

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 26 March 2013

#### Members

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#### Witness

Ms G. Short.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Gabrielle Short, and thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. I want to explain that all evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. If your evidence contains adverse comments or allegations about any individuals, I request that you do not refer to the name or names of those individuals. If you do make an adverse reflection about a person and name them, I will suppress that evidence.

This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation committee members will ask questions relating to the inquiry and to your very detailed submission. Thank you very much indeed. We look forward to hearing from you. Please commence when you are ready.

**Ms SHORT** — Good morning. My name is Gabrielle Short, and I am here today to talk with you about my 17½ years of experience under state and religious institutional care in Australian children's homes during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. I will be focusing on the physical and mental abuse that I was confronted with on a daily basis. Thank you for inviting me here to share this with you today.

I was eight weeks old when I was first placed in institutional care. I was placed in St Joseph's Babies Home in Broadmeadows, and then three months later, when I was almost five months old, I was transferred to another Catholic home called Nazareth House in Ballarat, which was run by the order of nuns called the Poor Sisters of Nazareth, which I call the cruel sisters of Nazareth. I went on to spend 12½ years in Nazareth House, so I will talk about this home first.

I do not remember anything before about the age of two; however, I recall what must be one of the very first memories when I was two or three years old. I was using the potty. It was always a stressful experience because the nuns would strike us with their sticks if we did not complete number ones and twos quickly. On this one particular occasion I was struck continuously on the back of my legs for not completing number twos quickly enough. It began with the nun pulling me forward by my hair very forcefully, then gripping my head between her legs. This was when she proceeded to strike me over and over again with her stick on the back of my legs. I was in so much pain, but I could not even scream, let alone breathe, because my face was right in her dress. When the nun finally released me she kneed me backwards. I then fell onto my potty, then the potty tipped over and the nun got very angry and grabbed me again by the hair and proceeded to forcibly rub my head and face to mop up the spilt urine on the floor. This kind of behaviour became a regular thing throughout my time at Nazareth House.

Everything was our fault. Even when it was the nun herself who had caused something to fall or break from her violence towards us, it would then be blamed on us and further violent attacks would occur. As an adult I look back, and in retrospect I know this behaviour by the nuns was wrong, but as a child I did not understand. I too believed that I was to blame and that I was a bad child. I lived in fear that even without saying or doing anything I was going to be attacked for doing something wrong. Many times a nun would come out of nowhere and just start belting into us with her stick across the head and kicking us at the same time. I remember many times being beaten so badly that I could not get back up off the floor. My head would be spinning and my legs would feel so weak I felt like I had no blood in my head. Eventually, when I did make it up, I staggered to find a place to hide so no-one could see me cry. We were also rammed up against the wall, with arms twisted up our backs, and then they would keep banging our faces into the wall.

Some of the other forms of physical abuse and mental torture I and the other small children endured are as follows: we were lifted and dragged around by our arms. This could cause our arms to come out of our arm sockets. Our heads were slammed together, as well as slammed against walls and doors. A lot of us suffered from chilblains, which had formed from the lack of warmth and clothing provided. We were directed to clench our fists, and then the nuns would strike us on the knuckles. This was especially painful when this hit us on these chilblains. When we were in the dining room eating, we would be hit over the head randomly with a tablespoon. A nun would walk around the table, popping us on the head with it. On a really bad day she would hit you over and over again with this little metal tablespoon. This would result in lumps all over our heads. We would be in utter pain but could not fight back or say anything, because it would result in even worse violence against us.

We would be locked in a broom cupboard for hours, forgotten about. It was never a short stay under that staircase — sometimes up to two days with no food, no water, no communication and no idea of what it was that you had done wrong. If we did not cross our arms over our chest at night, we would be dragged by the hair out of bed, down the passage to the washroom and our heads would be dunked in a large sink of water. The nuns were so enraged — sorry, I am getting nervous.

**The CHAIR** — That is okay. Just take your time, Gabrielle.

**Ms SHORT** — I just remember this. I remember I used to think I was going to die. Our heads would be dunked in a large sink of water. The nuns were so enraged that they missed the sink on some occasions and caused impact to our heads. It was not uncommon for us to black out for several hours. My own sister ended up in a coma after one of these beatings. I am not sure how many may have died from this.

