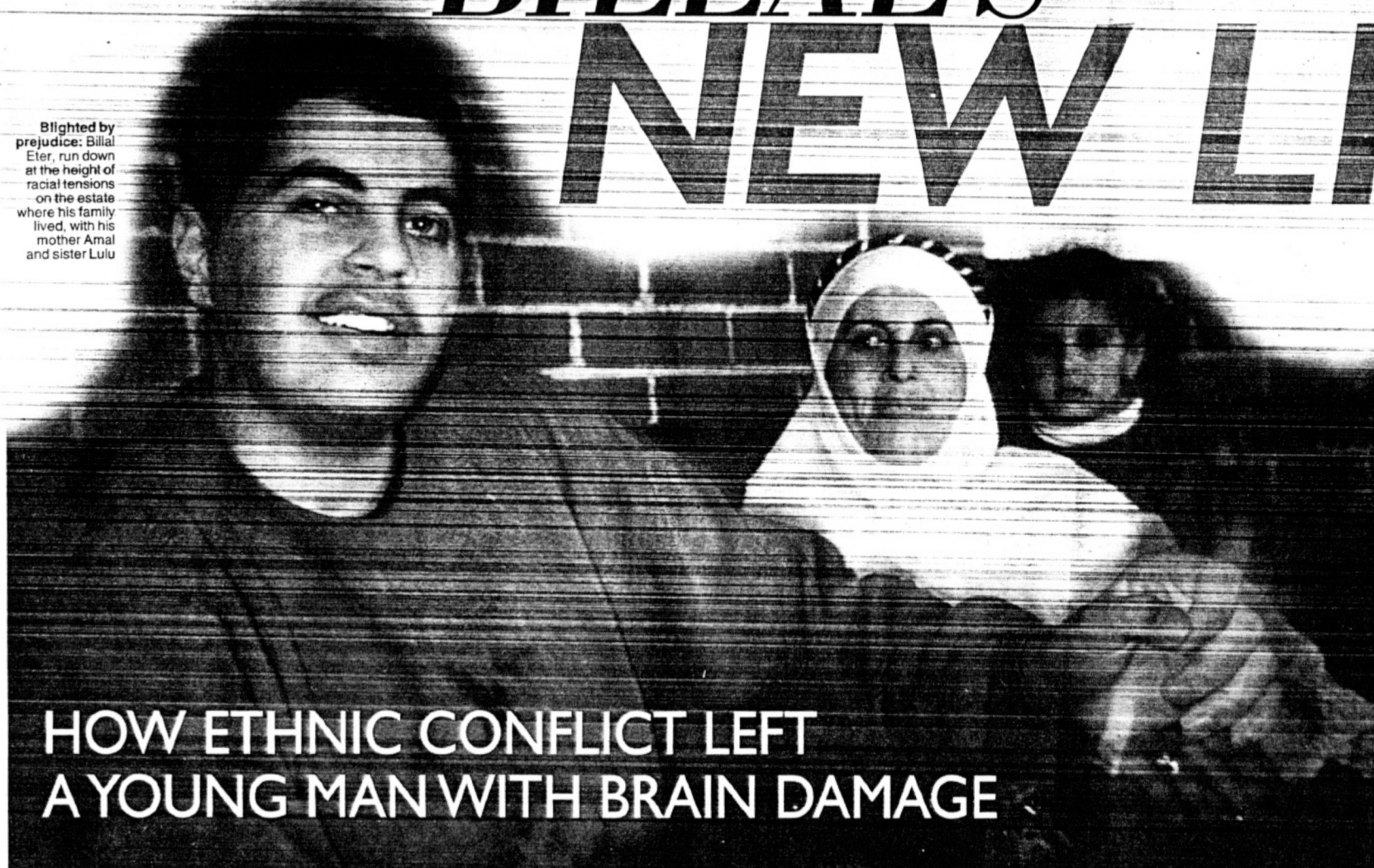


BILLAL'S NEW LIFE

Blighted by prejudice: Billal Eter, run down at the height of racial tensions on the estate where his family lived, with his mother Amal and sister Lulu



HOW ETHNIC CONFLICT LEFT A YOUNG MAN WITH BRAIN DAMAGE

Billal Eter would never be the same after he was run down by another teenager. Deborah Hope looks at how a film crew shooting a documentary about him became part of the healing process

IN 1994, Billal Eter was a shy 16-year-old with just a year of school to complete and hopes of finding a career working with animals. His dreams came to a sudden stop on Good Friday the same year when he was run down by a car as he crossed the street outside his house and suffered severe permanent brain damage.

Billal's story might sound familiar. After all, most cases of brain injury in Australia involve some tragic combination of young men and motor vehicles. The difference in Billal's case is that the incident was the result of racial tension between Lebanese-Australian and Anglo-Australian teenagers that had flared into violence the night before. Tensions that built up in the schoolyard and between neighbours, beginning with dirty looks and harsh words, moving on to stone throwing, fists and iron bars, a fight in the street and culminating with Billal lying in a coma in hospital with massive head injuries.

