

INQUIRY INTO THE HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE BY RELIGIOUS AND OTHER NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS

Submission

Living in a home where my brother and myself were deprived of love we were subjected to abuse, bashed continually, sometimes went without food for days. We ran away from home many times living on the streets and breaking into factories to find food and shelter, as in those days factories were not locked at night. By night we would crawl into their windows to find food. The police would often pick us up and return us to our father and step mother where we were living at the time. We were always running away from home after one of our bashings until eventually we went missing for three days and then were picked up by the police where we then went to court and were made wards of the state and placed in orphanages.

Because of the treatment we had received with our father and step mother we wanted so bad to go into a home where we thought we would be looked after and have a happy childhood life.

From 1959 I spent time in Turana, Royal Park, St Catherine's, Geelong and Good Shepherd, Oakleigh.

Unfortunately as a child I had a tendency to wetting the bed. I can recall my recollection of wetting the bed many times when I was in Turana where I would cry myself to sleep because I knew when I woke up I was too scared to tell them for fear of the punishment. I often made the bed and slept in the sheets for long periods of time. If they found out I had wet the bed I would be bashed, my hair pulled like it was coming out of my head. Another recollection I have of Turana is we would often go for long, long walks but we were never allowed to stop and go to the toilet, often we would soil ourselves and then be punished for being so dirty. When I asked could I go to the toilet my hair was pulled and I was shaken until I cried. The time I spent at Turana I have block outs of what happened to me I often now can recall incidents that return that I have suppressed for years.

After Turana I was placed in the care of the Mercy nuns in St Catherine's, Geelong. My brother was placed in St Augustine's boy's orphanage. It took me a long time to settle into St Catherine's. I missed my brother badly I would often cry myself to sleep. There were many siblings who had family in St Augustine's. When the boys would come over to see us on visiting days my brother would sometimes be missing. I was told he had been in trouble and was a wicked, wicked boy and would not be coming as a form of punishment. When I was lucky enough to see him most of the time we had to sit across from a room to talk to one another, we weren't allowed to hug and there was no play area where we could play as children. Sometimes when my brother left he would give me a hug. For hugging my brother I was always punished and made to stand in the corner for hours then I would have to go to bed without any dinner. I couldn't understand what I had done wrong and why were we being treated like this. We were being treated no differently than when we lived with my father and step mother. Wasn't this place supposed to be better?

When my mother came to visit she always brought me pretty things to wear and soft cuddly toys. I would ask where those things had gone after she left and I was always told that they had been thrown out as they were not the sort of things little girls were given at St Catherine's and you would have to be like everyone else and go without.

My life at St Catherine's fell into a pattern. We were woken every day at 5.30 am had to go to church first for our cleansing time. Religion was a big part of our daily ritual to the point where it was obsessive. After our breakfast we would be put to work until school time. After school we would have to work again. The chores consisted of scrubbing the corridors for hours with a scrubbing brush, scrubbing toilets, polishing the church pieces until we could see our faces in them. My hands would get so sore that I would cry so much. The nuns would come along and inspect what we had done and often I would be made to keep scrubbing until I was told to stop. The nuns would usually say I want to see the floor so shiny I can see your face in it. This would go into the late hours of the night. I never knew where the time went. I always went to bed feeling hungry as often we weren't given enough to eat. If we were caught laughing while we were doing our chores the nuns would come along and pull us up by the hair and drag us through the corridor for everyone to see and then we would be made stand in the corner without any dinner. There was never any time for play or just be normal kids.

The mental abuse that we suffered was something I will never forget. I was told I was wicked, that God hated me, I would burn in hell, that nobody ever loved me and that I was only fit for the gutter. All my life I have had this feeling of never being good enough for anything and what I do I have always failed in. I went into the convent as an unwanted child and when I left I felt even more like an unwanted child. We were never allowed to show emotion or our feelings. If we were caught hugging we were belted with a thick ruler, made to go and have a bath to wash away our sins, sometimes we would have to watch while other girls were held under the water so their bodies would be cleansed.

I often wet the bed in St Catherine's and when I did I was made stand at the laundry basin and wash my sheets by hand. I was made to feel dirty and ashamed of myself. I soon fell into the pattern of not telling the nuns I had wet the bed sleeping in soiled sheets until sheet washing day came.