We were thrown over beds with our pants ripped down, and the nun would jump on you and hold you down with her knee in your back, holding your head down into the bed so you could not breathe or scream. This was another very embarrassing type of attack because we were told to always keep our bodies covered by the nuns, and yet this was a common thing they did. We would be made to stand out in the gazebo just in our undies and singlet in the night-time during winter, which also caused some of the chilblains I mentioned a few moments ago.

Once we turned six we were made to scrub and polish huge floors within the children's home, and whilst we were down on our hands and knees the nuns would kick us in the backside and tell us it was not done right. Every night after prayers we would have to line up in the passage and hold our underwear out so that the nun could sniff, and if they smelled or had any stain on them, if guilty, we would have to remain there until others had gone to bed. Then she would tell us to put our hands on our heads and not move. We would stand there for hours while she sat there, reading her prayer book or saying the rosary, looking out the corner of her eye, and if we got caught even scratching ourselves, she would drag us out and beat the daylight out of us. I remember going to bed covered in bruises and found it hard to sleep because the pain was so excruciating.

We were regularly whacked across the front of the legs and knees with the nun's stick or a 3-foot ruler. Sometimes the nuns would put their hands around our throats and keep squeezing until we almost blacked out. We were swung around in circles by the hair; we would literally be in midair, and the same when we were lifted off the ground by our cheeks. Our heads would be shoved inside the desk and the nun would slam the lid down as hard as they could. These are just some of the tactics and torture that were used on us regularly. These are some of the assaults the nuns of Nazareth House were allowed to do to us when we were small children.

The nuns without a doubt seemed to actually enjoy hurting us and brainwashing us that we were terrible children and that our families did not want us. To this day I am disturbed by the amount of pleasure the nuns got from treating us this way, but furthermore, they also directed the older girls in the children's home to attack us on their behalf, and those girls, like us, had no choice but to do whatever the nuns told them for fear of being bashed, tortured or killed. One example of this: every morning our bedsheets would be checked to see if we had wet the bed. Quite often the nuns got the senior girls to do this for them, and they were instructed to rub our faces into the wet bed until our noses bled. The nun in charge would be looking on to ensure that the senior girls did what they were instructed to do. Sometimes the nosebleeds were so bad from this that my nose would still be dripping later in the morning.

Another punishment for wetting the bed was to stand in a bucket of hot water. We were instructed to stand in this until the water cooled. The burning sensation and the natural reaction to remove our feet from the bucket were met with violence. Once the water had cooled we were allowed to remove our feet but immediately had to put our shoes and socks on over the top of our burning feet and ankles. It did not help that the shoes and socks were always very tight; it was very rare that we had shoes and socks that fit us. There was much more abuse that went on, but hopefully what I have mentioned so far will give you a fair estimation of what our daily lives were like as small children. We had nobody to tell and lived in so much fear that we thought not doing everything they said would end in our ultimate demise.

We did have visitors who would attend Nazareth House from time to time. Some of these visitors were people who donated funding to the home, so on those occasions we would get up that morning and quickly put up the nice bedspreads that were put aside for visitors' days. We would also put a doll on the bed too, and then once

the visit was over we had to remove the bedding and the dolls and put them back in lock-up. I always wanted a doll, so one time I tried to hide the one that was on my bed under the mattress; however, the nun saw me and it resulted in a beating with a hairbrush all over my face. My face was so swollen and lumpy that I could not eat or talk properly for days. Sleeping was always difficult, because every time I moved my face my head would hurt.

As I mentioned in my submission, whilst in this institution I had opportunities to be adopted out, and the nuns always put a stop to it. My mother would come and visit us when she could and was trying to make a home and life for us to come back to. When she came to collect us the nuns told her that because she had been married she was excommunicated and therefore had no rights for her children and was instructed not to visit anymore.

