Mystery of a dying family

Anna Burns has lost her brother, her mother, her father, her uncle and her cousin... all to cancer. Her husband says the surviving family members believe there has to be a link. And they are pointing fingers firmly at the landfill site that bordered their homes.

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While there is a history of cancers in Mr Kerslake's family, there was none in Mrs Kerslake's until the disease killed her, her brother and her niece.

Ms Burns, the youngest daughter of Elaine and Kevin Kerslake, said the family had always believed there had been a link between the park and their illnesses.

She said they had decided to break their silence after reading about their former neighbour, who is fighting to have an inquiry established into the site.

In 1971, Kevin and Elaine Kerslake bought a house at 18 Corran St, Howrah, and moved in with their four children — Jenny, Mark, Andrew and Anna.

Behind their house was an area of land used as a landfill for domestic waste, which was known as the Howrah tip, and is now the sports ground called Wentworth Park.

Mark Kerslake was one of Tasmania's most senior public servants.

He was just 42 years old when he died. He had been promoted to the position of chairman of the Department of Economic Development, and had a brilliant career ahead of him. His death struck the Public Service hard, and he left behind a partner and three young children.

Mrs Lopatnik lived in houses bordering the former Howrah landfill site, which is now the Wentworth Park.

Directly opposite the ground, at 29 Silwood Ave, lived the Kerslakes' relatives including Mrs Kerslake's brother Ivan Bilton and his daughter Denise.

The kids used to run across the tip site to visit each other's homes all the time.

"We had gates on our back fences," Ms Burns said.

The houses backed onto the old tip.

"We used to visit, I used to walk out our back gate to theirs."

The families grew up and moved away over the years, although Mark Kerslake liked the area so much he bought the house next door at number 20 Corran St.

Poppy Lopatnik lived across the road, on the corner of Bembil and Corrae Sts. Mrs Lopatnik's son Peter died from leukemia last year at the age of 21.

She has compiled a list of 21 people who she says have died from cancer or other serious diseases.

"For five years she has been calling for testing of ground-water contamination in the area.

Ms Burns said it was a friendly, close-knit neighbourhood where everyone was good friends.

"Back then the whole street knew each other," she said.

When Mr Kerslake died in 1997, the family began to ask questions.

When Ms Bilton died, then Mrs Kerslake, they asserted to question possible links between the tip site and the illnesses in their family.

"There was heaps of discussion about it," Ms Burns said.

"I can remember Mark talking about it and he talked to Poppy a few times.

"After my dad died we looked at how many people had died in the same street and it was amazing."