

# NO PAST FOR



Abandoned in India, adopted by a Melbourne family, Michael's search for his birth parents is straight from the script of the award-winning movie *Lion*

**EXCLUSIVE**  
**AARON LANGMAID**

**W**HEN Michael Van Wilgenburg tells his life story, he's never sure where to start.

An orphan of India, he was another little boy without a beginning — one of about 30 young Indians from the same orphanage rehomed in Victoria at the start of the millennium.

He doesn't know who his biological parents are or why they abandoned him as a baby.

He can't say how he became another lonely face in a sprawling region of more than 43 million.

He has no idea how he made it to an overcrowded orphanage.

The entire first chapter of his life is missing.

"I want to know who my parents are," he said.

"But I don't know where to start."

His journey to Australia and remarkable rise to become a motivational speaker and sports ambassador would parallel the path taken by Saroo Brierley, the Hobart man whose quest to find his birth parents became a best-selling book and hit movie *Lion*.

Their stories are strikingly similar but for one stark fact: Michael was too young to retain any memories of faces, places or names.

Like Saroo, he has searched.

He has a birth certificate stating he was born on September 11, 1995.

His original name was Budhadev.

He thinks he is probably from the eastern state of Odisha where he was placed in his first orphanage, since shut down.

There are no other leads.

He can't retrace his steps or jog his memory using the internet.

Even if he could find his



Michael Van Wilgenburg (top) with friends in his new bedroom in Melbourne after being adopted; (bottom) pictured at age seven.

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## Queen knights Lowy

AUSTRALIAN business titan Frank Lowy has been formally awarded his knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II at a ceremony in London.

Sir Frank, 87, was honoured at an investiture ceremony at Windsor Castle for his services to business and philanthropy.

The self-made billionaire, who co-founded the mammoth Westfield shopping empire, was named a Knight Bachelor,

which is a knighthood where the recipient is not part of a specific order.

Sir Frank arrived in Australia with nothing more than a suitcase after surviving the Holocaust in Hungary, and built a global business empire out of a single delicatessen in Sydney.

"I couldn't quite add the two and two together but of course it's a wonderful feeling to have received that honour," he said.



Westfield Corporation chairman Frank Lowy at Windsor Castle yesterday.



# LITTLE BOY LOST



(Clockwise from main) Michael Van Wilgenburg with adoptive parents Catherine and Hans; as a young man; the passport he arrived with as a child; the Indian orphanage. Picture: IAN CURRIE

## AN INDIAN ODYSSEY

**NAME** Budhadev (changed by orphanage staff to "Mantu" before he changed his name to Michael in high school).

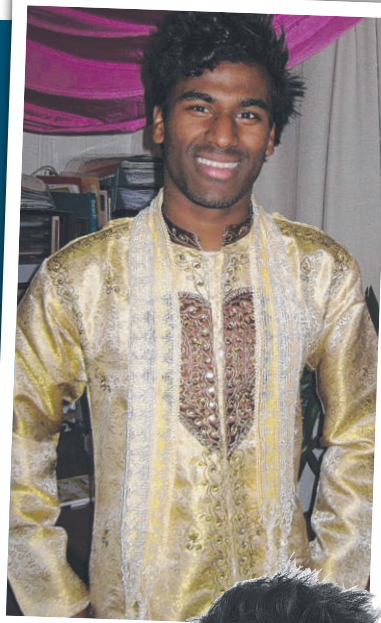
**BORN** September 11, 1995 (but they have no way of knowing this is correct).

■ **TAKEN** to a country orphanage in the state of Odisha (formerly Orissa), population 43 million.

■ **TRANSFERRED** to the Basundarah Orphanage in the city of Cuttack, population 606,000. It is estimated that around 30 children from the centre were rehomed with families in Victoria in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

■ **FOUND** by Melbourne parents in 2002.

■ **The Australian Government** has temporarily suspended the adoption of children from India due to ethical issues.



mother, he knows that revealing she had an illegitimate child could actually put her life in danger.

"I don't know where my parents are and I accept that I might never find out," he said.

"I wish I knew them. I wish they knew that I was here and that I'm OK. That's what hurts.

"But it would be nice if there was somebody out there with an answer."

Michael's most defining early memory is from the day he met his adoptive parents.

