

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups**

Melbourne – Monday 13 October 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### **WITNESS**

Renee Spencer.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I open this meeting of the committee for its Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I am joined today by my committee members Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; and Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater.

Today our committee is joined by Renee Spencer. Renee, thank you for making the time to speak with the committee today. We recognise the significance of you coming here today to share your lived experience and acknowledge that sharing your experience and trauma may be emotional. Thank you, Lachlan, for joining us too.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviour of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. The committee is interested to hear about and learn from your lived experience, including the recruitment methods used by the group, its impact on individuals and communities, and your experiences. The committee is also interested in what recommendations you would like to see the committee make to the Victorian government in this space.

All evidence given today is being transcribed by Hansard. It is protected by parliamentary privilege, but comments repeated outside this meeting may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript that you can review. You can advise us if you are comfortable for the committee to decide to make it public, make it public with your name and identifying details removed or keep it private.

I would now like to invite you, Renee, to share your experience, and then if it is all right with you we will have some questions.

**Renee SPENCER:** Thank you for inviting me today. Sometimes it is hard not to cry. I come to this space out of necessity, not choice. I have lived experience with cults and coercive control, and as a teacher and a mental health practitioner I can see the need for attention in these areas. However, today what I will be focusing on is my daughter, who was recruited to a group commonly known in the media as the kidney cult. It all began in 2017, when Ellicia as a young adult discovered the group via YouTube. Their controversial past was hidden, as they referred to themselves simply as Christians. In the years since I have come to see them as one of the most destructive cults operating in Australia and their leader, David McKay, as a dangerous psychopath.

While Ellicia was growing up I taught her to avoid drugs and we discussed safe sex, but teaching her the dangers of high-control groups was nowhere on my radar. I am proud of Ellicia's intelligence, her musical talents and her compassion. As a child she loved knitting and crocheting, taking her projects with her everywhere, including the footy. One day when she was 10 a security guard at Optus oval confiscated her crochet hook. Distraught, she said they had stolen it. I tried to explain that after 9/11 people were overcautious, but she was right: it was ridiculous. Her hook was not a threat. Even after I had replaced her hook she was upset about the injustice, so we sat down and wrote an email to the editor of the *Herald Sun*. To our surprise, the paper ran a full story and the stadium apologised by giving us some free tickets to the next match.

That story sums up my daughter – creative, strong willed and determined to stand up for herself – and she was supported by a family who loved and validated her. I never imagined my daughter could ever become submissive. If this can happen to my child, it can happen to anyone. I miss Ellicia's laughter, our conversations, her teasing me whenever I mispronounce a word and even our silly arguments over teaspoons. I am here today with my son Lachlan, who is a silent victim. He has lost his sister, and instead of getting the best of his mother, he has got a broken version.

At 22, Ellicia was at the crossroads of her life, unsure of what she would do next. It was that moment of vulnerability that McKay exploited. To ensure she remained under his control, McKay instigated a publicity

campaign in which he accused me of being a Satanist. In Christian circles, that means the worst of the worst. With no criminal laws to protect me from McKay's abuse, the only course of action available was civil defamation. Judge Clayton's findings were damning: Her Honour found that McKay had acted with malice, his slander the final nail in the coffin of my relationship with my daughter. Nonetheless, justice was not served; McKay continued to harass me, and then he left the country without paying legal bills, [REDACTED]. Prior to his leaving, Victoria Police was not able to arrest him despite 100 breaches of an intervention order.


I would like the committee to fully understand what parents in my situation go through. Imagine you have a child who suddenly disappears. After weeks of silence, you finally hear from them, only to discover they have changed their name and given away all of their possessions. They no longer have a phone and are chaperoned everywhere they go. Then they are sent overseas, and emails, which are your only means of communication, are monitored. The strange messages you receive are actually written by McKay or his daughter Tina, even though they are sent from your loved one's email account. Your child no longer calls you Mum or Dad, but they refer to him as 'Brother Dave'. Systematically, their identity is erased as they are programmed according to McKay's design. *Star Trek* fans might recognise this as being like Borg assimilation.