I ran away from Nazareth House when I was 12 years old. I found my older sister, who was living in the nursing quarters of a hospital. She took me back to Nazareth House, because she had nowhere to keep me and would face losing her accommodation if she even tried to. A week after my sister returned me to Nazareth House I was abruptly transferred to a girls home in Geelong called Pirra. I spent two years there, and when I was 14 I was placed in St Aidan's home in Bendigo. This was much the same as my experiences at Nazareth, although the violence was nowhere near as bad as I had previously experienced. The abuse was mostly being used as slave labour in the laundries. We did both hospital and commercial business laundry, and St Aidan's was paid for those services. If we were caught talking or resting, we were severely punished. I was getting to the point of complete desperation, so after a few months I escaped; however, I ended up at the Kyneton police station and was taken to a remand centre called Winlaton.

This was not a place for a child, especially a child whose only crime was running away from the system that was failing me and many other wards of the state. I spent three-and-a-half years there, and on my first day of arriving at this place that had barbed wire all around it like a prison does, I had to strip off all my clothing. I was locked in a cell for 48 hours with a mattress and pot on the floor. Two weeks after arriving I was subjected to indecent assault by being forced to undergo an internal medical for venereal disease. I tried to run away when I got to the clinic, because I was a virgin and from what the other girls in Winlaton told me, this was very invasive. I was dragged into the room, held down on the table and my legs were put in stirrups and I was held down by the staff. This was one of the most horrible experiences I had ever had. When I got to back to Winlaton there was blood in my underwear. This left me disturbed, especially with my strong Catholic upbringing. I now thought I would go to hell because I was no longer a virgin. I cried and cried for a long time, and I had trouble eating for a week. If I did eat, it would just come back up.

I went on to see girls gang-raping other girls, sometimes with sharp objects, and bashings and mistreatment by staff members until I was released at the age of 17 and a half. I was informed of my release by coming back to Winlaton from my day job to find all my belongings on the front of the veranda, and being told my time there was finished. I was then homeless.

I cannot change the past or what has happened; however, I want to share my experience in the hope that this type of thing can never, ever happen again. I would also like to see justice served to those perpetrators of crimes against children that are still living today and, most importantly, a scheme set up for us, such as support for housing, medical and dental, as many of the illnesses that have arisen have stemmed from the physical, emotional, sexual and mental abuse inflicted upon many of us children. I will end with a quote I came across:

If we do not understand the transgressions of the past, then we are absolutely going to commit them again.

Sorry. I was racing, but I had to get it over and done with.

**The CHAIR** — Gabrielle, thank you; you did extremely well, because I know that you were so nervous and it was difficult for you. Thank you very much for sharing your story and providing us a very detailed description of your experience. We do appreciate that.

You have just said that you wanted to share your experience, and that is why you have come forward to speak to us today — as I said, we appreciate that very much. You have just said that you want justice and have described a scheme for victims of a similar experience to yourself. In that scheme I think you highlighted housing and medical.

**Ms SHORT** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Do you know of other women in your position? Do you speak to other women who have — —

**Ms SHORT** — Yes, heaps.

**The CHAIR** — Heaps?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Do they have the same views about wanting a scheme put in place to assist them now, in their current lives? Is that what they want too?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes, because there are a lot of forgotten Australians. If you go here to the streets of Melbourne, most of the homeless over 50 were in an institution at some stage, or they live in rooming houses, caravans, rentals. Not many own their own homes. There should be something like housing, because most of us are all dying off. We are all getting old, you know, so, yes.

**The CHAIR** — So putting in place something to help them with their daily living — housing and medical aspects — would assist them?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes. Priority housing. I was nearly homeless last year. I went to the service, Open Place, but they could not help me. They are very selective. We have got an advocate group called CLAN, who are very selective.

**The CHAIR** — What do you mean by that?

**Ms SHORT** — They just help certain people and that is it. They are given a huge amount of funding, but nobody really sees it. It is virtually divided up in a couple of huge wages, and we do not really know, and a lot of people have left CLAN. I am probably not supposed to say all this, but I have got to just tell you the truth. There are a lot of people who will not go near CLAN now or Open Place, because there is just nothing there. They just get knocked back.

**The CHAIR** — So you are saying that some of the money that is given to them — the funding that is given to the organisations — is going to the administration and not to the victims?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes, all of that and wages.

