

Joan Donnelly

- Born: 7th July 1946
- 1948 Became Ward of the State aged 2 years and six months. Her mother had been certified insane and Joan was living with drunken grandparents in an old shack by the riverbank at Shepparton. Placed into "receiving depot". Joseph (Joan's brother) was one week old and he was also placed into "care".
- 27/10/48 Moved to St Josephs, Broadmeadows
26/12/48 Fairfield Hospital, (pneumonia after measles)
9/3/49 St Joseph's Broadmeadows
Feb. 1950 Moved to St. Catherine's, Geelong
- 1953 Psychologist report (Margaret Derbyshire, Travencore), notes that Joan "is clearly of normal intelligence, and although there is verbal inhibition, her language development is normal and she has no speech defect. As far as her intelligence is concerned, she should be quite capable of doing normal grade work at school. She is suitably placed at an institution for normal children." Her personality is described as inhibited and withdrawn and play therapy was recommended for her.
- 16/9/54 Depot
23/9/54 Travencore
17/6/55 Boarded out to Mrs. Phelan, Hawthorn. These are Joan's earliest memories. Mrs Phelan wanted a little girl who would wear pretty dresses with lace and things and I didn't do that. I remember playing with the boys next door. I think Mrs Phelan's daughter wanted to come back and live there with her husband so that is why I got put back into an institution.
- 5/1/56 Turana
- 27/2/56
Ages 9 – 15 years: Went to live at Marillac House. – Mrs Donnelly said Marillac house was for the intellectually retarded or severely physically handicapped. Mrs Donnelly asks why she would be placed in this institution when the reports just three years earlier show she is of normal intelligence and should be with normal children! She said the girls there were aged between 5-10 years and most of them were severely retarded, could not speak properly and made no sense and some of them had no control of their bodies.
Had no friends. "My best friend was the dog – he would play with me – the other kids I played with couldn't remember the game the next day."
Felt intensely embarrassed when out in public with the children who were housed at Marillac House. "We went to the park and if other kids came along we had to move, like we were poison – it was wrong – I wasn't poison, but we couldn't mix with other people"
"I hated being seen with the kids – they had a holiday house in Sorrento – I had to dress exactly like them all in the same dress and sandals – it made you look like them and I hated it – we had to walk on the street and it was so embarrassing".
"My toys were ruined by the other children. These were paper dolls that I made and the kids would rip them up and if I went mad at them I'd be punished – I'd be sent to bed for what seemed like ages– I was told I should know better – you just couldn't have anything private". I had another present, a stuffed dog, given by Mrs Phelan and they poked the eyes in – I was 10 – you have to go mad at them and then you get in trouble".
Mrs Donnelly recalls being punished for turning the television off. No one had been watching it and she thought that to turn it off would be helpful. Instead, she was forbidden to watch TV for a long period of time, which she

believes amounted to years. She remembers she had to stay in the room where the other children were watching TV although she had to have her back to it. She remembers "that really hurt me".

Mrs Donnelly remembers she started wetting the bed again. She was woken up at night to go to the toilet, but despite this, continued to wet the bed. She got into trouble for this, saying that "they went right off at you – they stood you in the corner with the wet sheets to embarrass you".

Mrs Donnelly says she felt angry that she had been placed in this institution when she had been assessed as mentally normal when assessed at Travencore.

15 years -

Good Shepherd Convent – St Aidans, Mrs Donnelly says this was like a concentration camp where she was put in the wrong section with people from the courts and had to work in a big laundry which had five bars on the window and there were old people there as well. Mrs Donnelly says the Nuns asked the Department to extend her wardship until she was 21 because they said she was mentally retarded and would never hold a job. She says she worked hard all day at the laundry.

She had no schooling at the Bendigo Convent and she just had to do hard work all the time in the laundry. She said she had never learned to read or write and she had attempted to write names of things on her arm in order to remember them.

Mrs Donnelly recalls that at one stage "I had little gold safety pins in my ears, I would have been about 17. This was because I didn't have any earrings. I made the holes in my ears so I could wear this "jewellery". The nuns ripped it out of my ear". It was Sister Claire who did this.

Mrs Donnelly also recalls that a nun there deliberately burned her left hand in an industrial press. She remembers that she had to attend a Sister Peter every day in order to get the wound dressed. However, it had actually been Sister Peter who had burnt her and she believes that this was done as a punishment.

Mrs Donnelly recalls being sexually assaulted by two girls. When she found herself bleeding she thought it was because the girls had cut her. She went to the nuns but they wouldn't listen and immediately after this, she became angry with one of the nuns, saying that she hated her. In response she was locked in a toilet. She recalls washing the blood away with water from the toilet. She remembers she was given her meals in the toilet.

Another recollection is that of confession where Mrs Donnelly said she didn't feel as though she had anything to confess. She remembers sitting in the confessional with nothing to say and after one of those sessions the priest told the Nuns who dragged her out of the confessional, down the corridor, by the hair.

Mrs Donnelly recalls having the feeling that "you'd never trust the nuns" and that "I don't trust people now". There is one woman whom she worked with and whom she tends to confide in. An important element in the relationship is that this woman was also in a home as a child, and therefore Mrs Donnelly believes that she would be more understanding and would not hold this history against her. Mrs Donnelly says she doesn't have a friend outside work "I don't like people sitting too close to me – I've turned down invitations from girls at work to socialise – I just make up some excuse".