Cult experts advise to stay in contact and hope your child will somehow resist the coercion. Meanwhile, they are instructed to 'forsake all', a phrase repeated to groom your child into martyrdom. How would you feel knowing your child was being given daily sermons that incite suicide? Everything they do, from living by faith to jogging and fasting, is demanded as proof of devotion. These practices are a bounded choice – comply, be punished or face death. McKay's relentless rants instil fear, effectively hijacking your child's amygdala and shutting down rational thought. With critical thinking offline and all outside influences blocked, your child is now completely dependent on McKay and entirely at his mercy. Forgetting items when setting the table or telling Brother Dave there is grass on his shoe will invoke the grievance system, a disciplinary process reinforced by hierarchy. These are not abstract examples; this is what happened to Ellicia. And then when you turn to the police, terrified, you get dismissed – or worse, you get treated as though you are the villain. History shows us exactly where this behaviour leads: Jim Jones, David Koresh and Paul Mackenzie. Just because these have not happened on Australian soil yet does not mean they will not – besides, McKay has communities hidden on every continent. I may sound hyperbolic, but if you are as familiar with McKay as I am, then you would understand.

What is truly shocking is not just his behaviour but the way our systems allow him to get away with it. The law's blind eye allows McKay to exploit my child and others in conditions that amount to modern slavery. My blood boils with rage at the thought of him viewing my beautiful child as a stockpile of spare parts that he could barter off on backstreet organ deals. I do not believe the kidney donations are a noble cause. It is just a way that McKay can fuel his desire to control others. It is like he gets satisfaction from playing God and deciding who will live and who will die. His supposed voluntary poverty is a facade, exposed through admissions of hidden overseas bank accounts and regular monetary gifts from anonymous donors. His claims of being a pacifist are equally false as he preaches hatred of family, supports corporal punishment and justifies lying as being God's will. Emotional and psychological abuse are illegal in domestic violence, but McKay's pseudo-family units remain beyond the reach of common law.

If you have seen the *Spotlight* documentary, then you have seen a glimpse of how much surveillance McKay enforces, but even under those conditions during the filming of that documentary I had a connection with Ellicia – the real Ellicia. The spark in her eyes returned as she spoke out of step with the group's indoctrination. That is the reason McKay will not allow unsupervised visits. A mother's love and genuine care can cut through his deceit.

It is not just McKay that parents are up against. The group dynamics are reinforced by his wife and his daughter, and then there is Ellicia's husband. When she is in his presence she becomes even more subdued. I know my daughter has genuine affection for her husband, but I also know she was pressured into marrying him too quickly. She is in a controlling relationship within a controlling group. It is not possible for anyone to consent to forsaking all of their freedom under any circumstances, let alone the ones I have described. No-one can consent to surrendering autonomy under deception and coercion. In business this would be fraud. Most parents stay silent out of fear. I speak because silence only serves the perpetrators. For two years, I followed professional advice to remain calm and avoid confrontation, but it did not work. Like death by 1000 paper cuts, some behaviours may seem minor, but the full picture is horrific.



From everything I understand about McKay's behaviour, now and in the past, his thirst for control has just gotten worse over the years. When it comes to cult leaders like McKay, I believe the state needs to intervene. Freedom of religion should never be a smokescreen that allows anyone the freedom to abuse. Not all cult leaders are equal. The most dangerous are those who remain cool, calm and collected under pressure and are capable of ruthlessly abusing others without shame or guilt. Motivation is not always money and sex. Sometimes it is just the thrill of control, manipulation and domination – traits I have witnessed in McKay, alongside a complete lack of empathy. He has a godlike superiority complex, and his paranoid delusions are frightening. I cannot formally diagnose him, but my description of him being like a psychopath is not flippant. Based on my direct observation and my background in mental health and psychology I have formed the opinion that he poses a serious threat to the safety and wellbeing of those around him.

