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Cairns children killings: What drove Raina Thaiday to slay eight kids?



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By *Kristian Silva*

Just hours before Raina Thaiday violently killed her seven children and niece she was ranting in the streets, gripped by an acute schizophrenic breakdown.

“You hurt my kids, I hurt them first,” she yelled.

“You stab my kids, I stab them first. If you kill them, I’ll kill them.”

In the community she was known as a loving mother, but she reached a breaking point nobody saw coming.

Ongoing mental health issues had never been treated, and the financial and emotional pressure of being a single mum had become insurmountable.

What set her off that night was that two of her daughters had stayed out past curfew.

How could something like this happen? Before Raina Mersane Ina Thaiday ended the lives of the four boys and four girls there were noticeable behavioural changes.

Her religious views became more extreme, and she went from church to church seeking counsel.

A long-time cannabis user, Thaiday also decided to ban alcohol and drugs from the house.

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Still, nobody could have foreseen what was to come next.

The children were found by their older brother, Lewis.

There were no survivors, and Thaiday was on the front verandah with about 35 self-inflicted stab wounds, including to the chest and neck.

More than two years has passed since the killings in their family home in Manoora, a suburb in the far north Queensland city of Cairns.

The house at 34 Murray Street has been demolished, replaced with a park to remember Malili, Angelina, Shantae, Rayden, Azariah, Daniel, Rodney and Patrenella.

The oldest child was 14, the youngest just 27 months.

The last time Raina Thaiday was seen in public, she was being wheeled into an ambulance as police swarmed Murray Street, a road lined with palm trees and Queenslander-style homes with tin roofs.

Her next appearance was quite a contrast.

On April 6 the case was heard in a Mental Health Court, in Brisbane's sleek new court complex.

It is a place where justice is supposed to be delivered in a contemporary setting, but not even Queensland's year-round sunshine brings much warmth to this cold, sterile building with a distinct lack of soul.

There was no media build-up to the day, and there was only about 20 people inside court 16.

Thaiday was brought in by a corrections officer. Dressed in a black blouse, she wore a light covering of makeup and had her hair tied in a bun.

She sat in the dock and waited patiently for proceedings to start, briefly glancing over her shoulder to acknowledge a couple of supporters in the back of the room.

Several psychiatrists have spent the past two years trying to unpack what was going through Thaiday's head when she went on the rampage, early on December 19, 2014.

One thing was abundantly clear, they say. She was not on drugs or affected by alcohol. She just simply had not understood what she was doing.

That is why the case has been conducted in the Mental Health Court, instead of criminal courts.

The lifting of a court-imposed embargo means it can now be revealed that a finding of "unsound mind" was handed down, meaning Thaiday will never face a trial for her actions.

Psychiatrist Dr Angela Voita told the court the initial diagnosis was of a brief psychotic disorder, but it had become clearer that Thaiday was suffering from

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Another psychiatrist, Dr Pamela van de Hoef, said Thaiday had no criminal history and had never received mental health treatment.

But Dr van de Hoef said there were signs as early as 2007 that Thaiday had mental health struggles.

“This lady looked after eight children, she prided herself on it [but] she had a number of very stressful events prior to her arrest,” Dr van de Hoef said.

“They included a break-up of her relationship with the father of her younger children, conflict with others, financial pressures, and on the fateful night, some of the girls didn’t catch the bus home that they should have.

“That was the tipping point — that’s how she ended up on the footpath.”

That night, a distressed Thaiday began ranting nonsensically, walking up and down Murray Street, waiting for the two girls to return.

At one point, she rang the police, demanding they find the children and bring them home.

While addressing the court, Justice Jean Dalton revealed what Thaiday had told authorities in the immediate aftermath.

“She said inconsistent things,” Justice Dalton said.

“She said she had to kill her kids to save them, she said she didn’t mean to do it.

“She acknowledged there would be a lot of hatred towards her because of what she’d done. But she said she knew it was right.

“She explained her own wounds and in particular the punctured lung by saying she tried to stab herself in the heart for what she had done.”

Justice Dalton said Thaiday’s “religious delusions” continued while being treated at the Cairns Base Hospital.

“These weren’t normal religious ideas that fitted within a set of Christian beliefs or even any other set of cultural or Indigenous beliefs,” she said.

Justice Dalton’s assisting psychiatrist Frank Varghese said Thaiday’s “apocalyptic delusional state” was one of the worst cases of schizophrenia he had ever seen.

“This is schizophrenia at its very depth and its worst in terms of the terror for the patient, as well as the consequences for the individuals killed,” he said.

Thaiday could be detained indefinitely

Queensland Law Society president Christine Smyth said rulings of “unsound mind” were rare, because of the strict criteria to meet the unsound mind defence.

“Did they understand what it is that they were doing? Did they have the capacity to stop themselves from doing it, or did they suffer some kind of delusion? Effectively, did they have capacity, and that’s the key criteria,” Ms Smyth said.

In this case, the answer was a resounding no, according to the judge.

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A court order means she will be kept in a secure ward at the facility, and only granted escorted leave on the property.

“Some people respond to treatment very well and can be released early, some people take a lot longer to respond to treatment, if at all,” Ms Smyth said.

“So it can be anywhere from a couple of years to a lifetime.”

Ms Smyth said it was understandable some would feel a lack of “justice” without a trial and a jail term, but the case had now moved to a phase where the focus was on Thaiday’s wellbeing.

“The measure of a society is how it best treats its most vulnerable — people with mental illness, they’re the most vulnerable,” she said.

Without a criminal trial, key details about this case may never be made public.

Namely, how exactly was Thaiday able to kill eight children without any fighting back or any being able to escape?

‘My babies, my babies!’

There were several fathers to the deceased children, spreading grief even wider to their families and communities.

Three days later the Torres Strait Islander families marched together in a pilgrimage to a makeshift memorial on Murray Street.

In heartbreaking scenes, the father of four of the children, Gavin Willie, collapsed, wailing “my babies, my babies!” as he placed a tribute.

A week later, grandfather Rod Willie spoke on behalf of the families.

“Children are the most vulnerable of our society, whose innocent lives deserve the greatest of love and care. Cherish them,” he said, his hand trembling as he addressed reporters.

Indigenous community advocate and pastor Yodie Batzke remembers that morning when she heard the news.

The four boys and four girls all gone, taken by violence.

“People were weeping, just standing where they were. Just crying,” she said.

“It was one of those things, where if you had a child, you were thinking this could have been mine.”

More than 4,500 people filled the Cairns Convention Centre the month after the killings to farewell the children in a service called Keriba Omasker, which translates to “Our Children”.

Eight white coffins were driven through the city to the children’s final resting place at the Martyn Street Cemetery.

Eight trees, planted in honour of each of the victims, are slowly growing and taking

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with the house gone, swings were installed so neighbourhood children could play. But they were soon taken out to reflect how the community feels about the site.

Moving on from such a tragedy seems a near-impossible task, but Ms Batzke said that was now what many families were trying to do.

“So much has happened,” she said.

“There’s been a lot of deaths within those families not long after the children had passed away so they’re not only grieving for their little ones, they’re also grieving for other family members that have passed on.”

Some families moved away, Ms Batzke said, and of those that remained, some were still grappling with how to feel about it all.

“The element of shock is still there,” she said.

“There is some empathy towards this whole situation and people are still trying to, I think, sort out their emotions as to whether they’re angry towards her or not.”

“This neighbourhood’s not the same, and that’s one of the things that has come out of this.

“People have become possibly more private in their own lives, but at the same time aware of what’s going on.”

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