Mrs Donnelly also recalls:

"I ran away from Marillac House three times. At fifteen I was in Winlaton twice.....for a few days and for three weeks. I hadn't done anything wrong and I was put in Winlaton. I was locked in a cell. We were stripped naked and lined up in front of other people. This was terrible – imagine, I had lived all those years with the Nuns where we learned nothing about the body and we were lined up naked. I was at Bendigo, St Aidans, Catholic Place. Good Shepherd Nuns for three and a half or four years....I stayed until eighteen and a half. Then they put me into a live-in position to run or work in a kitchen with a cook and three kids. I went back to Winlaton

for two months because I couldn't stay with these people. Put me into a boarding house in Kew, a few weeks because I told them of what happens to a Ward of the State. Then they put me into the Nuns at Albert Park but I didn't stay there long. I went back into Winlaton. They wrecked me. I got a place by myself when I was twenty something....I got pregnant. They didn't know I was pregnant. I was working at a drycleaners. I stayed with a woman who worked there. She had a son of thirteen. She said I couldn't stay there if I kept the baby. I didn't stay with her for too long because she wanted me to get rid of it with a knitting needle. I had the girl. She'd be thirty-five. I did sign papers....I couldn't read them. I didn't know what it was about. I wasn't allowed to see her in hospital. They said. No. She was adopted out. She found me a few years ago. She heard I had been in a Mental Institution so I hardly talked to her. I saw her once or twice. I am not sure. I got pregnant again. I was going with a policeman. It was a girl. I kept this girl. I left her in hospital - I went next day to a JP and got her out. I brought her up. She is thirty-four. I had a son seven years later. The father of Lisa is a policeman. He wanted to meet my family. We split up. An overdose to the Royal Melbourne. I told the Government to leave me alone. He paid for twelve months and then I went to Court. I lived on my own for a while. After a while and an old woman with two kids, I met a woman raising three children. We helped each other. We moved to the same places together. She died. I was on my own. I met this guy Tony. Tony is the father of Jason. I was with Tony for five years. We split up.

I cry a lot. I don't let the kids see me. I am raising the daughter's daughter now. She is 18. My daughter won't kiss or cuddle Charlene. I have reared her since birth. My children didn't know what had happened to me until a while ago. I just shut myself in the bedroom. I don't trust anyone. I don't have any friends. No one comes to my place. I don't go out with anyone. No one to trust. Always been shut off from other people. The State took all my rights away from me. I lost all my rights being a child. The Nuns tore my bras off me. I blame them. I didn't even wear a dress. I never even breastfed the kids....I don't go swimming because I feel people will look at me. They tore my bras off me.. The only pair I had. They went to lock me up one day. I got locked up all the time. I was in with the girls. They cut my hair off on one side - right down to the scalp. This happened often as a form of punishment. This was a terrible punishment as sometimes we felt our hair was all we had left. With the Nuns at St. Aidan I was locked in the toilet and I lost count how many times. They cut my hair on the side of the head and then the other.

And now.....

My eating is shocking. Sometimes I don't eat. The weight is all right. With sleeping, I have had shocking dreams since I have been out. I dream a lot of the Nuns. All of its bad. At the Mental home the nuns...all of those kids would dribble. I had to run away because I was very embarrassed. I had to work there and not even go to school. To wash all the dishes. I needed a chair to reach the bottom of the sink. I lost my dignity. I just had to work all the time. I taught myself to read and write when I had my second daughter.

I can never forgive the Government. I was in for probation. They should have left me with my grandparents. I think my father is my grandfather...My mother's sister...some of her kids from grandfather. We got punished for it. Five of us were made Ward of the State at the same time. My mother's brother and wife wanted to take Joseph and myself. They wouldn't let them have us. The Government didn't care. They locked us and just took the key and threw it away.

"I now own my own house and have bought my grand daughter her own car- I have done this all by myself and by hard work. I work seven days a week so that I don't have time to think. Counselling doesn't help me - I have to live with this every day of my life. There is something which reminds me of my past every day. I see school children playing or going to school and I feel sad because I never had that. There are so many things that make me remember.

When my grand daughter was born I worked at the drycleaners and after I paid my rent I only had \$10 per week to live on. We grew vegies and ate potatoes and bread. I wouldn't get help because I thought they would take my son and my grand daughter from me. I have fought for my grand daughter so she would not get taken away. I would never want what happened to me, happen to her.

My life was taken away. My teenage life was taken away. Nothing can make this better. There is no reason for the Department of Human Services to rip a child away unless that child is in real danger. Kids grow up – they are not going to stay little for ever. Because my grandparents didn't have floorboards – that was their problems, not the Departments. My report says I was happy and clean. Our entire family was ripped apart and we can never get back together. They split me away from my 1-week-old brother and we never knew each other until we were old. I had cousins in St. Aidans and the nuns never told me. I never knew my family. How can you get back together when you don't know each other?

If I had died as a child well that was bad luck for me. This way – your life is wrecked when the Government takes you. They do the damage. You are better off with your own family. It destroys your own kids. My son blames me for my being in institutions. He says it ruined all our lives.

How would the Government workers and families feel if their kids and family were ripped apart and never seen again?

Why don't the Government have a public meeting with the Catholic church and have it out.....Have a conference make them hear from all of us what happened.

I would like to speak with the Inquiry.....I have so much more to say.

I have read this and agreed to it being sent to the National Inquiry and put on their website.
Signed: Joan Donnelly.
18 October 2003