McKay started his cult in Victoria almost 50 years ago, with Victorian residents being his first victims. For decades complaints have been made to authorities, but he continues to evade every law. I do not know exactly what the future holds for my daughter. In the worst-case scenario our relationship is lost forever. I hope that my suffering will give rise to a better future for others.

My recommendations to the committee basically fall under three main categories: group-based coercive control laws, prevention through education and mental health support for victims.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Renee. Thank you for sharing your lived experience with us and the experience of yourself and Lachlan and your family. Ellicia sounds like a wonderful woman, And can I thank you for your bravery and courage in coming forward today to speak to the committee and shine a light on these issues.

**Renee SPENCER:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I would like to start with a question about something you mentioned in your statement. You spoke about the law's blind eye which allows this group to operate and put people like your daughter at risk: can you tell us what you think the Victorian government should do to better protect people?

**Renee SPENCER:** The very worst behaviours, where there is evidence of coercion and coercion which could be compared to either that in business or in domestic violence – we do not accept coercion there, and that level of coercion, when that is happening, I think should be a criminal offence. But even more importantly the thing I am most passionate about is prevention. I have got a background in teaching, and at schools it is never talked about, and as a parent I never even thought of actually mentioning this to my daughter. It is like cults are just on the fringe, and even when she joined the group I recognised straightaway that it was a cult, but I did not understand how dangerous it was. I did not understand what that meant, and so when I realised she was just in a group that I did not agree with, I decided 'I'm going to let my adult daughter make her own decisions.' I did a bit of googling – okay, if your child joins a cult, just be patient and they will come out. And it was like, well, no, that has not happened; it has just gotten worse and worse and worse.

**The CHAIR:** You mentioned you are a teacher. What did you teach?

**Renee SPENCER:** You would think that is an easy question. Most of my teaching career has been teaching art, although I have also finished up teaching maths for the last few years, because there is a maths shortage in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Art and math are two very different disciplines.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** My mum was an art teacher.

**Renee SPENCER:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** So just on the prevention side of what you of what you are talking about, can you give us some suggestions about how the Victorian government could support prevention activities – for example, prevention by speaking to young people about it or speaking with families. What would your suggestions in that area be?

**Renee SPENCER:** That it is somewhere even in the curriculum, I guess, along similar lines of Respectful Relationships. It could even be an expansion of that, or even just because I guess not all cults are religious – you can have other groups – it could also come into even workplace training and looking out for MLMs. As a business they can be quite ‘culty’ sometimes too, so there are actually lots of ways where it could just be fit in. I think a lot of it is just even the awareness. When people hear ‘cults’, over the years – I do not steer clear of that word. I just use it because I think there is a purpose, and people understand that there are lots of different definitions there, but yes, lots of awareness.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, okay. One other thing I would like to pick up from your opening statement too: you spoke about surveillance, surveillance that your daughter is under as being part of this group. Is there any consent involved in the surveillance? Do you think your daughter and other group members know that they are being surveilled?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, they do. The way I understand it, because I have spoken to a lot of members over the years, McKay has gradually just gotten more and more controlling. As soon as he worked out, ‘Okay, I can read personal letters’ – because he started doing this before email – he began reading them. Basically, the way he phrases it is, ‘We share everything, and therefore you must share your letters, you must share your emails.’

**The CHAIR:** Okay. So he is reading letters and emails. Are there other ways in which he is surveilling members?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes. They are not allowed to go anywhere without somebody else. That is like a rule that they have in the group – you cannot go anywhere alone. If I ever had any time with Ellicia, even leading up to it all getting really horrible, there would be someone – like a car at the end of the driveway with members there – while she was in the house. There would always be someone nearby. You could never just say, ‘Right, I’m leaving the group for a week and I’m coming back.’ No.

