

by Paul Freedman



HE LOVES ME . . .
HE LOVES ME NOT
(preventing violence against young women)

A CONVERSATION WITH LESLEY ELLIOTT



You may never have heard of the *Sophie Elliott Foundation* ... but you will probably remember the name Sophie Elliott – right?

She was the bright, vivacious 22-year-old who was gruesomely stabbed to death by her former boyfriend and ex-tutor, Clayton Weatherston.

It was a trial that had most of us glued to our TV sets back in 2009. And the questions kept haunting us: *“How could things get to such a state? And how come there was no warning?”*

Sophie’s mum, Lesley Elliott, was the one who opened the door to Weatherston on that fateful day. And, as you can imagine, she has agonised over those very questions ever since. To try to pinpoint some answers, and to help protect other young women from horrific confrontations like this, Lesley has set up the Foundation as a legacy in Sophie’s memory. She’s also written a book – *‘Loves Me Not’* – to help young people know when a relationship they’re in might be unhealthy.

We asked Lesley how she first came in contact with Weatherston. And how the fatal succession of events got started ...

LESLEY ELLIOTT: Sophie had completed her university studies. (She was an honours student, studying economics.) During her last five months at university she’d had a relationship with this chap Clayton Weatherston. He was 10 years older than her, and a tutor in the economics department.

The relationship between them was ... well, volatile ... right from the beginning. Only three weeks into it, she would be coming home complaining about the things he’d said and done.

GRAPEVINE: When did you first meet him yourself?

LESLEY: About mid-June. Sophie brought him home for a meal. And he talked all

about himself and his family. He was sports-mad.

SELF-FOCUSED

On the whole, I thought he seemed a reasonable guy. But ... well... deep down, somehow, I just didn’t feel comfortable with him. When you talked to him it was always all about him. He never asked about you. He just seemed totally self-focussed.

GRAPEVINE: What was the first sour note that you noticed?

LESLEY: They were out walking one night. She didn’t have warm clothes on and told him she was feeling chilly. And



Sophie Elliott

he replied, "Well, I'd lend you my jacket, but then *I'd* be cold!"

"You know what, Mum?" she later told me, "He didn't lend me his jacket!"

Another time he was visiting us and we were all drinking herbal tea. He drank his, then calmly got up, wandered into the kitchen and made himself another one. Never said, "That was nice. Could I have some more?" He just made one, as if it was *his* kitchen. Not that I really minded exactly. It's just not what you expect from someone you've only just met.

There were lots of other little things which all made me think he was obsessed with himself. Everything was always done at his convenience. I remember Sophie saying, "You'd think just for once he'd volunteer to be the sober driver." (He lived close to town and we lived a bit further out.) "But no," she said, "he never does. It's always up to me!"

She'd say to me, "I can't work it out, Mum. Does he want me or doesn't he?" Their relationship was always on-again/off-again. One day she'd say, "I'm never going to see the b.....d again!" – then the next she'd say, "You're not going to be pleased, but I've decided to give him another chance!"

I've subsequently learned that a lot of abused women do this. The police tell me they get really frustrated with the "one last chance" thing.

GRAPEVINE: When did it get to the stage that you began to worry ... concerned that there might be something seriously wrong or dangerous here?

LESLEY: It was just 10 days before he stabbed her. There were two occasions when he actually, physically assaulted her. The first was just after Christmas. He'd just

graduated with a PhD – and Sophie, being the person she was, even though the relationship was supposedly 'over', offered to take his graduation photos. So she did.

She made a very nice album with all the photos laid out. And she told me, "I want to give this to him, but I'm not sure of the best way." I said "Take it to the uni and flick it under his door." But no, no, that wouldn't do – she wanted to hand it to him. That was typical of Sophie.

She later told me she gave him the album. He had a quick glance through it, tossed it on the floor, and immediately wanted to go to bed with her. She said, "No – the relationship's over. I'm out of here. I won't see you again!"

SCARED FOR HER LIFE

But as she attempted to leave, he grabbed her, threw her on the bed and chopped her in the neck, putting his hand over her mouth while screaming obscenities at her. She told me she'd never been so scared in her life. She didn't have a hope.

He was over six feet tall, 92kg; she was just a little thing, only 52kg. I asked how she got away, and she explained that as they were struggling on the bed they both fell off, and she managed to leap to her feet and rush out.

He ran after her, but she made it to her car and escaped, very upset and distressed. She didn't dare try and drive home, she was shaking too much. So she went into her workplace and told her workmates what had happened. They got her a coffee, calmed her down and insisted, "Sophie this is a serious assault. You've gotta call the police!"

But she said (first to them and later to me when I urged her to do the same thing), “What’s the point? I’m leaving next week. I’ll never see the b....d again. It’ll just be a huge hassle!”

