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To The Chair Person,

Here is a transcript of my history in institutional care as a State ward.  
I spent my formative years in 5 different institutions as a State ward.

Broadmeadows 1948-1950  
Abbotsford 1950 – 1954  
East Brighton 1954 – 1962  
Nunawading Three weeks Jan - Feb 1962  
Bendigo 1962 - 1965

My first 3 years were at St Joseph's Broadmeadows Foundering Home. At the age of three I was transferred to the Good Shepherd Convent Abbotsford. I underwent 2 physical and 2 psychological assessments over this time. The first examination was 1/6/49 and the other on 1/11/50. The IQ test I was subjected to was for a fully sighted person. Given I have a severe visual impairment I failed many of the tasks I was given. I was diagnosed as being mentally retarded even though the psychologist suggested I could have sight problems. At this stage this was not followed up.

While I was at Abbotsford I was subjected to child labor. This took the form of domestic cleaning and because of my so-called retardation I was put to work making mattresses for most of the time. I would have to tease the horsehair then stuff it into the mattress. My state ward files indicate that I did participate in some pre-school activities but I have no memory of this but have powerful memories of the smell of the horsehair and the smells and texture of the ticking material.

I also experienced emotional abuse. I was a bed wetter, so I would have to stand in a corner in my wet nightie and my wet sheet draped over my head until the nun dismissed me. I was also force fed when I wouldn't eat my food.

On 24/6/54 I was discharged to Marillac House, a home for retarded children in Brighton. By the end of 1954 I received my first pair of glasses. The lenses in the glasses were very thick and looked like three lenses in one. That will give you an idea of the severity of my sight problems. Marillac had its own internal school. My education was primarily focused on physical education eg dancing and exercises. Handcraft was another component, as was religious instruction. The education based on the three Rs amounted to about grade 2 level. I was disadvantaged in this area as I could not see the blackboard too clearly.

As there was very few nuns -7 in all- to care for about 100 children I became a source of labor here, too. Some of the children were severely retarded and as I was very quick and reliable, I had to provide care to some of these children, like bathing and dressing. At this time I was only 9 or 10 years old myself. The domestic cleaning was done by myself and a small number of other able girls. I began this work shortly after I arrived at Marillac, when I was only 7 or 8 years old. Here is a list of the cleaning jobs: scrubbing floors; applying floor polish; cleaning toilets and baths; and making beds. I also had to darn socks. In addition on some days in the late afternoon I had to shell big Hessian bags of peas or top and tail beans. Peeling potatoes was also a chore I was required to do about once a week. The head nun sister Margaret would occasionally check the potato peelings and if we had removed any of the white of the potato we would be reprimanded for wasting food and made to eat the raw white potato that was accidentally peeled off.

Marillac House operated on a two-class system. As most of the girls were not State wards they would go home at the end of the school term. I would have to pack their suitcase with their clothes, unlike state wards who owned no clothes of their own. While girls with families were away I would have to do extra spring-cleaning, like cleaning windows. I was subjected to harsh treatment for behaving like any normal person would in the same circumstances. Any assertion of will or free spirit was punished. Punishment would often involve cleaning all the girls' shoes on my own, as usually the shoes were cleaned by four of us at any time. Although dish washing was a collective job, it could be given as an individual job, as punishment. I also experienced solitary confinement for hours, being made to sit by a grandfather clock in a poorly lit hallway. I would then have to pull down my underpants and lean over a bath in order that the nun could give me the cuts

with a wooden spoon on my bottom. Some nuns would pull your earlobes or slap you over the face. Sometimes the punishment involved being left out in the yard in the dark.

I didn't like eating many of the foods, such as porridge, tripe, lambs fry, brains, custard and sago and refused to eat them. When I didn't eat my food it would come back to me the next meal, cold and I was given no other food.

Marillac had fundraising activities, which also involved my labor. Trucks used to go out and old newspapers and rags were collected. Again, with a couple other girls, I would sort out the rags and bundle up the newspapers. Two other girls and I would also stand on the corner of Collins and Flinders St in Melbourne or go door to door selling buttons for The Lord Mayor's appeal, as Marillac benefited from this charity.

Another form of fundraising was with these same girls, going out by train to the surrounding suburbs of Brighton and door knocking, asking people if they would like to donate any goods to Marillac House, the home for retarded children. Much of these activities were a substitute for an education.

I deeply resented the stigma of being labeled mentally retarded and it was partly the reason I absconded from Marillac with four other girls, when I was just fourteen years old. We were picked up by the police walking the streets of Sandringham and locked-up in the local police-station cell for about 4 hours.

Three of the girls weren't state wards even though they didn't seem to have family that I was aware of. These girls were placed in other catholic institutions in Melbourne. The state wards, being myself and one other girl, were sent to Winlaten remand center. This had a deeply emotional effect on me, as I was treated like a prisoner. I had to strip, then I was required to put on clothes they provided. I was confined to an excise yard during the day then locked in a bedroom on my own at night. I was subjected to emotional torments and humiliation by the other inmates. Many of these girls were streetwise but I was very naïve.

After three week the other state ward and I were transferred to St Aidan's Good Shepherd Convent Bendigo. This move only added to my traumatized state as I now found myself trapped in a prison for the next 4 years. Every room of this *prison*, a so-called convent, was locked, be it the dinning room or the dormitory.