**The CHAIR:** Then I guess my final question around surveillance is: what do you think the government’s role here is, to help address the surveillance of members of this group?

**Renee SPENCER:** Know that it is happening. We know that in domestic violence when there is this pattern of that much surveillance, it is an indicator that more violence may follow. It is a warning sign.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Okay. Thank you. I will hand over to my colleagues to ask some questions now.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**The CHAIR:** You did mention in your submission that emails were either dictated by McKay or his wife or his daughter. Is that correct?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes. Through the civil trial process, evidence to prove that came out.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Renee. I will hand over to Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you. Thanks, Renee, for the courage to be here today and for your submission as well as your contribution – and to Lachlan for supporting your mum. Can I just ask how long it has been now since your daughter has been in the cult?

**Renee SPENCER:** It would be nearly eight years now.

**Chris COUZENS:** Eight years. Okay.

**Renee SPENCER:** And six years has been the really bad part.

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes. Okay. How prepared are frontline services, do you think – obviously you have done the rounds – in dealing with survivors and providing the support that they need, whether it be police or other workers in the community?

**Renee SPENCER:** I also do some mental health work myself, and I have had some really interesting conversations. There is just no awareness there. Mental health support workers are beautiful, kind, empathetic people and as soon as you say something, as soon as they realise it is a thing, you know that there is going to be support there, but I think a classic was when I was at work one day and I finished up bringing it up in front of a work colleague and their response was, 'I didn't know we had cults in Australia.' But then as soon as I start sharing my experience, they go, 'Oh yeah.' What I find is with people who I am working with, I will hear their stories and I will recognise when there are cult influences, but no-one else around me will pick up on that.

In terms of police, my worst experiences have been with the federal police with them just going, 'No. You're the problem. You've got a problem with your relationship with your daughter,' and not realising it is a cult problem. With Victoria Police I have had empathy, but I have also had, 'We can't do anything.'

**Chris COUZENS:** Do you have a view on what they could be doing or should be doing? I know you have made lots of contribution already, but it would be good to hear from you what your thoughts are.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes. Look, I would like to see some investigations, but at the same time I can also see that there are so many loopholes in laws. McKay will actually study the law to work out how he can avoid the law. This is where I go, 'He is this level of insane where he just gets excited knowing that he can dodge everything and get away with all of these things.' A normal person would be like, 'I want to be a good person; I want to do this.' That is where you go, 'No, you're not trying to be a good person. You're not trying to contribute to society. You're trying to see how you can get away with controlling people and how you can dodge the law everywhere you go.' In federal terms, on paper it looks like his behaviour could actually tick all the boxes of modern slavery. There are Fair Work issues there. There is a loophole there. If you call it religion, you can get someone to work for free for 50 hours a week.

So what can the services do at the moment? I think at the very least with the breaches of the intervention order, that would have been something. I did have a very unfortunate situation where I did have an officer tell me that the problem was me seeing that he was breaking the order. The order of course is meant to mean that he cannot talk about me online and he cannot try to speak to me online. I do look at what I can do of what he is doing online because I am worried about my daughter's safety. I want to have some sort of idea, if I can, or see if there some clue. I do not even know where in the world she is at the moment because he just moves members everywhere. It was disappointing to have a police officer tell me that if I did not look online then there were no breaches. That was really disappointing.

**Chris COUZENS:** My experience has been fairly limited obviously up until now. I knew cults existed, but this has blown my mind, so I get what you are saying. You have made some recommendations obviously and talked a bit about them today. Which ones do you believe to be the most immediate that need to be put in place? Obviously you have talked about different legislation, but what other areas do you think are really important?

**Renee SPENCER:** Prevention. Just prevention.

**Chris COUZENS:** Okay. Is that the education and awareness part of it?

**Renee SPENCER:** Education and awareness. Yes, definitely.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Chris. John.

