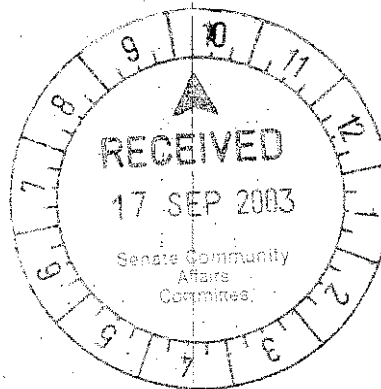


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Sharyn O'Brien

To Whom It May Concern

When I was sixteen years old in 1964 I was sentenced to six months detention, (however I stayed for almost two years) in Parramatta Girls Home and Hay Detention Centre. The following is the details as to why I was there.

I was born in Crown Street Womens Hospital in 1948, the daughter of an Australian mother and an African American father. My father was a merchant seaman on R & R leave in Sydney when he met my mother. When he left Sydney to return to the USA a few weeks later, he did not know that my mother was pregnant with me.

My mother lived with her mother and she was not allowed to have me in her mother's house. As there was no Unmarried Mother's Pension and a White Australia Policy in place, my mother found it too difficult to keep me

I was institution raised in an orphanage run by the Sisters of St Joseph, where I was subject to physical and mental abuse. From the age of seven years old I ran away from the convent to find my mother's house, which I eventually did when I was eleven years old.

I went to live with my Grandmother who treated me with contempt because she was embarrassed by the fact that her daughter (my mother) had an illegitimate black child to an African American man. She was extremely cruel to me, mentally and physically.

My mother married when I was twelve years old and had a son, all three of them were fair skinned. I felt like the odd one out and very alienated. I asked my mother to tell me about my father and my heritage. Her answer was always the same, "Your father was an American and he is dead!" She told me that same story for 47 years.

All of this took its toll on me as I was just a kid. I had low self esteem and no sense of belonging. I felt I had no identity and that I was bad and soiled and that this father of mine must have been a bad person as nobody in my family would talk about him ever, other than to say he was dead, which I had never believed anyway. I began to runaway again.

I was arrested by the police and taken to the childrens court many times, until I was sixteen and placed in Parramatta Girls Home for "being in moral danger."

During my stay in these Government institutions I was subjected to physical and mental abuse and saw many other young girls being abused.

Some of the treatments were to have an internal vaginal check by a "doctor" on arrival who used stainless steel implements and his fingers to examine me, standing in line to have nightly showing of the crotch of our underpants by the officers, how embarrassing and soul destroying for young teenage girls to do this, showers without doors within view of male and female officers, no talking and marching like German soldiers for seven months, period blood running down our legs and wetting ourselves urinate while waiting for permission to be allowed to go to the toilet, extreme isolation with only bread and milk for days on end and the bullying and hitting by both the female and the male officers. Not that it happened to me but according to several of my fellow inmates, some were sexually abused. It was a nightmare time for me that affected my life very badly. I was never rehabilitated nor was I counseled or shown any compassion or sensitivity. I was treated like a criminal just for being a teenage runaway.

I went in a runaway and came out at age eighteen a young offender.

I believe the people employed by the Child Welfare Department should be made accountable for the emotional, physical and mental abuse they bestowed on the young people who went through the system. Many of them are still living and their actions should be investigated. Some of the officers were very good and decent people, others were vicious and child abusers.

My life has been very sad, made even sadder by hearing the stories of many of my old friends who went through the Child Welfare system. I have slowly built it to be a life I am extremely proud of. I had to work through all the hard times and learn to believe that I am a good person with the right to be treated with respect and dignity.

I now have a beautiful family with a husband, children and grandchildren that I love and a new family in America that I found seven years ago, my father's family who cherish me. I have learned to be proud of the colour of my skin and to stand tall. My father was loved and respected by all

who knew him. A gentleman who never knew that I existed, however he passed away only 15 years ago, so while my mother was continually telling me he was dead, I could have had the opportunity to meet him. Finally after years of searching I met his family and I now have 3 sisters and a brother living in Los Angeles and 80 cousins living in North Carolina and New York. We were introduced to each other by satellite on Midday with Kerri Anne and put together by Gordon Elliot on his television show in New York. It was truly worth a lifetime of searching and I now travel regularly to the States to visit them and they will be coming to Australia to join us for Christmas this year. Now I am at peace with myself. My self esteem is now healthy and I feel happy.

I have a wonderful job and I am blessed with great friends.

I understand that there will always be troubled youth but I do hope they are not being put through the agonies and the cruelty of Government institutions such as Parramatta and Hay. They, and we should have the right to be understood and cared for, at a tender age when young people are allowed to make mistakes, especially when some of the girls I knew were as young as twelve years old and were being abused by family members and treated as though it was their fault and they were to blame. They were locked up and the abuse continued at the hands of people employed by the Government of the day, who should have been caring for these young girls and it also happened to the young boys as well.

Shame on the Department of Child Welfare, shame, shame, shame!!!