These events took place in Macquarie Fields, a neglected, graffiti-splattered public housing estate on Sydney's south-west fringe. On a recent visit there, teenagers were spilling out of Billal's old school, James Meehan High, and fanning out into streets with names like Mela-leuca, Blackwood and Eucalyptus.

Girls in hijab, Koreans and Pacific Islanders alongside their Anglo peers, laughed and chattered. Hip-hop music blared from the open windows of a house. A boy with curly brown hair played chicken recklessly with an approaching car as he crossed the road.

Any one of these carefree kids could have been Billal two years ago. But Billal will not be returning to school and will require support for the rest of his life.

Noted documentary film-maker Tom

Zubrycki was in Macquarie Fields early in 1994, talking to teenagers who were about to leave school. He planned to follow their lives on film to compare their dreams with the reality they found a year on. Billal was one of the boys he met during this research. Just after the Easter weekend, Zubrycki received a phone call from local youth worker Linda Abraham to tell him Billal was in hospital fighting for his life.

Abandoning his original project, Zubrycki took his film crew to Billal's bedside. During 15 months he recorded Billal's progress through several rounds of brain surgery and a year in a rehabilitation hospital, during which it became increasingly obvious Billal would never be the same. The devastating effect of the trauma on his family and the film crew's involvement in that also became an important part of the narrative.

The film's interpreter, Alissa Gazal, became an important support for the family: writing letters, filling out forms and acting as an advocate with the Housing Department when the family, fearing further violence, was desperate to move to another suburb. As the story unfolds, Gazal is increasingly present on-screen.

The result is *Billal*, a riveting 86-minute documentary to be released in Sydney and Melbourne next week, and to be screened on ABC television later this year. It has been nominated for the APT's best documentary award.

The film includes confronting images of brain surgery and two extraordinary interviews with Linc Beswick, the Anglo-Australian teenager who drove the car that hit Billal, in which he says he acted out of fear and was "stoned" at the time. A remorseful Beswick was sentenced to two years' jail for culpable driving, to serve a minimum of nine months.

Sipping coffee lattes in cosmopolitan

inner Sydney, strolling through Chinatown, munching a quick Vietnamese lunch or shopping for Japanese groceries, it is easy to forget there is a large chunk of Australia that has yet to come to terms with multicultural society. It is too late for Billal, but Macquarie Fields is attempting to act on the lessons it has learned from the events of Easter 1994.

"A lot of people couldn't believe it happened next-door," says Abraham, a local resident. "It knocked the hell out of me. I felt something had to be done in the area." When I phoned Abraham at her home one night recently, she was hard at work hand-painting posters promoting racial harmony. She pins them up on noticeboards at the local Glenquarie shopping mall, where most kids hang out, and at the youth centre in the hope that the message "one world, one people" will eventually sink in.

Abraham's poster campaign is part of what she describes as a "huge anti-racism project" involving local schools and youth centres. "Racial tension is still there, but it's not the same. It used to be the Pacific Islanders and the Europeans sticking together against the Anglos. There's been only one incident since Billal [was run down]," she says.

"It's not as aggressive and it doesn't involve physical violence. The kids have broken through the barrier, there's more tolerance."

A LOT of people in the area think it's unjust that Linc is still walking around the area now he's out of jail," says Abrahams. "Others said, 'Bloody well serves the wogs right.' There are mixed emotions. But the kids realise they have to live together."

Annette Rogers, a support worker at the desperately under-resourced local family support centre, is also involved in the campaign, offering a range of projects that encourage more social cohesion, tolerance and pride in the suburb. They include a mural representing Macquarie Fields's diverse population, plans for a community fun day and workshops on conflict resolution. A feasibility study is under way for a group of women who want to set up a multicultural catering co-operative.

According to Rogers, Macquarie Fields is characterised by a teenage population

with chronically low self-esteem. "Living in a housing project is still a stigma. They get called 'houso' at school," she says.

"All they get is negatives. The reason kids get into trouble is there is nothing to do. We need to change attitudes, to look at what they can offer us rather than just to say they are a menace."

"The Lebanese were the first new group to come into the community for some time. Then the Pacific Islanders came in. They came in bigger numbers and were more noticeable. There was some trouble as the new groups settled in. The Gulf War meant emotions were raw around the time [that Billal was run down]. A lot of people were shocked that someone would run over a person. It woke people up."

The Eters were not new arrivals. Abdul Eter migrated to Australia from Lebanon 23 years ago, returning two years later to marry his 17-year-old cousin, Amal. Back in Australia they had five sons and a daughter. They are Australian citizens.

Abdul worked in factories and on the railways, and for some years ran a Lebanese restaurant. He has been unemployed for several years.

The family moved from Lakemba to Macquarie Fields in 1990. A Lebanese family living next-door became firm friends, but the Muslim Eters found their Anglo neighbours inhospitable and socialised mainly within the Lebanese community.

Hostility became a regular part of the Eter daily diet. One night a mob of drinkers from the local pub arrived at their house to shout abuse. At other times stones and insults were thrown.