**John LISTER:** Thank you. Thank you, Renee and Lachlan for coming in and speaking about your experiences. I appreciate you are coming from the perspective of not only someone who has engagement with this particular cult but also from your experience of working in schools and as a mental health practitioner. The experiences that I think we have not really heard so far in these hearings are actually from families, so it is quite refreshing to hear this perspective in what you are talking about today. What I really wanted to know was through your connections with other families or ex-members from not just this particular group but other groups, what are some of those common patterns that they are experiencing that go beyond just what you have experienced?

**Renee SPENCER:** We are crushed.

**John LISTER:** Yes.

**Renee SPENCER:** Like, yes, I have got PTSD from it. I will have nightmares. I will wake up, and I go, 'Oh my goodness, where is she? What did I do wrong?' We blame ourselves. And we have to keep on just – yes, it is a process to go, 'No, actually the blame needs to go on this person who has actually done this.' We get to that place by talking to each other as parents. I have connected with some of the other parents from this group, and we have compared emails. We will compare phrases, and we already knew it, but we know that this is not our children that are talking to us.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, John, just before your next question – Renee, if you wanted to take a break for a few minutes now, we can do that. Or if you want to take one later on, just let us know. Just a friendly reminder.

**Renee SPENCER:** All right, thank you.

**John LISTER:** I think this sort of goes to thinking about what is next as well. What do you think would help both you as a parent but other parents who might be in this situation? You know, obviously it feels like there is that difficulty in the separation that is happening, and forced separation, so what sorts of supports would be useful for parents in particular?

**Renee SPENCER:** I guess, yes, mental health support as well, and yes, some recourse because sometimes I guess, even like with, say, the modern slavery, it is like, well, you apparently need to have someone who is actually the victim make the report, rather than someone on the outside. It is the parents: we are seeing these things, and so we need to be trusted as well. We need to be able to at least open up an investigation – what is going on with this group? – because the people who are in it, they cannot do it. They are so tightly controlled. They have been told the world is about to end, so it is fear, fear, fear, fear, fear, without a break. How can you expect someone who is that controlled to make a statement?

[REDACTED]

**John LISTER:** Thank you for that.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks. Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you. You mentioned in your submission about Ellicia being in a transitional stage when she was recruited. Can you provide us with a little bit more detail about that and perhaps what was identified as her being in a position possibly of vulnerability or ready for recruitment?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, at the time when she was recruited I was actually living up in Brisbane, doing some study up there. Lachie was up in Brisbane with me as well. She was 22. When she left high school she actually went overseas. She was an au pair and she had done travel, and when she came back in I think 2016 she was still working out what she was going to do. She was talking about going to uni; she had started making some applications and things like that. She had also done a TAFE course in teaching English as a second language, because she had always been very good with languages. Just before she joined, she was planning on coming up

to Brisbane and living with us. She was living down here in Victoria, in Lilydale, all by herself – a young person – and I guess I did not see at the time that her saying she wanted to come live with us in Brisbane was, I think, her going, ‘I’m not coping. I’m not too sure where I want to go with my next step in life. I want to move back to be with my family.’ Even though, as a young person, she had already gone overseas; even though she had been very independent, I think that was a sign that she just was not too sure what to do next. She converted to Christianity when she was overseas.

**The CHAIR:** Where?

**Renee SPENCER:** In Ireland, but it was not a cult. I grew up Catholic, and so I do sort of go, ‘How did you become a born-again Christian in Ireland?’ But anyway.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Do you know where she met them?

**Renee SPENCER:** The kidney cult?

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Yes.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, online.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** So it was just online, and it was just her engaging in online chat as opposed to anything else?

**Renee SPENCER:** She became Christian, and she was part of the Christian community in the Yarra Valley, a beautiful Christian community, beautiful people. I am friends with them. They are fantastic people. But she was also looking just at Christian YouTube, and when you looked at their videos, particularly back then – these days they have got a little bit more extreme – their videos just seemed like, ‘We’re really dedicated to being Christian.’

