

My name is Gwen Pearce nee Campbell. I am in my fifty's and I consider myself one of the lucky ones who went through the home system. I don't remember much of my childhood but a few instances stand out.

A bit of family background: There were seven of us under the age of ten when my mother died, as near as I can work out I was between two and three. We were all separated and sent to various aunts and uncles. The eldest and the youngest went to our grandparents, my sisters Isabel and Annette went to my fathers brother where they grew up. Ken, Barbara and I seemed to float between my fathers relatives and homes till I was about ten. While I was with one of these I was sexually abused by the man of the house and also my older cousins but though that is part of my childhood it is not part of the home experience.

My first home was a Church of England Home in Carlingford, we used to go out to school there. My brother Ken was in the boys home and we would see each other on the way to school. We would try to talk to each other but would be stopped and get into trouble for talking to the opposite gender even though we were brother and sister as this was not allowed. Someone asked me what would happen but I don't remember, the punishments seem to be mixed together over the years and institutions and I think that I don't want to remember a lot of things, it's the way that I survive. Ken remained in this home till he left to go to work on a farm.

When I was about ten Barbara and I were charged with neglect, (as if a child can neglect itself and was a criminal, even today I feel that I have to declare that I have been charged when documents ask for criminal records) and sent to Bidura, where what I remember the most was being treated for lice and having to sleep with my sister in a bed with sides on and treated like, the only word that comes to mind is a pet animal. It is what always comes to mind when I think of that time I say a pet because I was inside I think that I actually treat my own pets better than I was treated as they do get patted and shown love. I felt as though I was worth nothing. I was scared most of the time and looking back I cannot think of even one person offering kindness and understanding.

While I am writing this I am feeling a coldness, as if I want to shut down and run but it is very important to tell all our stories so I push on.

After Bidura Barbara and I were separated. I wasn't told where she went but I went to a home in the Hills district - I think it was Baulkham Hills. It seemed to take forever to get there it was I think better than Bidura but I cannot be certain, I was sent to one foster family who returned me because I got ear aches and cried in the night.

I was then sent to a foster family who lived outside Cobar on a water tank. If you don't know what that is it was a property in the country where the government let drovers etc. have water for their flocks. They were spaced a days driving apart I think, and the family I was with ran it with the man subsidising the income in this case by being a dogger. I had said that I liked the idea of living in the country to be fair. The woman really wanted me to do chores and so that she wouldn't be alone. After a while my sister joined me for a while but was sent back to the welfare home, always a threat. How to describe them well here is some things that I remember happening I was told to drown a sack of kittens, but I didn't as I really couldn't do it, I was accused of seducing the woman's husband, after all by the end I was maybe twelve or thirteen, I had a dog chain taken to me this was just a few of the major things apart from the more subtle. I ended up running away, but I was too scared to tell anyone what had been going on as I must have bought it on myself.

After this I went to Lynwood Hall where I was reunited with Barbara, one of the first things that was said there was that I thought myself better than my sister because I was better at school, I was there for three years. What can I tell you about this place it was locked up at all times and run by Miss Davies, a school week consisted of four half days of academics, two half days of cooking, two half days of sewing and one day of laundry not today's type of laundry but with hand turned wringers and coppers this included washing everything used in the home including blankets. There were different jobs that we did before and

after school that maintained the domestic side of the home. There was no staff apart from the supervisors and teachers as we did everything. If the girls cooking messed up we still had to eat it no matter how terrible it tasted, like the time that, while the teacher was out several girls add extra salt to the meal and it tasted like sea water. Punishments here were varied but included scrubbing bathroom floors with a toothbrush, hand polishing wooden floors and being locked up in a room about the size of a walk in pantry with no light and nothing to do for hours. These could be dished out for looking at any visitor if not invited to do so or any other misdemeanor.

All during this you were reminded that you were wicked and worthless. Two good things happened while I was there I meet a social worker called Miss White who actually encouraged you to try to better yourself and I was sent to hospital to have a cyst removed there I met Nan a lady with grown grandchildren, she took a liking to me and made arrangements for me to go and live with her when I was fifteen.

Miss White had left by the time I was to get a job and for three weeks (before I was fifteen) I was sent out to do domestic work for a family. The lady that took Miss White's place kept trying to place me in domestic service permanently even though I had sat for the Public Service Exam, her comment was that very few of the Lynwood Hall girls the brains to pass this exam I informed her that I would rather work in a factory then. "Where would you live if this woman decided that she didn't want you after all?" was her answer.

So anyway I left to live with Nan and I did get a job in the public service. My education level was first year ( year 7) I went to night school and studied to bring my education level up to Nurses Entrance Exam Level as I wanted to be a nurse.

One of the questions I dreaded till about three years ago was "where did you go to school?" a feeling of dread would come over me that people would discover my shameful childhood, and I would mumble "A type of boarding school". I never talked about my childhood as it covered me with shame. I even wanted to delay my wedding so that Neville would not have to go to ask the welfare for permission to marry me, after all he was respectable and he might not have wanted to marry a girl from my background, I was scared stiff.

Another thing I could not understand was that if even I could do something why couldn't everyone. Meaning if someone as useless and stupid and wicked as me could do something than everyone could, or maybe it wasn't something good as I thought but evil.

I'm one of the lucky ones I know how to read and I can escape into books and also use books to educate myself. Stubbornness is my middle name, and never give the staff in the homes and the foster homes the satisfaction of being right, along with do unto others that you would like done to you these are what I try to live by.

Things I still need to work on are the fact that I require so much more personal space than other people and if someone invades this I step back till I cannot go any further and then I look for a method to get out of this situation. I look too much to food for comfort so am way overweight. I don't like anyone other than my immediate family to touch me and if someone tries to put a comforting arm around me I absolutely freeze this really came to the fore when my husband died. I would like to be able to feel comfortable talking to anyone with out being misunderstood. It would be nice to be confident meeting new people and making new friends.

I am very grateful to CLAN as it has helped me to start to speak out without rage about my past, particularly when the aborigines and the migrant children are mentioned, and am slowly ever so slowly starting to feel as if I am a worthwhile human being.

That is part of my story the rest may someday come out and I won't feel cold and scared talking about it.

Gwen Pearce  
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