Then, two days before she died, she had a gift to give to her former supervisor. She went down to the uni. (This is early January – the university’s usually pretty deserted then.) As she walked down the corridor, Weatherston came out of his room and called, “Soph. Come down, we need to talk.” And, stupidly, she went down to his office! He closed the door and put his arms around her. She was shaking. He shoved her back against the wall and asked, “Why are you shaking?” She answered “Because of what you did to me last week?” He said, “Well, what was that then?”

She told me later, “I lost it then, mum. I tried to chop *him* in the neck and put my hand over *his* mouth as he’d done to me. Well, he pushed me off quite easily and said, “Well, you’ve assaulted *me* now haven’t you? And now *I* can go to the police!”

She rushed out of his room to a stairwell close by. When she got onto the landing he followed her and gave her a hard shove down the stairwell. She later told me, “By the grace of God I was able to hang on to the banister and didn’t fall.” As he shoved her he bellowed, “I’m giving you my hate!” She was able to get away, and came home quaking and in tears.

Anyway, those were the two occasions when he physically assaulted her.

GRAPEVINE: Yet even after these warnings he was able to get into her bedroom and kill her?

LESLEY: The day she died he came to our house. She was upstairs packing, running late, and had a barbeque to get to. Anyway

he knocked on the front door. (He didn’t bring his car up our drive, which he’d always done before.) I looked through the glass panel next to the door – opened the door a little bit. He asked, “Can I see Sophie, I’ve got something for her.” Sophie had heard the knock and came part way down the stairs and mouthed to me, “Who is it?” I mouthed back that it was him. She rolled her eyes – but she came right down. I opened the door fully and stood back. Sophie told him she was really busy, running late, and he’d have to come up to her bedroom. So they went on up.

I went back to the kitchen. And it was only then that the memory of the two assaults really hit me. I thought, “Oh my God, what have I done? What do I do now?”

I knew if I went up and barged into her room, Sophie wouldn’t be pleased. But I was also terribly worried. A lot of what happened at this stage is actually a sort of blur. Her bedroom’s above the kitchen, and if there was any shouting or screaming you’d certainly hear that. But I couldn’t hear anything. It was dead quiet.

I went to the bottom of the stairs. Then I heard the bathroom door bang – and next thing Sophie appeared. She came down and I asked, “What’s going on?” She answered, “I don’t know. He’s just sitting there.” I said, “Look, Soph. – you’ve got to meet your friends soon. Just tell him he needs to go!” She replied, “You’re right.” I heard the door open and she went back upstairs. Next thing she just started screaming ...

He’d been waiting behind the bedroom door – and he attacked her straight away. I rushed upstairs but couldn’t get in. (My husband, who works in Central Otago, had put locks on both bedroom doors for

our safety – and that worked against me.)

I banged and pounded on the door and screamed at him, “Open the door!” I thought he was raping her. The screaming had stopped but a sort of rhythmic thumping kept going. I knew I could open the lock from the outside with a screwdriver, but I couldn’t remember where that was – so I rushed downstairs to get a meat skewer. I knew if I pushed that into the lock I’d be able to get in.

TOO LATE TO SAVE HER

I raced back upstairs and finally opened the door – but she was dead on the floor. He was sort of crouched over her, and he was still stabbing her. He just leaned out and pushed the door closed again. I’d already made a 111 call on my cell-phone.

(I actually have no memory of doing it, but I was on the phone as I backed out the door.)

Even if I’d got in earlier, I think it would’ve been too late. She must have died really quickly, because he’d stabbed her first in the neck. *He stabbed her hundreds of times!*

GRAPEVINE: So what did you do then?

LESLEY: The 111 person told me to go outside – out the front. I was screaming and incoherent. I can hardly remember what happened at that stage. They told me to go out and wait for the police – who took about six minutes. (They did react pretty smartly, but it seemed like an eternity.) I pleaded with the paramedic, “Please save her!” ... but in my heart I knew she was dead.

From that quick glimpse, I’d seen that she was absolutely white. She’d bled out

– there was blood everywhere – and I knew she was gone.

They wanted to take me to hospital because I was so distraught – but I didn’t want to go. So they took me instead down to the Police Station where people were coming at me, seemingly from all directions, asking questions – all a nightmare really. And of course we weren’t allowed back in our house for a week.

GRAPEVINE: Where did you live while they examined the crime scene?

LESLEY: At first they were going to put us in a motel right next door to the Police Station. I was determined, myself, to tell my husband Gil (who works away from home) and my two adult sons (who live in Australia) what had happened – I didn’t want them finding out via the media. (Even when I was still waiting on the front lawn – and still on the line to the 111 service – I noticed that the TV crews were there already!)