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** And when was the last time you and Lachie saw her or spoke to her?

**Renee SPENCER:** During the documentary process. What was not filmed, was that in the afternoon Lachie and I went and saw her, with her husband there as well, and then I saw her a week later. Like I said, when I saw her the week later, I am pretty sure it was recorded. It was in a park. McKay was in the house just within view, and after an hour he walked out of the house and stood in front of the house, and it was like that was the cue. He was in control. Our time was up. She had to go back inside.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** I do have a few more questions on that. Since McKay has absconded, have you noticed any change in the cult? Because there is obviously some form of monitoring that is happening. Is there a difference? Are you hearing anything in regard to –

**Renee SPENCER:** They have gone underground.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Okay, completely? All right.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** And the last question I have is: Ellicia’s husband, you obviously had a chance to meet. I am wondering whether there was the normal respectful greeting and relationship, albeit very small and limited in time, that you had with your daughter’s husband, and whether you have managed to identify who he is and reach out to his family.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, I have. Definitely. There is a really long story there. Basically, when he joined – this is over in America, because he is American – there was an incident where they tried to physically keep their son from joining the group. They had a fight with one of the members who had gone there to chaperone, and that person – basically, her husband’s father finished up bashing one of the other members, which caused a great big rift. McKay has always said that they are attempted murderers – this is what he does. He will spin something on parents. So rather than going, ‘Okay, it was parents, self-defence and all the rest of it,’ he will go, ‘Right, your parents are attempted murderers.’ I am the Satanist?



He started communicating with them when he was 16, and then he left as soon as he turned 18 – because the usual pattern is that he will groom people through the internet while they are a teenager, and then as soon as they turn 18 they disappear. Ellicia was unusual in that she was 22, that she was a little bit older – and yes, I have made contact with his family.

Look, McKay has worked. His attacking of people has actually worked insofar as it is actually really hard for me to communicate with his family because if we communicate, whatever it is, he is going to latch onto that, because he is monitoring everything, and he just makes these wild stories. It is just so insane what he does. But yes, they are a broken family too. They have lost their son. Their son has now been in the group for over 20 years. He is absolutely indoctrinated, [REDACTED]

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Jackson.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for coming in, Renee and Lachlan. Can I just say how brave it is to do what you are doing. I am obviously very sorry to hear about everything that you have been through, and to be here and to be putting into words obviously your advocacy and work over many years in the situation you are in, I just want to say thank you very much from myself personally, and I know my colleagues are thankful as well. My question to you, Renee, is: if you had a magic wand and the Victorian government could pass particular laws pertaining to groups like the Jesus Christians, what would those laws be to change the behaviours that you are talking about?

**Renee SPENCER:** It would be coercive control laws for groups, so group based – so pretty much what is in the *Beyond Belief* submission, which I helped write.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Is there anything else? If you got this magic wand, is there anything else – just prompting to see. If there is anything else, please let us know.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, look, it is the group based, and then there are loopholes in laws, I guess. I do not know. Other possibilities are – McKay operates like a family, and yet, even me going, ‘Okay, welfare check’ or whatever, no, it is not a family situation, because it is a group. I do wonder if legislation like that could actually be looked at to see if some of these loopholes – if it could also be made applicable.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Forgive my ignorance, but in terms of the advocacy you are making around group-based offences, are there any other jurisdictions in the world where they have something similar to that, that you believe could be a model that Victoria could look to?

**Renee SPENCER:** I think Victoria is actually leading the world, and all the other advocacy places around the world, they are so excited with what Victoria is doing. I have made contact with a few people around different places. This is the opportunity to do it really well.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Just one more question if that is all right, Chair: in your experience what specific warning signs should schools, community services or families be alert to when young people are being targeted?

