

Submission to Family and Community Development Committee

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Submission

I was born in 1952. I always believed that I was with my mother (who will be referred to from here as “her” or ‘she’ as I don’t like to acknowledge her as my mother) for the first 3-4 years, until I got my files. When I got my files, in 1997, I found out that she left me when I was 12 days old, that’s how long she had to stay in the Salvation Army Home for unwedded mothers after I was born. She abandoned me. When I found out, I was so hurt, so upset. I wanted to kill her. I hate her so much for all the lies. It took me a long time to read the paperwork again after that. It took at least seven years, until 2008, before I even looked at it quickly again. When we moved, I said I needed something from under the bed and I had a panic attack just looking at it and my husband told me I needed to deal with it. It took me about six to eight months to read it and by then I was given a copy of the Senate Report into Forgotten Australians. The term ‘Forgotten Australian’ made a lot of sense to me. I had always called myself a Forgotten Australian, because that’s what I felt I was, forgotten. That report set so many triggers off for me. I had started seeing a psychologist, and got onto CLAN and then there was the apology. I felt excluded from the apology, they only apologised to those who were taken, not those who were abandoned so I didn’t feel like I was included and that made me angry. It said sorry to my husbands and children, but not to me, because I was abandoned, not taken.

I found out that I was left in the Salvation Army babies’ home for 18 months prior to being put into Berry Street. In Berry Street I was given a number, I was Number 1375. I heard they did experiments at Berry Street in the time I was there, but I found out from CLAN that none were done on me. Because she abandoned me I was put on the child protection list in Victoria. When I turned 5, she was asked to take responsibility for me. She said she couldn’t, so I was placed in the babies section at Orana. They took me in and she had to pay some upkeep. She always paid for me. I was in four different homes before I was 5 years old. I was on my own and I feel I was drowning, even then.

She took me out of the home and took me to Ballarat, when I was about eight years old. A day later, she gave me a walking doll, no explanation, she said it was mine and she just gave it to me. A couple of days later, my half sister, who was 18 months, she knew exactly what she was doing, she screamed and carried on “I want the doll, I want the doll” and so that was it, she gave it to her. Ever since then, everything I got while I was with her, went to my half sister. I was abused by her, she accused me of taking cigarettes, she wouldn’t feed me the same as the others. She used to make me prepare all of the meals and if there wasn’t enough, I would have to prepare more and eat it

raw. If I threw it up, because I didn't like raw food, she'd make me eat that. She used to beat me and make me stand in the corner. If I looked like I was going to wet myself or if I did, I'd get a flogging. When my brother was born disabled, she blamed me for this. I carried that guilt with me to this day, even though I know better. I ran away and told the judge I'd rather die than live with her again. My stepdad was kind to me at times, but she was not.

From the day I was born, I've wondered why I was born, wondered why she didn't abort me, I thought I'd be better off. I just sometimes wish to God I wasn't born, I really do. I wonder why she kept me the way she did. She did tell me one time why she did, she said I was a debt and you have to pay your debts, whether it's 2 pounds a week, you still have to pay your debts and I was a debt to her. When you read the paperwork, I just can't get over it. It really hurts. When I told my daughter that I had found out that I was abandoned, because I didn't know that before, I thought she'd understand more, but it went totally over her head. Sometimes I feel like I'm in a tunnel and the tunnel, it's dark and there's never a bright end, it's always dark. Sometimes I just don't think I'll ever get out of it. I think I've been in mental pain since the day I was born and when she took me out of Orana the abuse was worse, she was just a wicked woman. I changed my first name in 1998 because I hated the name because she gave it to me. I'm much happier with the name I have now and no one uses the old name at all now.

I was put back into care and was placed in a reception centre in Ballarat and transferred to Pirra. I ran away from there as well. I ran away from three homes in total. I was placed in foster care at one point when I was about 13 years old. My foster father sexually abused me. I didn't tell anyone as I didn't think they would believe me, they had already called me a liar and I didn't want to go back to the home. And I thought the abuse was normal as it happened when I was with her too and I think it happened in Orana too.