Anyway, I stood at the window of this motel and I said, “We can’t stay here because *he’s* down there!” So they changed the motel for one further away, with a unit for each of the boys, so they could have their own friends come around and be supportive.

Lesley and her family were then plunged into a 22-month legal and media frenzy, culminating in a five-week-long trial and the guilty verdict. The judicial process consumed enormous amounts of time and energy. Then, finally, as time worked its slow but steady healing, there came at last a chance to look ahead.

LESLEY: Eventually, after the trial, life settled down and I did begin to recover.

Although lots of other things were happening, as I healed I began to get an idea that got stronger and stronger as time passed. It would be my legacy to Sophie.

I eventually sat down and put together a PowerPoint slide show. (I'm not an expert, but I managed it – just!) I approached four girls' schools in Dunedin and I asked the principals, "Could I have an hour of the girls' time (their free period or lunch-time)? I just want to sit with them in an informal way and tell them about the relationship Sophie had with an abuser." Three of them couldn't get me in there fast enough ... and I've never since had to invite myself to any other schools.

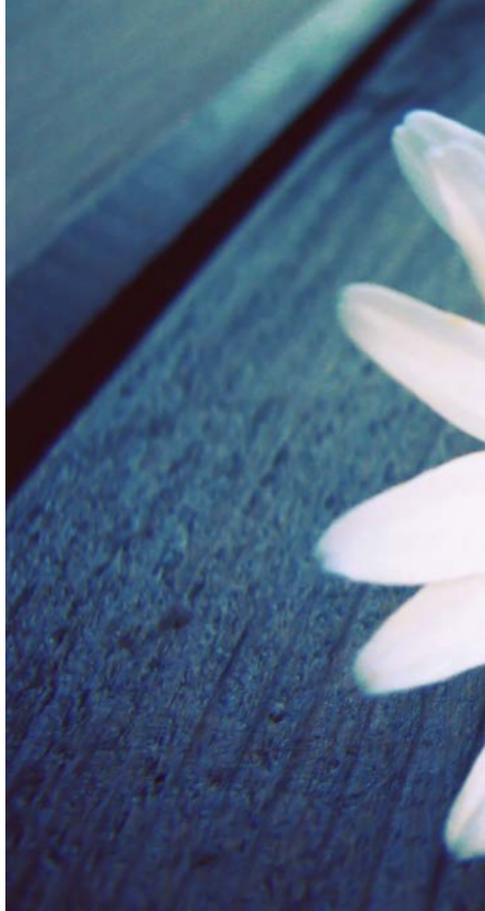
So from this little start things just grew and grew. And now here we are, seven years after Sophie died, with a Foundation, a website, books and a busy schedule. We're visiting three schools tomorrow and the next day up in Auckland – all at their request.

We don't advertise. The word just gets around. And the next thing you know, another school is asking.

I started with girls' schools. Only began including boys' schools when my sons said to me, "Mum you've gotta talk to the *guys* too, you know." So then I started adding co-ed schools. And it was fine – I didn't have any problems at all with the guys.

BOY-GIRL RELATIONSHIPS

Most schools already have a health programme that covers bullying, getting on with your mates, that kind of stuff. But they don't do boyfriend/girlfriend dating relationships. Girls will often come up to me afterwards and say, "Gosh, we really needed to know that! Thanks!"



They tell me, "We've never heard stuff like this before! We've never had anyone explain to us how to get on with boys." And boys typically say, "We don't really know what girls want."

Anyway – one thing led to another, and the Foundation got started. I was invited to speak at a conference at Police College, looking at the whole area of domestic violence. I got involved with the person in charge of the whole country for domestic violence policing, and our programme took shape. The



police do the actual delivery of the programme, but our Foundation is there to help provide top quality audio-visual resources to make the programme better and to stimulate discussions. We engaged a film producer and director to produce some of these.

GRAPEVINE: So is this a dramatization of Sophie's story?

LESLEY: No – it's more a documentary. The interviewer talks to me and we go through the story together. But he interviews four of Sophie's close friends, too

– one from university and three others. It went very well. We couldn't believe it when we saw the final product. Those young ladies said exactly what we wanted them to say – and they weren't briefed or reading from a script or anything like that. They described how they'd tried so hard to get Sophie to abandon the relationship ... how they saw Sophie changing from a bright and bubbly, confident person, interested in the world, to a girl with low self-esteem, preoccupied with the relationship and all its problems.

The programme's about relationships ... what is a good relationship? ... and what makes a bad one? Schools can deliver it in different ways. Most teachers do it with white boards, or they put down the kids' thought on paper.

There's quite a lot of discussion around 'consent' – which kids mostly know something about, but a lot of them can be a bit confused. And I'm not just talking about consent for sex. There are many other kinds of consent. For example, about possessions: can you just take a cellphone, or someone's car? And if not why not? And what happens if you do?

