

The Secretary, Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee.



Enclosed are some of my personal feelings of my time spent in St Brigid's home at Ryde. I was four years old on arrival and 16 by the time they told me my bags had been packed and to pick them up.

I struggle with the magnitude at which these institutions' aftermath has rippled through our society, presenting various consequences. It is as if our past has no bearing on our future and therefore, doesn't exist. The memories are part of our surviving; with knowledge we try and understand how to walk forward. We have survived in a world of judgment with little margin for error.

There were peaceful, empty, lonely and friendly times. There were opportunities in holiday, that were spent with different members of the family, however as time went past, I got older and these times become strained, due largely to innuendo and community's perception about home girls. *"At 4 you are cute by 16 you are trouble."*

Enclosed is a short story and the memories on leaving the place at the time I called home. My sister, was with me for half the time I was in the home, over the last two and half years, she has been experiencing hell, reliving the past as if it were yesterday. Not able to afford help, not able to call for help, we have both relived this painful experience isolated from support.

This is not about persecuting those that were in command of these institutions; it is about healing those that have been persecuted because of the situations. It is having access to persons or places that can assist in sorting out the pain we don't understand.

I have done a variety of work over the past 30 years, including five years of TAFE. Working presently in the welfare field for Shoalcare; an agency in Nowra doing Supervised Access, Short to Medium Housing for Youth and also their Disability Services. It never ceases to amaze me when talking to parents, affected by behavior from their children, how many of these adult parents, have come from a background of disorder. Their lack of parenting skills due to not being parented themselves and attempting to raise children, without support or guidelines seems to amount to endless struggles between parties. No doubt the flood of flow-on behavior from generation to generation can only spread, unless the skills are not picked up somewhere. Family break down impacts, sending ripples down the generations, perpetuating inappropriate behavior that is familiar, often, to persons struggling with past transgressions.

To all those that are only left with the insanity of life, may they be given some peace.

Regina Stratti

THE SQUARE

This is a story where hobbits have no home, gremlins and the dreaded trolls roam. Black Riders attack and you never know when. No White Wizards to defend spears of confusion, arrows of illusion. Your battle is with deception this is the game. Who can we blame?

It's the system that's the shame.

Without choice, my sister and I were placed in a space, with strangers. No familiar faces, No hope, No reason, No family-Siblings were not allowed to care for each other, lots of treason. Let the horror story begin, isolation, discrimination, fighting battles in a place where you feel totally misplaced. You won't be disappointed, if horror is your read, the places we have been are not always a very nice scene.

Read along and think like Alice, sliding down the rabbit hole, not knowing where your going and not finding any one that can make sense of the journey.

Where to begin, is the question? Do you begin at the end or start at the beginning?

The requirements for admission are simple, be less than 16 years of age of and in need of a home.

The vicious cycle

My mother was herself a victim of neglect Marjorie Dawn Hehir, born in Baccuss Marsh on the 5th March 1927. At birth she was not meant to live and was given to her father's mother to be nursed to health. She returned to the family, in total 5 girls, mum in the middle. She spent many of her younger years feeling unloved and a menace to her family. She was given the title of uncontrollable and difficult and she didn't let it down. Not doing well at school, she was palmed off to work on farms. When this failed was placed in a home for young girls. When this failed she was asked to leave her home, she was 15 at the time. She headed for Melbourne, finding her way to Sydney, where she worked in a hospital as a nurse's aid with accommodation. She met my father and married at 21.

My father, Giovanni Joseph Stratti was born in Italy on the 17th May 1922. He was the first son of an Italian immigrant family consisting of 6 boys and one girl. My mother and father met and they married and spent their honeymoon in Tasmania where my father became mentally ill and my mother had him hospitalized. On return to Sydney she informed the family, they became defensive and offered no assistance and remained in denial. My sister observing his behavior on one of his visits, while she was training at Cullen Park Balmain, questioned mum in relation to dad's problems and he has since been diagnosed, with Schizophrenia. My father's family remained in denial about dad's afflicted health. Four children were born eldest my brother Sam 1949 my sister Grace 1950 my brother John 1952 and me Regina 1956. Dad's sickness died with him in 2002.

In between these two above paragraphs is a story about neglect, abuse, misunderstanding and the lack of compassion and unconditional love. If we go back further we find more light to shed on the circumstances that brought about the misappropriations of these family's dynamics.

My Auntie ^{Bridget} my father's sister had three boys and desperate to have a girl, came to visit my mother in hospital insisting that she raise me. My mother refused and struggled on. By the time I was three my mother herself become mentally unstable and decided after being continually told by her mother to place us in a home, did at last what she was told and my sister and I where placed in St Bridget's Orphanage. She left the boys with their sick father. This broke down with Sam going to live with his uncle, then his grandfather, until marrying. My brother John was not so lucky he was sent to Boys Town Engerdine, another story untold of abuse and neglect eventually running away.

The Lose

What do we as people lose, coming from homes or orphanages?