**Mrs COOTE** — Gabrielle, thank you very much indeed. That was remarkably detailed and really poignant.

**Ms SHORT** — My head is banging.

**Mrs COOTE** — It was terrific. Thank you. You did a fabulous job; it was amazing. Thank you. Have you ever asked for compensation from the Catholic Church?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — What was the reaction?

**Ms SHORT** — I went back in, I think it was, the late 90s — am I allowed to say the lawyers' names?

**Mrs COOTE** — Yes.

**Ms SHORT** — Okay, Maurice Blackburn, because they did a class action, and that did not come through until about 2005, and I got 20 000 — am I allowed to say that too?

**Mrs COOTE** — Yes

**Ms SHORT** — I got 20 000, but that was it. But I did not know what it was all about. We just signed, we did not have a clue.

**Mrs COOTE** — Who organised that? Was it a group of you together with Maurice Blackburn?

**Ms SHORT** — Yes, there was probably about, altogether in mine, that I know, it was about four or five.

**Mrs COOTE** — It was not under the auspices of CLAN or Open Place or anyone else? It was just a group of you got together?

**Ms SHORT** — No. CLAN did not exist at that stage, because we actually applied in the 90s.

**Mrs COOTE** — Do you think that if you had had a lot of sexual abuse that you would have been paid more money by the Catholic Church?

**Ms SHORT** — I do not know, but to me, when you go through abuse as a child and you are two or three, or you are being raped, or you are being physically smashed up against walls, I would find pain is pain. A young child is not going to know whether they are getting sexually abused or, you know — we used to black out. To be honest, I do not know, but I cannot claim sexual abuse because I was not sexually abused, although there are some things in there that I find a little bit leaning towards that.

**Mrs COOTE** — What you have given us today has been extremely helpful, so thank you very much indeed.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Thanks for telling us the terrible story that you have gone through. I was wondering about the laundry work you were doing. Could you explain a bit more to me? For example, did you do it 8 hours a day? How often did you do it? Were you paid for it?

**Ms SHORT** — When I was there, I was only there for about five months, and they had a school and it was done by correspondence, but we were not in that school the whole time. They would come and call a lot of us out, depending on how many people they needed, but there were days when you could start at 7 in the morning and you would still be there at 6 at night, and you would have missed school that day. It was really hot, and, I mean, we were kids! And they were paid by the outside companies to use us.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — It was just a normal commercial laundry.

**Ms SHORT** — Yes.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — And basically all the work was being done by the children?

**Ms SHORT** — By the girls, yes.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — And were you paid, yourself, for any of that?

**Ms SHORT** — No. At that stage we did not know — I suppose we knew the nuns were being paid but we did not put it together. That was just part of the day to day. We just did it. You did not ask questions, you did it, and if you rebelled, you copped it.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Thank you.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you very much, Gabrielle. A number of the instances you described, you said the nuns would give you severe retribution if you tried to report anything internally, like you tried to find your sister, and you described how the nun would not tell you where she was, and then you go to the priest. He eventually tells you where your sister was, and in response to that, you describe it. Can you tell us what happened in response to that? And then I am going to ask another question.

**Ms SHORT** — Yes. I put in there about it, because two of my sisters were taken. We did not go out to school until we were form 1, so the school was in it. This was my first year: went out, came home, one of my sisters was missing. I came back a few days later, the other one had gone, no goodbye, no nothing. Anyway, this time I went to the priest after benediction — can I say his name? Because I am not saying anything bad about him.

**The CHAIR** — No, that is fine.

**Ms SHORT** — Father Halloran; he was actually the nice priest. The one we had before him was that Ridsdale; he used to bash the shit out of us, which I have not put in there, but anyway that is another story. He actually was nice, we felt like we could approach him, and I waited for him to come out of the church. I kept

begging him to find out where my sister was. I walked away thinking he was not going to do anything, but he must obviously have thought about it, and then he came down to the yard. This other girl and I were putting the balls in the goal ring. He said, 'Gabrielle, do you want to go and see your sister?', and I said, 'Which one?', and he said, 'Loretta'. He said, 'I found out where she is', and he said, 'She is in St Catherine's', and I was rapt. Then Marlene, my friend who was Loretta's best friend, said, 'Can I come too?', and he said, 'Yes, I will have to find out'. But obviously he got permission, and he took us there. Once I knew where she was, I felt relieved, and I went and saw her and I felt good.