The programme then spends quite a bit of time on 'the bystander'. If somebody you know is in a relationship and it doesn't look too healthy, what can *you* do to help? What can you say? What will actually *work*?

Lots of girls have said to me, "Oh, I have a friend whose boyfriend is pushing her around a bit – I don't know what to do. I don't want to interfere!" Or they'll say, "If I poke my nose in, she won't be my friend anymore." So there's some discussion around issues like that.

The programme isn't designed for some authority-figure to get up there and spell out, "This is what you should do!" It's designed to make the kids think and discuss among themselves. So if and when they do get into a relationship that's not healthy, they'll hopefully think back and remember what they discussed together about what they ought to do.

The *'Loves Me Not'* book came out of that. We found schools were making great pamphlets and hand-outs. But if you've had kids, you know what it's like – they chuck them in the bottom of the

wardrobe never to be seen again! What we wanted was something they could *keep* – something obviously valuable – worth keeping and looking after – to keep on their own bookshelf. So Bill O'Brien (who co-authored *'Sophie's Legacy'* with me) persuaded me to write the book – and it's based around Sophie's story. The opening chapters are about the *signs of abuse* that Sophie and I *both missed!* We interviewed quite a few school counselors, one of whom has contributed a really helpful a chapter – and Nigel Latta's added a chapter for the boys.

GRAPEVINE: This must all cost quite a bit?

LESLEY: The foundation is being supported by the business and professional women's group, Zonta, who are fund-raising all over the country to allow the Foundation to get thousands of copies printed – and given free to students who're doing the programme.

AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE

The thinking behind it is that the girl (or maybe a boy, but usually a girl) might not be in trouble now, but possibly two or three years down the track she might be feeling, "I'm in a relationship that doesn't feel right!" and the book is there, ready to be used as a resource.

There's a section in it called *'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall'* – where they can check out, 'What do I want from a relationship? What am I *actually getting*? Is this relationship one I'd be better off without?' I wanted a book which, if Sophie had had it when she was in year 13, then when the relationship with Weatherston started getting rocky she'd

have recognised the warning signs and been able to act on them.

GV: You make it clear in the book that when Sophie was struggling with the negative effects of the relationship, Weatherston always made her feel that everything was all *her fault* – which seems amazing! How did he manage to do this?

LESLEY: He just somehow made her believe that *she* was to blame. She used to come home and say to me, “Mum, if only I was a better person he wouldn’t treat me like this.” For instance, he told her she was fat! She *wasn’t* fat! But she’d still come home and say, “Oh, if I lost a bit of weight off my backside he wouldn’t say these things.”

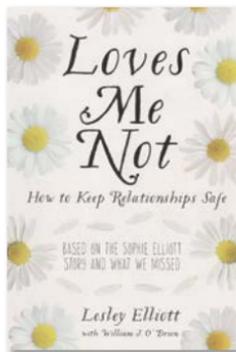
I’d tell her, “Sophie, you’ve got a lovely figure.” But she believed him ... and many abused women have told me that this is typical. They become sort of brainwashed. And I emphasise in the programme that Sophie’s relationship only lasted five months. It wasn’t 10 or 20 years! I have women coming up to me saying, “I’ve been married for 20 years, and I’ve suddenly realised I’m in an abusive relationship and I don’t have to put up with it anymore!”

I’ll get girls who’ll come up to me and say, “Oh, my boyfriend calls me names. Is he an abuser?” And I have to answer, “Well, I don’t know. I can’t tell just from that. Think of the context. If it’s consistent – all the time, and if it’s really nasty names that make you feel diminished, maybe you do want to step back and ask yourself,

“Do I really want to be in a relationship that’s so horrible?”

Relationships should feel *good*. If a guy wants to go out with you because he likes you, he should want to make you feel good about it and about yourself – not anxious.

I’m positive that if Sophie had had a programme like ‘Loves Me Not’ in her final years at highschool, she’d still be with us today.



US First Lady Michelle Obama was talking to a group of girls at Oxford University in England not long ago, and she echoed everything the Sophie Elliott Foundation is about.

This is what she said:

“Reach for partners that make you better. Do not bring people into your life who weigh you down. Trust your instincts ... good relationships feel good. They feel right. They don’t hurt. They’re not painful. That’s not just with somebody you want to marry, but it’s with the friends that you choose. It’s with the people you surround yourselves with.”

I’m sure those wise words would’ve really resonated with Sophie ... ❁

IF YOU’D LIKE TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT VIOLENT DATING, ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS, SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR, AND THE ‘LOVES ME NOT’ BOOK & PROGRAMME ... VISIT THEIR WEBSITE: WWW.SOPHIEELLIOTTFUNDATION.CO.NZ.



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