- The lose of the understanding of self
- The lose of knowing unconditional love
- The lose of education
- The lose of knowing your father, mother and the family environment
- The lose of interaction with siblings
- The lose of family culture and language
- The lose of family gatherings and relatives
- The lose of connectedness (belonging)
- The lose of support and brain storming over life's decisions
- The lose of not feeling part of anything or to any one
- The lose of understanding what work can do for you and the connections for work
- The lose of not rescuing others that cross your path.
- The lose of your teeth
- The lose of your health mentally and physically
- The lose of self esteem
- The lose of marriages and children of your own
- The lose of financial matters
- The lose in persons knowing us
- The lose of feeling safe among persons
- The lose of play and fun
- The lose of photos of family and self
- The lose of role models
- The lose of trusting people
- The lose of knowing when to seek help and accept help
- The lose of making friends and knowing true friendship
- The lose of lives
- The lose of knowledge to brake these habits that maintain these cycles

The Gain is the Pain.

- The gain is in understanding empathy towards others.
- The gain is not wanting the same life for our family's
- The gain is being able to blame our problems on past
- The gain is in the challenge in finding new attitudes for past qualms
- The gain is excusing drinking and taking drugs of all descriptions because of
- The gain is giving your self permission to be abusive towards others
- The gain is not conforming to society therefore, not belonging
- The gain is being adulterous because what is a relationship
- The gain is society owes me, it is ok to be welfare dependent
- The gain is learning to battle your way through, using unreliable resources.
- The gain is knowing there is a way out when you can't cop any more
- The gain is answering to no one and not giving a shit what anyone else feels

Action and reaction these two words need to be exchanged for right and wrong then maybe people would think before they act. Instead we say right and wrong and develop a culture based on judgment and blame. Yet I know now we learn through our experiences, creating our lives from the choices we make, our attitudes, our circumstances, our interactions and the energies around us, be they people, nature, companies, and relationships, outcomes unfolding through the laws of cause and effect.

It is difficult for me to write a story about my life in the home. Enclosed is the important impressions in the chapter of my life that has left their mark on my spirit. The rest is history so they say. It is the action and reaction the cause and effect, that have intrigued me and allowed me to find a way through the earthquake and it's rippling effects to survive and have a future. I still get angry when I think of the demons that arise at the most inappropriate times. It frustrates me that my life has been a struggle, yet I find comfort in understanding my actions will have a reaction, so I need to think responsibly. I am a mother of 5 children struggling to educate myself and my children, learning how to be a parent, learning how to play and what play can achieve for the individual achievements. The biggest lose is not understanding the power of love, therefore struggling with relationship that breakdown. Everything has its cause and effect, which affects all involved.

Arrival (first day)

I remember this day being wheeled into the home in a pram and left screaming, my sister beside me tearful. Nothing changed that scream went on forever; it remained silent but deadly, building up into all manners of outbursts, from bedwetting to anger and sickness. Duties were endless, power and control were the energy running the campaign.

Leaving (last day)

Leaving was forced upon me by Sister Lawrence, because I turned 16 at the end of year ten 1977, (a short story is included). On request for information about myself while in St Bridget's I was sent one sheet of paper giving me a date of entry. I think that sums it up correctly, these institutions hold no memory, no photos, no medical, school reports nothing, and yet some how we are meant to become model citizens, HOW?

My thoughts Regina Stratti.

THE ARCHIVES
CONVENT OF MERCY
PO BOX 2012
NORTH PARRAMATTA NSW 1750

April, 7, 2003.

Phone. - 02 9957 5040.

Dear Regina Stratti,

The following is information you requested about yourself when you were in St Brigid's Orphanage, Ryde.

Our records show the following entry:

Regina Frances Stratti

Born: 30.1. 1956.....Sydney

Admitted: 17.3.1960

Baptised: Ryde

Father: Joseph Stratti

Mother: Margery Hehir

Address: 3/45 Concord & Gallipoli Street
CONCORD.

Reason for Admission: Father's mental illness.

Sister. Grazia Therese Stratti

Born: 8.11. 1950

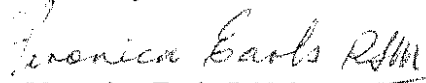
Admitted: 17.3.1960

Baptised: Rose Bay.

No other information is given. Perhaps you could contact the record section of the Department of Community Services or Centacare Catholic Community Services, 9 Alexandra Ave., CROYDON NSW 2132, phone 9744.7055.

I trust you and your sister have happy memories of your time at St Brigid's, Ryde. God bless you and may you enjoy a Happy and Holy Easter.

Yours sincerely,



Sister Veronica Earls RSM
Archivist, Parramatta Convent.

Robbed In My Youth

By Regina Stratti

I felt like a stranger as I approached these imposing brick walls that shrouded my past. One wondered whom they were keeping out, for it was clear to me this day that the real thieves were inside. They had gathered up my possessions and were prepared to rob me of my right to further my education. They were judge and jurors: sentence had been passed, no evidence allowed to be presented, even though this had been my home since I was a little girl of four.