Well-intentioned planners built the estate at Macquarie Fields along lines intended to encourage a sense of community. Backyards faced the street, with house fronts verging on a communal footpath. After dark, however, these paths became feared zones, occupied by large groups of kids with nowhere better to go.

The night before Billal was run down, a group of Anglo youths from a house opposite gathered on the path outside the Eters, yelling insults of the "f...ing dirty Lebs go home" variety and urging a fight. Billal's 18-year-old brother Ahmed was knocked unconscious by a blow from a metal bar. Incensed by the assault on

Ahmed, Lebanese boys retaliated, attacking the Anglos' house, smashing windows and fibro panelling.

A brawl between the two groups began and continued until the police were able to bring it under control.

Other neighbours were outside their homes, screaming at those in the fracas. The next day Billal was run down by Beswick as he crossed the road outside his house.

A witness, Billal's friend Sawaz El-Bahar, tells Zubrycki: "The car was approximately 20m away from Bill. As Linc Beswick had seen him crossing the road, he gave the car some speed. Bill was still crossing. He froze and stuck his hands out, and he got hit by the car. And as the car kept going he was thrown on to the windscreens, on to the roof, on to the

"I was stoned. I smoke pot. I just froze. I ran him over. Then I went straight down to the police station."

back boot and he landed... in the middle of the road."

Billal's mother Amal was outside the house, serving coffee to her husband and a friend. The next moment she heard a thud and saw Billal flying through the air. "I only knew it was him from the colour of his pants," says Amal. "I ran to him... when he fell to the ground he stopped breathing. I thought my son had died. I wanted to die myself."

In his defence, Beswick tells Zubrycki he visited the street, Mahogany Place, that day because he was concerned about a friend, Jimmy, who lived next-door to the Eters, and that he had not been involved in the fight of the previous night. He says: "As I pulled up at Jimmy's house, they all came out the backyard... They had their hands behind their backs. They could have been carrying anything

... a gun, a baseball bat, anything. I just thought the worst... so I took off. When I drove on the other side of the road he came out in front of me. I was stoned. I smoke pot. I just froze. I ran him over. Then I went straight down to the police station."

Amal describes the effect on her family. She cannot sleep, feels faint when she hears English spoken and falls to the ground when she hears loud noises, her nerves "shot to pieces". Abdul stays in his room for a week, smoking and drinking black coffee. In the weeks that follow he becomes morose and cries a lot. Amal will not allow Omar to return to school out of fear of further attacks.

They do not trust the police, who suggest to Abdul that Beswick may have just been passing by, and believe they regard Lebanese people as trouble-makers. They feel let down by the law when Beswick is charged with negligent driving and let out on bail. When sentence is passed, Abdul comments off-camera: "Nine months? Is that all my son's life is worth?"

Doctors at the hospitals where Billal undergoes surgery and rehabilitation seem unable to communicate to the Eters that Billal's uninhibited behaviour and aggression are permanent features of his new personality. In the end it is Gazal who breaks the news that the damage is lifelong.

According to Abraham, the family's move out of Macquarie Fields three months after Billal was run down was a good decision. "It was so big at the time. People were talking about guns and machetes. I feared something silly might happen."

Appropriately, the release of *Billal* follows National Brain Injury Week late last month. About 25,000 Australians sustain brain injuries each year. About 10 per cent of these people will have a permanent disability, with one-third severely disabled. As many as 70 per cent of these injuries occur in motor vehicle accidents and a majority involve young men.

NSW Brain Injury Association executive director Freda Hilson says brain injured people are more visible in Australia as medical technology ensures accident victims survive in larger numbers. "The most significant issue is that once people leave the hospital and rehabilitation system, usually about two years post-injury, there is almost nothing for them in NSW in support service terms," says Hilson. "Medical technology saves lives, but the community is not prepared for this or able to cope."

Hilson is lobbying for changes to laws in NSW that at present mean people at fault in motor vehicle accidents are not eligible for benefits from third party insurance.

According to Hilson, Zubrycki's film is unique because it explores brain injury from such an early stage — while Billal is still in a coma in intensive care.

She says: "Families pray the injured person will live, but that person dies and the survivor is a new person. Families struggle to cope as full-time carers. Sometimes marriages can't survive. It's awful for the people themselves as well because, although they have cognitive problems, they can recall how they were before." Frustration, anger and exacerbated behavioural problems can be the result.

In one interview, Abdul says he feels he has lost his son. "It is true that he is still alive, but I would say that he is here but not here. The dream I had for him is gone. I can't dream for him anymore."

As he leaves a rehabilitation hospital to return home permanently, Billal describes to the camera how he would like to brutally bash Beswick, to "give him more pain than he gave me... Because everything's been taken away from me. The doctor forbids me from driving a car and even riding a bicycle... I'm not allowed to go anywhere because my parents are scared I might get hit by a car again. That's what's happened to me. It's just like starting a new me. I'm starting a new life. From the start."

Billal opens on October 10 at The George cinema in Melbourne and the Valhalla in Sydney.