**Renee SPENCER:** That is where it is tricky, because there are lots of behaviours, and it can be different. What I have done actually is I have made a rubric, which is different, basically, indicators. Part of my approach and way of thinking with that is I think that is appropriate for a school-based environment, because kids know how to use rubrics – that is how they get marked. So things like isolation and thinking in terms of, well, if someone is trying to isolate you, okay, they may only be doing it a little bit or they could be doing it a lot, and just looking at the full spectrum of different behaviours and knowing that it might be three behaviours here that are really high and ones down here are low, but you have got to look at the big picture; you cannot just look at –

I am trying to gather my thoughts. You cannot actually say exactly what every warning sign is going to be for every group, because it can vary a little bit.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Cindy.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you. Renee, you are doing really well. That is a big sigh, but you are doing really well, so thank you. One of the things you just mentioned earlier was about all of the sharing. Did McKay reciprocate any of the sharing? He expected to be able to read everybody's emails; did he allow his emails to be –

**Renee SPENCER:** Of course not.

**Cindy McLEISH:** I knew that was the answer; I just wanted to –

**Renee SPENCER:** Of course not.

**Cindy McLEISH:** How many people are a part of the group, do you think?

**Renee SPENCER:** That is a good question. He presents with making them look very small, but I have got indicators that there are actually other groups that may not be directly part of them, but they work with them. There was a group in Argentina – sorry, I should say a victim from Argentina, and he said that he observed 300 people, and that is not the official –

**Cindy McLEISH:** So McKay started it in Australia?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** And he is the one that has taken it to other places?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** So he must have had some sort of contacts. What did he do before he decided to embark on this sort of business?

**Renee SPENCER:** He had a very brief career in journalism, and then he joined Children of God for a few months, and if you look at a lot of his belief systems, some of them are just Children of God.

**Cindy McLEISH:** There is a lot of Jesus Christians, Children of God. Is there much religion in what he does?

**Renee SPENCER:** How are you qualifying religion?

**Cindy McLEISH:** Probably a little bit more mainstream, I guess.

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes. McKay claims that he is the only person in the past 2000 years who has interpreted the Bible correctly, and his interpretation is literal.

**Cindy McLEISH:** He is right?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes, and you cannot argue with him.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Is it doomsday?

**Renee SPENCER:** Absolutely. I have heard rumours that he believes that he is one of the witnesses that are supposed to usher in the apocalyptic stuff. I get confused with it all.

**Cindy McLEISH:** What about children? Are there children born into the cult? Is there more than one generation now? I mean, it has only been going since the 1980s.

**Renee SPENCER:** Very rarely do people have children and that is because McKay basically tells them there is no point in having children because the world is about to end. What, as parents, we understand is that what is really going on is if people have children, then the parents become more concerned with their kids than they do with the group, and so therefore he cannot control them so they leave.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Do they do any mainstream activities? I guess there is probably hardly any schooling because the kids are at the back end of their schooling when they are recruited and, as you said, your daughter was older. Do they live in particular places? Do they live in like a commune-type thing or do they have houses near each other?

**Renee SPENCER:** Most of the time they live in caravans or camper vans, and they travel around.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Is that what Ellicia was doing?

**Renee SPENCER:** That is what she was doing in Australia. Last I knew she was in Mexico, and I believe the accommodation there may have been a little bit more permanent.

**Cindy McLEISH:** And the kidney donation stuff, have you seen evidence that that happens?

**Renee SPENCER:** Oh, yes. Yes, that is still happening.

**Cindy McLEISH:** To the group members? They do not buy from somebody else in an impoverished country?

**Renee SPENCER:** I do not know how it works, but there is like an online forum where you can look for kidney donors. McKay actually plays the role of matching up members to people and supposedly does it all for free. I do not believe that he is not getting some benefits from it.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Do you know if Ellicia has given a kidney?

**Renee SPENCER:** I do not know. I have got no idea. I know she had some sort of medical something that happened when she was in New South Wales. I suspect she may have donated a liver lobe because it is not just kidneys. I would be horrified to find out that she has donated a part of her liver and her kidney. That would just be horrific. But at this stage I do not know if she has.