I've had some flashes of times when I was in the homes. I don't have dreams. The only good memory I have is of being bathed. The water had to be hot. We had to walk up and into it so it was at a good height for the workers. I realised that was the only time we ever got touched, when the workers dried us. The rest of the time there was no loving contact. I think that is why I can only relax in a bath now. When I met one of the women who bathed me at a reunion, I hugged her so tight. She confirmed to me that this was the bathing routine. I never had any cuddles and no one touched us or held us, I had no one to bond to. Even today I have issues with space and safety. I don't like people cuddling me. I don't let many people cuddle me.

I don't remember many others from the home. I remember one person and we were close. I found out later that he had ended his own life. I remembered that he had changed and that kids had noticed when we were in Orana. Years later, it made sense to me. He used to tell me things and I didn't believe him at the time. I realise now he was telling the truth. After those things he changed, his personality changed.

I remember one man who ran the home at Orana who was very kind to me when I was in the home, but that was rare and we had a mutual respect. She put me in there, but she would visit once every three or four months, but they said there were no cuddles.

I feel we weren't given any help to manage our feelings or learn about life. All they did was fed, clothed and housed us and that was it. As a result, that's all I did to my kids when I first had

children. I didn't give my children a lot of love and affection when they were young. I love my children right up to the sky but my relationship with my children is complicated, especially with my eldest.

I don't know a lot of things, I feel I missed out on a lot education wise. For example, when my quilting teacher was talking about saving, I said I hadn't been taught this and didn't know how. I often find that I have to ask people the meanings of words that others would commonly know and I can find this embarrassing and feel stupid at times. Most of the time, despite others telling me I'm not stupid, I feel that I am not as good as others who have had an education. I think they are above me.

I believe I don't have any memories of most of my time in Orana as they are too traumatic or difficult to remember. I don't remember much before the age of 8. Once I was put under hypnosis and he tried to take me back to that era but I screamed at him to get me out. Seeing my records sparked some memories. Some things trigger painful emotions. For example, I don't like clocks. I also don't like birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day and Father's Day. At a recent reunion when some fellow Forgotten Australian's were talking about a man who had abused them in Orana, I had a panic attack. I remember them saying "not another one". I have not had any more memories, however I do have ongoing flashes and I'm not sure what they mean. I find them distressing and don't know what to do about them. It is difficult not to have memories of my childhood as I can't explain why I think or like particular things, often I know something comes from childhood. It is the same with my family, I don't know my family history like many people do.

It was recommended that I be adopted while I was in Orana by a family that I visited at Christmas. I believe one of my Aunties would have adopted me as well. But she wouldn't sign the papers and so I couldn't be adopted. I would have loved to have been adopted and been in a real family.

I never had any pictures of me as a child. There is one of me at a fountain where I looked happy. My daughter recognised me because I looked like her daughter (my granddaughter). She said that is the only time I have seen my mother happy. But I don't know that I was happy, the homes always organised positive photos for particular days when others came to visit. I can see the resemblance to my daughter and grandchild which is important to me. Blood is very important to me. I'm very protective of those who are my blood and I don't like it when my children view others as being a second parent for example or let their children call someone else their grandmother who isn't blood. I don't think my children and my daughter in particular understand this. I have a lot of rules with my children and I have had a lot of issues in my relationship with my daughter who I feel doesn't understand these issues. I have always said if my daughter hurt me like **she** hurt me I'd cut ties with her. My daughter used to make a comment that it's like walking on broken glass with me. My husband said it would have been hard for them to live with me and that it had been very hard for him at times.

When I was 15 they started me working at a garment packing factory and then I worked in some stables and that's where I met my first husband. I married my first husband when I was 16. They didn't tell him anything about my life or what I'd been through. They didn't tell him much about anything. He knew there was something wrong. I had two children with him, but we separated after our second child was six months old and we were divorced four years later.

I had another child, but I didn't keep him (I did not want to make the same mistake she did, keeping a child I didn't want). I tried to have an abortion, but it didn't work and I gave him up for adoption to his father and I have never regretted the decision to this day.

Throughout this time I had often tried to end my life. My daughter often had to clean up after my suicide attempts, from the time she was a young child. She also had to care for her younger brother. I still feel like this. All I want is for the pain inside me to stop. It hurts so bad and the rage is still strong.

After I left the homes I worked and had my own cleaning business and I've also done care work for the elderly. I currently work part time doing cleaning and work in the local post office. I feel I might have been able to do something different if I had more education. I married my second husband in 1983 and it's lasted a long time but it's been difficult for him. He's had to teach me a lot of things, maths, history and life in general. He also cops a lot sometimes. He has not had any peace since the day we were married with my mood swings and rage..

