

# Loveless life deprived Braiden of swimming glory

CHAD le Clos and Braiden Shange were born in 1992 within a month of each other. They went to similar primary schools, not far from each other, and from early on both excelled in swimming.

Braiden won a string of medals, and swam for KZN Schools. But around the time Chad entered Westville Boys' High, Braiden's grandmother, who had raised him, died.

For much of his life he had thought she was his mother – but she, in fact, was now working in Ireland. He and his sister had to find new homes.

At that point the family asked me to help look after him, and I became his main caregiver, with friends urging me to support his swimming.

So, Braiden started training with a top coach, and entered a school with an excellent swimming record.

The coach told me: "This boy should make the national team one



By Crispin Hemson

day." And at the school gala, I watched as this one black youngster plunged into the water and charged ahead, breaking records and winning five gold medals.

Yet at this point of opportunity, a downward spiral began. It was as if he had internalised whatever negative messages he had got in his life.

Constant thefts and dishonesty made it clear he was taking drugs.

As my aunt was dying in one room of the house, I found a flick-knife on him.

He took my car and smashed it. I told him never to come back, then let

him return, then chased him out.

He had taken my car again. But his friend and a taxi driver found him with it at the beachfront, and brought me the keys early in the morning.

Before long he was arrested and charged with possession of a firearm, in Westville Prison awaiting trial.

Finally, the case came to court. Thanks, no doubt, to the intervention of a sangoma – a man I had to meet in a house where I sat on the couch beside a curious chicken – the witnesses' evidence was muddled, and Braiden was acquitted.

By now, his mother was trying to get him to come to where she worked, in Dublin.

And so Braiden spent 18 months there, doing little that was productive. His right to be there expired, and he returned to SA in 2011.

We soon realised there were



Braiden Shange, like Chad le Clos, had dreams of being a champion swimmer, but his dream was shattered by a life of drugs and crime.

problems. He began to tie string from plant to plant, and put a radio in a tree, because he "could hear his grandmother telling him to do that".

Finally we took him to specialists, and he was diagnosed as schizo-

phrenic. And so he was treated in King George V Hospital until an aunt arranged for him to stay with her in Joburg.

This year he returned, and re-established ties with me and his family in Lamontville.

On the evening of May 29, I encountered him there, and we spoke.

He was training, and trying to get seasonal work as a lifesaver.

He seemed clearer and more settled than in a long time.

Later I had a frantic call – there had been a car crash and a shooting. I went to the township, and there was a throng of people, with police cars and lights. The metro police had chased a car, which had then crashed. As the occupants stumbled out, shots rang out.

Down a steep ditch we could see an arm, and two men went down to retrieve the body, but could not.

Finally a car was winched up, and then Braiden's body was brought up and laid on the tarmac, and what might have been.

In the light we could see a bullet hole behind his ear.

I was on the phone, trying to explain to his family in Ireland what I was witnessing – the full horror of it.

Three people had been in the car. The driver is now on trial for drunken and reckless driving.

Braiden had been shot dead, the other passenger shot in the leg – for what?

For having the wrong driver? At the funeral feast, the driver's mother sat next to me. I said: "People did not speak much about the trouble Braiden got into."

She said: "It was the stage."

Was the mayhem just a stage young men go through? And was the shooting of an innocent person just what happens to young black men?

After celebrating for the

Olympics team, I could not help thinking of the body on the tarmac, and what might have been.

I wondered if the officer who shot him thought for even a second that this had been a person of immense potential.

If there is a lesson in comparing Braiden with Chad – it is not only about social identities and what goes with that.

It is also the emotional support young people need.

When Chad's father spoke to the BBC in his remarkable interview, he spoke in terms seldom used – of open love and overwhelming warmth.

Whatever our tragedies, that is something for the world to celebrate.

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