It is one of their most cherished memories too.

Melbourne couple Hans and Catherine Van Wilgenburg had stood anxiously waiting for the cheeky seven-year-old after the adoption papers were cleared back in 2002.

Michael did cartwheels down the hallway to meet them.

"That was a remarkable moment," Ms Van Wilgenburg said.

"He was dressed in a bright yellow T-shirt and shoes and he was

holding a posy of marigolds. It was unforgettable."

Their adopted son knew only three words in English.

But the journey to become the emerging leader he is today was a deeply troubled one. Michael wasn't used to having a mum or dad. He was street smart and had mastered a fight or flight reaction. He had no understanding of the unconditional family structure others take for granted. Michael showed early signs of developmental delay.

He found learning difficult, lacked social skills and pushed back at his parents at every turn. It became an intellectual gap they feared was a result of some form of mistreatment from his lost years. Experts suggested he may have been severely malnourished as an infant, perhaps even physically abused.

For a while it was an unknown void that threatened to tear them apart. But Michael still had sport. His hand-eye coordination was impeccable and he excelled at almost

anything. First swimming, then athletics, footy and basketball.

Finally, his parents could see a promising young man emerge.

In 2013, they even returned to India. They found the orphanage but no answers. "I think we knew that going in but it was still nice to share some beautiful moments together," Ms Van Wilgenburg said. "It was like Michael found a way to fit back into his past. He was no longer the orphan boy."

It's an inner strength they say that helped Michael, now 22, find his way out of the fog.

This week he was named a Victorian ambassador for the Special Olympics National Games and was praised by former NSW premier Mike Baird, now chief customer officer of event sponsor NAB.

It was a proud moment.

"Michael is proof to anybody that, in fact, we all have disabilities of our own — the key is to focus on our abilities," Ms Van Wilgenburg said. "He has the gift of charisma and

has always been able to look on the bright side. He has found an inner strength so many others often don't."

Late last year, Michael joined his parents at a screening of *Lion*. The Sun Theatre at Yarraville had been booked out by the Intercountry Adoption Resource Network and was packed with families who shared similar stories. They were all brought to tears at the depiction of one man who managed to find his birth mother in a nation of 1.3 billion.

Michael knew it wasn't an outcome he was likely to share. But he's at peace with that.

Marilyn Nagesh, a Melbourne volunteer who for years was instrumental in co-ordinating the placement of orphans — Saroo and Michael among them — said

thousands of lost children eventually faced the same questions.

"A lot of children from those circumstances carry a lot of baggage and when they are as young as what Michael was it is hard for them to articulate what happened to them," she said.

"It is lovely to see that Michael, that little boy who was quite traumatised and really in need of love, has grown into the man he is today."

The reality is, she said, the odds are stacked against anybody adopted from India as a child.

"There are cases where it does work out and that's heartening," she said. "I don't think it's a door that should ever really be closed."

aaron.langmaid@news.com.au

## 'Politics to blame' for our power struggle

POLITICAL fighting is to blame for high power prices, an energy boss says.

Alinta Energy chief Jeff Dimery has demanded that both sides of politics come up with an agreement on carbon pricing so the industry can invest in new technology of coal-powered electricity generation.

"What we need is stable and bipartisan energy policy," Mr Dimery said.

"Ideologically the parties

STEPHEN DRILL

can't agree but we need to find a middle ground... We don't want to be investing in a 25-year project only for the policy to change six months later."

Power companies have been avoiding investment in new technologies because of confusion over renewable energy targets. The federal government scrapped a clean energy target, which would

have encouraged more investment in wind farms and solar power in favour of a national energy guarantee.

The Hazelwood coal-fired power station was closed because operator Engie did not want to spend \$400 million to upgrade the 52-year-old plant.

The plant supplied up to 25 per cent of Victoria's power and there are now fears there will be blackouts this summer.

The loss of Hazelwood has

contributed to a spike in power prices of up to 14 per cent.

But Mr Dimery's comments come as he announced a drop in prices. The company will offer a 2.8 per cent drop in prices.

The Western Australian-based company has 300,000 customers on the east coast but has plans to increase that with cheap pricing.

Alinta Energy purchased the Loy Yang B power station last month for \$1.2 billion.

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