This Christmas holiday had been spent at Miriam's at Gladesville, not far from the home. As irony plays its cards, my brother met his wife Neroli, through her cousin. Neroli was part of the CYO Group, along with her brother Robert (the bus driver), that took us home girls on picnics throughout the year.

The phone rang Miriam answered it in the dinning room. The sliding doors were fully open that separated the lounge from the dinning room, I could see Miriam's face as the conversation continued, her colour changing, as if she was holding her breath. The conversation was not long and her replies were short. She got off the phone, walking towards me she stated, "That was Sister Laurence, she has rung to say your bags are packed and you need to go and pick them up." Then she asked "Do you know any thing about, why you won't be returning to the home and where are you going to live?" Trying to shed some light on the situation that was news too me, I replied, "I thought I was returning to do year 11." I had past my year 10 exams with 4 credits and 2 ordinary passes allowing me to further my education. By now Miriam was appearing confused not certain what to do.

Father Phil, Miriam's oldest son a Redempist Father, happened to be home on holidays from the Philippines on leave from his duties of missionary, fortunate timing for me. She called to Phil reiterating what had just transpired. Then she said, "It might be a good idea if you go with Regina, to pick up her bags, Phil." Then She turned to me, trying to shed more light on the situation, saying "They have packed your bags, do you know why?" Not sure of what to feel or think or say, "I replied I thought I was going on to year 11 I don't understand."

The 4-kilometer trip to the home was done in silence. On arriving we had to park around the corner, because the front gates were shut.

Father Phil followed me through the small iron gate, at the corner of the large brick wall that surrounded the home. I had got to know this place a very familiar space. We stepped onto the gravel path, to the sound of the click, of the iron gate shutting behind us, allowing you to enter into a world all it's own. Simultaneously the familiarities of the home overcome me. This was my safety zone I was no stranger.

Once inside, the imposing brick walls became camouflaged by leafy gardens tailored lawns and a shady majestic old Morton Bay Fig tree near the large front gates. The emptiness of the home was echoed through the gravel crunching with each step we took leisurely strolling around the large circular flowerbed, now lawn. On past occasions I remember this bed a blaze of colour, long stemmed roses stood tall encircled by blue and white flocks, pretty pansies and dancing poppies. The appearance it took on today was that of a well kept cemetery lawn, how very appropriate I thought. Gravel crunching was all you could hear as our feet found their way to the front verandah, all the while hundreds of butterflies were fluttering inside me finding no escape.

It was an appealing building from the outside, with the name St Brigids 1889 stamped across the top for all to read. The common dark brown bricks set in white mortar giving it a simple style and the sets of long windows an aura of openness. This was a strong solid building and from it I drew strength, releasing the butterflies, gaining my composure.

We climbed the steps together, leading onto the red, blue, brown and white mosaic federation tiles, which were always swept clean. My foot slipped, Phil quickly came to my aid, his arm assisting my balance. I took a deep breath. Phil's finger finding the buzzer, it was not long before I could hear the unmistakable tapping walk of Sister Lawrence on the other side. The door opened. The round plump, stern face of Sister Lawrence was in front of us now. Her expression of surprise was caught in the moment as she looked straight past me, detecting Phil by my side. "Good afternoon Father Medlin." She said and "Hello Regina. Follow me this way please." In her ignorant manner, her hands gestured us entry into the front parlor, we followed her through the lounge room, onto the back verandah. It was disturbingly quiet. I had forgotten how different the home felt when vacant of children. The need for light conversation was obvious. Phil broke the ice. "The home is quiet while the children are on Christmas vacation. Did all the children find accommodation this vacation Sister?" Phil asked. Her reply was quick "Yes and we have decided that children turning sixteen need not return." Her bluntness was piercing and discourteous. It was clear that she was going to achieve what she had set out to and I knew how much of her tongue she had restrained because of Phil's presence here today.

The dormitories were all upstairs and Sister nominated to lead the way. Memories flooded in as the wooden stairs squeaked under my feet. They were often used as a form of escape, and many Saturdays I had spent cleaning them. There was not a dormitory that at sometime I had not slept in. At present my room was at the top of the stairs, first door on the left. This room had been divided into three, it was shared with two friends, both were in the same year and we had shared many years and times together.

Sister Lawrence opened the door. On my bed was a suitcase, I didn't recognize, but I knew what was in it, for my wardrobe door was open and the contents missing, captured in a case. By now my body was numb, I felt sick. Alone, I stood looking at the bed. Phil didn't say much, Sister Lawrence was babbling away, I didn't hear a thing she said, I just wanted to curl up on my bed and go to sleep, wake up and find myself getting ready for school, thinking that all was a terrible dream. Phil sensed my mood, gently lifting the bag from the bed, turned and walked down the stairs, Sister followed and I knew my time was up.

I felt a great need to say goodbye to something or someone, this was my home I was leaving. My memories went further back than Sister Lawrence. My siblings were on holidays, returning to go to school, where I would not. This place had been my '*Alpha*', today it had become my '*Omega*'. I felt my safety zone slipping away from me, gone forever.

By
Regina Stratti