Over the time I spent in St Catherine's I was subjected to being belted with a thick ruler, made to stand for hours, not allowed to go to the toilet when I needed to, my hair almost pulled out of my head, if I had an accident and I wet myself I was made to sit in my own urine, then I would have to scrub the floor clean. I was always so tired that I would fall into bed. The nuns had a special dark room where you were put into for punishment. I was so scared of the dark room that when I was put into it I was always screaming, kicking that it would take two nuns to lock me in the room.

I can recall going to the priest's special flat sometimes and what I was subjected to. I do not want to record on paper. There were many girls who were subjected to this not only in the flat also in the respiratory. As girls we would talk about what the priest was doing. A lot of us girls just thought this was part of our everyday life.

As a consequence of St Catherine's we were marched off to the dental hospital every few months. I was so scared. The dentists used to treat us so bad I can remember having the instruments put in my mouth and told to shut up when I was crying. As a consequence I am petrified of the dentist. This was another form of abuse we were subjected to.

So many forms of abuse at St Catherine's it is hard to record all of them.

When I left St Catherine's I was placed in the care of my mother for a short time. When I was neglected again I then went to the Good Shepherd convent in Oakleigh. I thought I was in hell. We were forced to work in the laundry where we were forced to work up to 16 hours a day. We were exhausted by the end of the day. I can remember some days folding sheets, over and over again. When we weren't working in the laundry we were back scrubbing floors.

This convent was far worse than the previous I had been in. We were belted with thick rods, kicked while we were standing, hair pulled almost out of the roots, made to stand for hours on end, and bashed in the face. One nun in particular I can recall used to always belt me with the towels.

The food we ate was at times disgusting. I can remember once when we had meatloaf that was so awful that I put into into the slop bin. The Mother Superior caught me so she waited until everyone had finished and at the end of the meal I was made to take the meatloaf out of the slop bin and sit in front of Mother Superior where I was not allowed to leave until I ate every bit of the meat I had thrown away. It had jam, butter, tea leaves and other scraps all over it. I have never forgotten that particular instance. Needless to say to this day there are many foods that I cannot eat due to the way the food was served up to us in the convent. One other thing was that the nuns would serve themselves up the best of food enjoying roasts, and good fresh vegetables. They always had the best of everything.

Oakleigh convent also housed many older ladies and disabled ladies. The disabled ladies were tied in their chairs. While we were in the laundry working I would often look at them sitting in the corner all day, Never given anything to do, sometimes wanting to go to the toilet but no one ever came to help them. Most of them just sat staring into space all day. We were not even allowed to talk to them.

Emotional and mental treatment was one of the biggest in Oakleigh convent. We were called names, told we were no good, we would never grow up to be anything, sex was a dirty word. We were never given the proper education to make our lives better. Many of us told lies to the sisters as we were scared to do otherwise. We were never given the chance to do better. There was never any form of praise.

The above is just part of the story. It is difficult to put down on paper all the details and this in itself is not an easy task. This is just some of my story.

The handling of children in these institutions were appalling. There were so many things taken away from us. Our self-esteem was shattered and we were left with no dignity and our childhood was taken away from us. We were placed in orphanages

where we trusted those that were in charge of us. The government let this go on for years and never did anything to rectify what was happening throughout the state. The shame and mistrust we all went through should never have happened because the government should have been making sure all of us were looked after properly. Some people will never be able to tell their stories as they are either too ashamed or just want to block it all away. The government has betrayed all those children who suffered under the cruel supervision of nuns, brothers and carers that took place in those horrible places. We were supposed to be taught right from wrong. Most of us learnt to lie and cheat too the nuns because that was what we had to do to survive. We were told we were wicked, would go to hell, abused, mistreated, molested and then we were told we had to all be good. How was this possible when the good people who looked after us were bad. We shall never know the full brunt of those dark days. There are those that have gone before us who have taken their own lives because of the scars they were left with and could not live with them anymore.

The government should provide a form of compensation to allow all those that suffered to live the rest of their lives with some dignity. Nothing can ever make up for what was suffered during those dark years. This is only some of my story.

I am not even sure where this inquiry will go I can only hope that the government and the outcome will do something to give back some dignity to those who suffered in orphanages to enjoy life with a little more dignity than they had in those dark years growing up.

Name: Toni Courtney

Address: [REDACTED]

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Signature: [REDACTED]

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