**Cindy McLEISH:** The other family members that you have met, have they got similar stories?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Just finally, you mentioned about prevention. Can you unpack for me what you think that would look like and how that would work?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes schools – I guess, with a teacher background – that is one of the prime places. It probably needs to be even broader too. I was actually in a classroom a few months ago where, because I have spoken out and someone did recognise that I had been in a newspaper I finished up doing a very impromptu conversation with a year 7 class. Like, they were really shocked; they were really just like, ‘What?’ ‘There are these groups, I am doing this advocacy because these groups can control people’ and the kids were just going, ‘How? Don’t you go to the police?’ And I am like, ‘There is nothing stopping them. You have just got to know that some groups might try to.’ That would be the place, in schools.

**Cindy McLEISH:** With that prevention element, and you mentioned that your daughter was recruited online, is there a way that some of that online recruitment can be dealt with?

**Renee SPENCER:** Absolutely. Thank you. That is definitely something I have thought about too. Yes, online, exactly, some sort of reporting that this group is associated with something else.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Have you had a look at what Ellicia found on line?

**Renee SPENCER:** Definitely.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Does it look innocent?

**Renee SPENCER:** Back then it looked more innocent.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Renee, can I introduce you to Annabelle Cleeland, Deputy Chair and Member for Euroa.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you so much for your honesty and frankness.

**The CHAIR:** I have got one more question to finish up with, but just on Cindy's last point around resources that might be available online as part of the recruitment process: if you do uncover any of these over the course of our inquiry, we would be really appreciative if you could share those with us because that will also help inform our work.

**Renee SPENCER:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Renee, I really want to commend you because you have been experiencing this over the past eight years, I think you mentioned, and I cannot imagine what kind of impact that has had on your family, but you are doing so much advocacy work and now getting involved in survivor networks, so I just want to ask you a bit more about your involvement in survivor networks. How can the Victorian government best support survivor networks?

**Renee SPENCER:** I have recently become aware and worked out that Victoria is making all of the wellbeing hubs part of mental health, and those hubs are just a fantastic thing. I think basically raising awareness of all the people who are running those hubs would be a really great thing, because people will be walking in off the streets with these stories of group-based coercion. I know from working in those spaces that there is just not enough awareness.

**The CHAIR:** Just one final question as well: do you have an understanding of how this group is financed, where an income is coming from, who that goes to and how it is being spent? Is there anything around the financials that you can share with this group?

**Renee SPENCER:** Yes. When people join they are expected to hand over all their possessions, so that is one income stream when people come and they donate all their money. They spend most of their time distributing books and pamphlets and things like that on the streets in exchange for money. McKay makes it very clear that people are not allowed to give away things without getting some money in return. He even has quotas, so the way he phrases it is, 'If you don't get this much money or this many book things distributed, then you're not in the spirit.' It is phrased like that. There are also the YouTube videos. Some of the YouTube channels are monetised and he sometimes sells some books online and he gets some anonymous donations from people. I cannot prove this, but I have always suspected that some of the anonymous donations are like, 'If I got a kidney from someone, I might want to give anonymous donations to that group too.' That is my speculation.

**The CHAIR:** Do you know if they benefit from a charity status?

**Renee SPENCER:** I do not think so.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Renee and Lachlan, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for sharing your experiences. Earlier this afternoon you said that Victoria is leading the way, but we would not be here without people like you. We would not be sitting around this table having this conversation if you had not courageously raised your voice, begun your advocacy work and advocated for change in this space, so I truly want to say thank you for everything that you have done and everything that I know you will continue to do.

**Renee SPENCER:** Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here.

**The CHAIR:** Just finally, you will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, together with any questions taken on notice, but I do not think we had any of those today. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will be published on the committee's website, but like I said earlier, we will work with you on what you want to do with that.

I now declare this meeting adjourned. Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**