



Friday, 28 February 2020

This is my Response to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria, a little of my story, mostly since the Victorian apology. Please take the time to read this fully, I apologise if it is a little long, but it is complex and my only chance to show those that can make change what this experience has had on me, just one adoptee.

I am an adoptee, born in January 1968 and adopted October 1969 after being a State Ward. I consider that forced adoption has had a profoundly negative impact on my life and I still struggle to make sense of and heal from my adoption. My birth mother wanted to keep me, but she was forced to surrender me. I lost all of my original family due to government judgement and intervention, and societal mores.

It's been over 7 years since the Victorian Government issued an apology for their part of forced adoption. It was at that time, when I saw this apology, that I realised that I may be able to explore my story, to be allowed to feel and investigate the complex trauma that adoption had left me.

I contacted **Open Place** to request my file. I had received a copy of my file in 1992 but wanted to apply again to see what new information may be there. I did so in 2015.

I had been notified by mail in 1992 that I had been a State Ward before adoption because the government had labelled me retarded and that I was a special needs child. To this day I cannot understand why the government sent this damaging, some 80 pages of information without warning to my letterbox. It caused me profound harm and I have never seen myself in the same light since that day.

When my file arrived in 2015, I was given time at an office at **Open Place**, and support workers to help me understand and process what had happened to me back in 1968/69. My story was complex and difficult, I had been a State Ward for 2 years, and no-one, not my birth or adoptive mother had ever told me of this, and my birthmother never knew. The government had tried to erase the first 2 years of my life, changed my name buried and my story.

What I did notice that was different from 1992 was that my file was page numbered from a PDF, and I noticed straight away that many pages were missing from my file. I was told that those were redacted pages. I asked why they were redacted, and I was told it was to protect the privacy of my adoptive parents.

I didn't understand that in 2015, and still in 2020, that the adoptive parents are still the people that are protected, while the rights of adoptive adults and birth parents go begging. I asked for the redacted parts of my file and I was told the State laws would not allow me to have them, even though the file had my name on it.

In 2015 I contacted **Find and Connect** and spoke to a worker and reiterated to her that I wanted a complete copy of my file without redactions. I asked her if she could tell me what was in it, why was it so important to protect my adoptive parents? I had had a difficult childhood and I wanted to know if anything was being withheld by

the Victorian Government that explained why I was placed with this particular family. I had started counselling with a psychologist at this time as I knew I had a journey ahead of me and the repercussions of a difficult childhood were still affecting me.

I applied to the **County Court** of Victoria under Section 99 of the Adoption Act of 1984 to obtain my unredacted file, one of the Find and Connect workers from DHHS still objected to my obtaining my file and wanted me at 47 years old to get permission from my adoptive parents to read the information in my file.

I connected to my support service in **Vanish** to get some support for when I went to court and to see if they could help me write a letter to the Honourable Judge Pullen. To my disbelief Vanish would *not* support me at all. They sent me away and I felt like I had no support and was rejected by my own cohort as this was my primary adoptee advocacy service. It was devastating to me.

I called **Relationships Australia** and there was no support forthcoming. They had no understanding of past adoption practices even though they had received a lot of funding. I was referred to a counsellor, but they had no understanding of adoption, and again I was left without a place to go for support. If I call this agency today, I have to speak to a machine and ask for a call-back. This means that they may call at an inconvenient time where I may have to explain to any present company that I need to duck out for a private chat about my adoption trauma. I do not use this service at all and it's appalling that they were ever given funding, they know nothing about past adoption practices.

Representing myself, I had my day in the **County Court** on the 5th of November 2015, and on the 12th of November 2015 Judge Pullen ruled in my favour and gave me my file fully unredacted. I was the first person in Victoria to do so, and I did it without the help of any support services, in fact it was harder knowing that they *did not* support me in such a ground-breaking moment for adoptees.

My file redactions revealed that Case Workers checking my parents 50 years ago had concerns about my placement with my family, but the concern was overlooked. These alarms around aggression did play out as family violence in my life with my adoptive family. It was revealed by my file that I should go to an "unintelligent family" and that I would never achieve any significant schooling level. The social worker that decided I was not fit for adoption but wardship did so on the grounds of me not responding appropriately to stimuli (I "...just sat there and did nothing") at one appointment, after I had been removed from my mother, spent 6 weeks in a hospital, some time in Allambi reception centre, and finally in a foster home. This absolute negligence and haughty judgement all still distress me today.

Since the time of my win in Court I have had little dealing with **Open Place** as although they are a fantastic service and I access funding for ongoing counselling. I had 2 years as a State Ward, and I was considered lucky, by other service users, to be adopted, and therefore was not accepted by them. The workers were always helpful and available, but I didn't fit in with other service users because I was adopted, which I wish I could have done.

I have attended support groups at **Vanish** and have found them an invaluable resource when going through reunion and the life shattering experience of acceptance and rejection from our birth families. Nothing is as supportive as your peers who has been through the same experiences as you. I have trust issues with

the management of Vanish since they refused to support me in court getting my file, and again refused to support me with trying to implement Integrated Birth Certificates after finding my father who I found through DNA.

The search and support workers at **Vanish** are a great resource, although they are moving away from employing members of the adoptee triad which is disappointing. It would have been great if Vanish offered more courses in dealing with reunion to move towards healing, as the support groups really just focus on the reunion and the pain of adoption. I have had to undergo therapy with psychologists who know very little about past adoption and I would prefer support from agencies who do know.

The support agencies have been lacking. As a service user and adoptee advocate, it appears all of them fear losing funding and therefore deliver services that lack real support for adoptees as they don't want to appear to be operating outside of a preferred government agenda.

- **Open Place** while full of brilliant workers but lacks support services for anyone who started life as a Ward but was adopted. I do get ongoing counselling funding through this agency.
- **Vanish** support groups are fantastic, but management always felt my advocacy was too risky perhaps for fear of funding loss, they are much too conservative when looking at supporting the adoptive community. They could do so much more.
- **Relationships Australia** is an appalling service and have never helped me as an adopted person and I have called them at least 6 times over the past 4 years.

I have contacted Dan Andrews the **Victorian Premier** to ask about why the recommendations from the Law Reform Commission (which I had taken part of) had not been implemented as far as integrated Birth Certificates.

<https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/content/6-birth-certificates-adopted-people>

After over a year I was contacted by the registrar of **Births Deaths and Marriages** James Lawson and met with him twice and discussed the importance of truthful birth certificates for adopted people who wanted them. We have looked at what the documents may look like, and now nearly 12 months later again (February 2020) I have still not received any advice of anything changing. Why won't the government implement the recommendations?

In Summary, the apology of 2012 gave me permission to explore my origins. To know that the government accepted that the adoptions of the past were handled wrongly, and they were sorry. Since that time I have been in contact with many support services such as Vanish, Open Place, Relationships Australia, Find and Connect, and I've contacted government agencies such as The Premier and Births Deaths and Marriages; and in my experience none of the agencies has been able to fully support me as an adoptee. The Victorian government continues to drag its heels on implementing the recommendations from the review of the Act of 1984, this shows us in the adoptee cohort that the apology was just lip service and not a heartfelt understanding of the government wrongs and desire to support us in healing.