Being in the homes has affected my health. I have high blood pressure, arthritic hands and insomnia, which has been chronic for most of my life. I have also had lots of dental problems because my teeth weren't cared for as a child and I haven't been able to afford to get them fixed. I take lots of medication every morning and every night.

I have never been able to find any psychological reports, although in my file they are referred to. At least four different doctors saw me over a period of three years. I have found this upsetting as I don't know what they said. When I read my file the things they say about me sound like someone else. They characterised me as a liar, a thief, but it was never clear why they said that, they never spoke about what I had stolen or what I had lied about. They did say, whatever I stole, I gave away, so it wasn't for personal gain. Maybe it was my way of buying love from others. I realise now that I was reacting to what was going on, the lack of any affection or care, other than the basics of food and housing. I was so angry to read that, I felt that it wasn't me.

My mental health has been bad because of my time in the homes. I have had multiple diagnoses over the years including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, Panic Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder. I had a psychotic episode on one occasion as a result of the medication I was taking. My husband found me and took me to my Doctor. At that time, it took a lot of people to hold me and get me into the hospital. I was detained in the hospital for a period of time until they sorted this out. I also have had two strokes, in 1984 and 1997. My family have told me I'm much calmer since the strokes. I still get angry but I am less violent when I'm angry now that I've had the strokes and don't get into the rages that I used to. There is still rage there though and it scares me. I don't know where it comes from. And there is still anger and pain. I rock myself to sleep. I have not attempted to kill myself recently but the thought is constantly with me. I loathe myself, I can't stand to look at myself in the mirror. About 5 years ago, after my last suicide attempt, my son made me promise not to do it again. Promises were solemn vows in our family. So I have not tried again but the thought is always there.

I think in black and white, I know, I don't know any other way to think. I work with a psychologist and understand that it is what I do and that it is not helpful for me, but I find it difficult to think in any other way. I am sure this is to do with my childhood.

One psychiatrist who I saw, who had input into the SA Inquiry into Abuse, stated that “the only proper input from psychiatry is input from time to time, she is the kind of person who could take up a lot of time from a psychiatrist without there being much benefit. She is very one track minded”.

What I would like from the Government

A lot of people don't understand what Forgotten Australians are. We're different to other humans. We were damaged, some from the day they were born. The ones who were taken from their parents are damaged too. I don't like to talk to people who aren't genuinely interested in it. I'll talk to people who are interested and want to know more.

I feel like no matter how many people you talk to, nothing has changed. The apology was one thing, but it didn't help me, they ignored the ones who were abandoned and focused on the ones who were stolen or taken from their families. They didn't mention us, so I felt left out and offended. But it hasn't made our lives easier, we still have to deal with the expenses and the trauma and I think we should be given the support to do this.

I have seen a number of counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists. Currently, I see a psychologist and a GP and specialists for my health as needed.

I have found organisations like Vanish, Clan and Open Place. Vanish were good, but then they didn't continue because the government accepted another offer, so now we have Open Place and they aren't as good, they seem to service Victorians mainly and I live out of the state and so I don't get as much support. Even when I need to see them, they don't help with the air fare.

I know there was a Court action to try to claim compensation from the homes, but I can't claim as I don't have clear memories of abuse that occurred in the homes, but I know what happened to me was not normal, no child should be brought up without love and affection. This has affected me my whole life and still does in all of my relationships. My lack of education has stopped me from doing things I might have done. I continue to feel pain every day. I would like to have access to services without having to justify myself. What I would like is a Gold Card, similar to what the veterans get. I feel that it is because of my time in care that I have mental health issues and many physical conditions and I don't believe I, or my husband, should have to pay for this as we didn't cause the problem. I get my psychology sessions paid for by Medicare and Open Place, but they no longer pay for medication etc and some of these are related to my time in care, e.g. anti anxiety medications.

I was under your protection for five years from birth to 5. You damaged me! Then you got her to look after me and she put me into Orana until I was 8. They helped do more damage to me. Then you let her take me home with her where she abused me, evil woman. You allowed this to happen and yet you did nothing. I was back into care and for the next four years you did your bloody best to damage me more, for which I am still suffering from. So you caused this to happen. All I am asking is that you pay my medical bills.