The inmate population was made up of women of all ages. There were girls who had become too old to stay in institutions for young children. These girls tended to have an intellectual disability or a physical disability. Some women were single mothers and others were old women with dementia. Also many young girls had been placed by the courts for protection or for criminal offences. I was so traumatized and shocked that I didn't menstruate for about 12 months. I cried and hardly spoke a word for the first few months.

I was put to work, slave labour, in the commercial laundry the nuns ran. Illness didn't interrupt the onerous and endless work day, which involved heavy physical labour.

I witnessed another girl who had beautiful long wavy hair struggling while being held down by three ladies and this nun called Mother Peter, a meek smiling woman, who could transform into a *'butcher'*, pulling at the screaming girl's hair while chopping it off. The poor girl looked like a boy after Mother Peter had finished with her.

I was subjected to physical abuse, this involved the butcher also hacking at my hair as means of humiliation. Having witnessed what had previously happened to the other girl, I acquiesced. After the hair job I was locked up in a toilet for more than 24 hours. Food was brought to the toilet for me to eat. It was so cold in the toilet I had to keep my hands soaked in the basin filled with hot water. I was given a pillow and blanket at night and was only let out after being coerced into an apology.

My name was changed, even though I didn't approve of it. Friendships with other girls were not allowed to develop. You had no privacy, even when undressing a nun would keep watch to make sure you didn't go near another girl's bed. Talking between inmates was forbidden in the dormitory and dining room, although in the latter it was allowed on special occasions.

The second hand clothes I had to wear were often not suitable. The winters were very cold and I would suffer from frostbite on my knees and heels. I often had no socks to wear and the second hand shoes would have the interlining missing.

Girl's who had done their time would just disappear, never to be heard of again.

Additional to the laundry work, we did all the cleaning around the institution, and often the cleaning jobs were dirty and heavy.

The shortterm state wards were given a few hours of education a day. The cruel fate for me being labeled retarded was to be denied access to this education.

My stigmatized status enabled the nuns to exploit me. The nuns were able to use my retardation as an excuse to blocking my discharge from the convent. They kept advising the welfare board that I was not ready to be placed in a job outside the institution. In fact it is stated in my state ward files that I would always need supervision because I was too retarded. I was profoundly burdened and stigmatized by my experience that I had no hope of every gaining freedom from the exploitation of the repressive prison environment, that all I wanted to do was to finish my life.

Given my retardation status it was surprising that I was the only young girl given the job to serve in the small shop that was stocked with some grocery lines and ice creams and loillies on Saturday afternoons and for an hour in the evening. Some of the old people received a pension and I think some of the police girls received an allowance. For all the work I undertook I was given only five shillings pocket money a fortnight, from which I had to provide my own toiletries and any sanitary napkins above the 1 packet supplied per month. Any small transgression would incur a fine, so this meagre amount could be reduced even further.

The food we were given was a disgrace. The cream would be skimmed off the milk and served up on Sunday as a treat. It was often turning sour. One piece of fruit was handed out on Sunday.

I had to get up early for church every morning in all three catholic institutions.

It was not until my late forties that I obtained an education, even though I had made many attempts prior to this. I paid a friend to teach me how to write. She was the first person who understood the impediment my sight imposed in my ability to access the written word and grammar skills. I had self-educated through RN ABC radio up until this stage, and still rely heavily on this as a source of information, despite not belonging, as you can clearly see, to the Chardonney elite. I'm currently attending Melbourne

University and am halfway through a Bachelor of Arts degree, receiving very high marks for my work in all subjects undertaken so far. I'm sure after reading my submission you will have no doubt about my intellectual capacity.

I see myself very much a child who identifies with the stolen generation. While I have survived extreme deprivation I am left with deep emotional scars. I have a sense of abandonment, exploitation and not belonging. I have undergone a period of therapy to address many of the issues but feel it impossible to fully recover from my experiences. The State Welfare Board was implicit in this travesty of justice and the abuse and exploitation I experienced, as it failed in their duty of care. Welfare officers would make regular visits to Marillac House and St Aidan's. My deep sense of discontentment and alienation I conveyed to the officer but I was met with the response, "If you are good you will be happy".

You might be interested to know that the other state ward who was with me in the last three institutions gained the right through the Supreme Court to seek damages from the State Government. In 1996 the Government settled an undisclosed amount of compensation, out of court. Thus, the Government avoided a precedent being set. I was denied the same justice on a couple of grounds. First, I was not eligible for legal aid. Finally, a copy of the IQ test I was given as a child could not be found. I think it was appalling that girls like me had to fend for ourselves after enduring the authoritarian and sadistic culture of the institution. You had no network to fall back as you had no contact with any of the girls from the institution. And once you reached the age of eighteen, the Welfare Board had no responsibility or duty of care for you.

I could say more but I think I will leave my input at this point. I hope it will give you an appreciation of what it has meant to be a child – invisible in an institution. And for those who say it was in the past and we should get on with life, should take a close look at many families who find it hard to let go of family hurts and disappointments. As a child raised in an institution, I have no sense of belonging or a family experience to share. As a physically disabled child raised in an institution I have undergone experiences reminiscent of Dickensian nineteenth century orphanages, despite this happening in the so-called egalitarian lucky country in the mid twentieth century, a country experiencing post-war prosperity.