I went back to the home that evening, and then I was lying in bed and all of a sudden the blankets came off and a nun grabbed me by the hair, dragged me down off the bed, up the passage, into the washroom and started slamming my head into the sink and the water, and she kept saying, 'How dare you!', and this was Sister Philomena. Anyway, then I do not remember much. I just remember waking up on my pillow and my hair was all wet, my pillow was wet and my head was banging. I do not know whether I drowned or what; I must have blacked out, but I do not remember her taking me back to bed.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — The next question I was going to ask may be fairly obvious, but if you could just tell us what sort of hope or culture was there for children to report abuses internally?

**Ms SHORT** — Nothing. No, that was our little world within the world, you know what I mean? That was all we knew. Who would we go to? The nuns were — well, they were holy. I mean, we were kids. We did not know anything about the outside world.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — And when you tried, then you got treated that way.

**Ms SHORT** — I remember sometimes girls would write 'I hate this place' on the back of the toilets, and if the nuns saw it, they would line us all up. They would have us there for hours, trying to find out who it was. If nobody owned up or nobody dobbed somebody in, then the nuns would pick someone out. Then they would get the living daylight belts out of them. That was as far as we got. We were writing on the toilet door.

**Mr WAKELING** — Gabrielle, thank you very much for telling us your harrowing story, but it is very important that we have people like yourself who are prepared to come forward and tell us their story, because it really provides us with a human understanding of exactly what happened in these institutions. Firstly, in regard to that incident you described before with the sink, you did make the point earlier — you said you did not know how many children may have died. Are you aware of any deaths that had occurred in the institution whilst —

**Ms SHORT** — I know that girls did disappear from there. And most of the time we would find out in the dining room in the morning, because it always seemed to happen when no-one was around or in the evening or when we were at school. So I cannot actually say that I know anyone that has died, but I know that a lot of girls disappeared, and that was why I wanted to find out about my sisters.

**Mr WAKELING** — Thank you for that. In terms of what you have been through, did you ever feel as though you were willing to go and talk to the police?

**Ms SHORT** — I never thought that they would deal with something that happened then. No, I never went. I had my children. I lived my life. Then a lot of it started coming out in my 20s. I had a breakdown at 20, I had a breakdown at 25. I did not understand why I was the way I was, and it was only when I started meeting up with some of my Nazareth friends that I really started to talk about it. I tried counselling. I went to the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau; a priest put me onto them. I went to him and he prayed for me and put me onto them. I still had a lot of religious beliefs, but not now. I have managed to unbrainwash myself. I went there, and then she started to ask me a bit about myself and where I grew up. As soon as I started mentioning about the convent, she did not want to know any more. It was almost like, 'Oh'. That was in the 80s.

**Mr WAKELING** — Certainly what you are raising is clearly criminal activity, and through this committee afterwards there is support available. We encourage all victims, if they feel the courage to do so, to report these incidents. You may be aware that a number of people through this inquiry have reported —

**Ms SHORT** — Can we still do that?

**The CHAIR** — We have support here if anybody would like to speak to the police. There is a special task force set up within Victoria Police to deal with these matters that is quite independent of this committee, so you can report the matters to the police.

**Ms SHORT** — Okay. That is good to know.

**Mr WAKELING** — Thank you very much, and good luck.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much. We do appreciate your time, and your evidence this morning has been most helpful. Thank you very much indeed.

**Ms SHORT** — Thanks for listening. It is good that we have a system that is starting to listen to us. I used to stutter, which is why I was nervous.

**The CHAIR** — You did not stutter.

**Ms SHORT** — I used to cop it at Nazareth House for stuttering. I have never done anything like this publicly, but I had to do it. I knew I had to do it.

**The CHAIR** — You have done very well, and you did not stutter at all. It has been fantastic.

**Witness withdrew.**