

SENATE ENQUIRY INTO CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE

(Mr. LES JOHNSON)

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“ I will give you two weeks Johnson, and you will be in the Big House on the hill. “
(Meaning Mt. Penang Boys Correctional Centre)

These were the last words spoken to me as I was about to board the ferry to go to Sydney to find my way in the world. They were the words spoken to me by the Nun whose s/care I was in.

The place was St. Joseph's Boys "Home" Kincumber South.

Although you will read about some disturbing facts in my submission, I can't help thinking of Karl Davies and those other boys in Bindoon and all those poor little girls in other "HOMES". The abuse they received Mental, Physical and Sexual was disgusting, abhorrent and unjustifiable.

I was in two "HOMES" (1) Murray Dwyer Orphanage Mayfield West and then on to St. Joseph's. Total time in "CARE", ten years (5 - 15yrs).

For many years I have wanted to write about those years and their lasting effect on my life. Since discovering CLAN and especially the compassion and understanding of Leonie Sheedy I am inspired to try to unravel the mess.

When I look back, I can see that my early years can be divided into three parts.

I call these my three Disappointments.

Disappointment number one began when I was eight months old. The mother was ill due to another pregnancy and although living with her parents, the atmosphere was such that the father felt it was bad for me, and so took me to stay with her cousin Rosie who lived in Asquith. Rosie and her husband Alby cared for me like one of their own. Over time this meant that the mother bond transferred to Rosie.

At age two, I was suddenly taken from their care (breaking their hearts) to live in squalid conditions ie. An iron shanty with dirt floors and potato sacks for windows. Imagine the confusion of a two year old being torn from the only family he knew.

On the surface most people would think it a good move reuniting with family.

WRONG I was really enjoying my life in the bush at Gilgandra, until one day at age five, my life was to be turned upside down once more. The mother took myself, and my four siblings to the Child Welfare Dept. in Sydney. The marriage was over, she was unable to cope, so she left us without even signing papers, never to return to us.

Consequently I was placed in Murray Dwyer Orphanage. A CWD officer

accompanied me to the "HOME". She was kind, bought me some sweets and a nice big apple. I can still remember walking up the long winding road and I saw a huge building. What I couldn't figure out was who was this lady I was holding hands with, and the size of the house baffled me. What sort of family needed such a large house.

We walked through a huge gateway and then up some stairs. We were met by another strange lady, but this one had on the biggest hat I had ever seen. In those days the nuns (Daughters of Charity Order) wore a starched white hat resembling an aeroplane. This nun took me to meet the rest of the children in the "HOME". They were all standing a few yards in front of me, gawking at the newcomer. I was very upset and pulled away from the nun and threw the half eaten apple hitting one of the kids in the eye. She took me inside and gave me a couple of sound smacks on my backside. I would not cry and refused to say sorry. Little did I know there was worse to come.

That night I was taken upstairs to the dormitory. I had never seen so many beds. When the lights were put out I sobbed myself to sleep. In the morning as I awoke I looked around the room and wondered where I was.

This is the beginning of Disappointment number two;

When I was around six and a half some kind people took me to live with them on a dairy farm at a place called Tarro near Maitland. I know they intended to adopt me, because I was there for quite some time. They enrolled me in the local primary school. One morning I was down in the dairy with Mr. Mills, when I saw him grab a post then suddenly fall to the wet concrete floor. "Go and get mum" he said. As soon as I gave her the message, she rushed to the dairy. Unfortunately Mr. Mills died the next day. After the funeral there were a lot of people at the house. I could not understand why a lady was packing all my clothes and precious nick knacks into a large port. She was of course, packing me up to be returned to Murray Dwyer.

Oh how I missed the farm life and those kind people. Here I was back in the s/care of the hard-hearted nuns. No Birthday parties, no presents no kindness, just fear and regimentation to keep us in line. There were plenty of other kids who received the same beltings, so I was not alone in this. Going out of bounds and being caught meant what we all dreaded. Four kids would hold the offender down and a nun would hit the bare buttocks with a leather belt, anything up to six times. Once I was hit so hard I could not sit down for two days. It was very uncomfortable in class. The teacher had no sympathy for the pain we suffered.

It took me a long time to settle down and forget the kind Mills family.

Thus begins Disappointment number three.

One day (about nine years old) the head nun called me to her office. There was a solidly built man and his wife with him. I was introduced to them, with that the man picked up my port. I had no idea what was happening. I heard him say, "Thank you Sister, we will keep in touch." I was taken to their home at a place called Horseshoe Bend near Maitland. I know they were considering adopting me as they told their daughter I was her new little brother. That night I was shown where I was to sleep. There were two beds, the second belonging to their fifteen year old son. It wasn't long before I found out why I was there. The next morning the boy asked me if I liked cows as he pushed a heavy wooden wheelbarrow from the shed. We went to several houses picking up scraps for their cow. After a week or two they thought I should know the run. I then had to do it alone, rain, hail or shine. Being a nine year old and small for my age, it was very hard for me to push the heavy barrow. Some mornings were freezing cold, so much so they gave me a hammer to break the ice from the cow's water trough. I was sent to the Marist Brothers in Maitland for schooling. My grades were never any good as I was so confused. If I got the cane at school, I had to report it to the man of the house. He would then give me the same amount again. If I lied or forgot to tell him, I would receive double punishment. One morning at the breakfast table, I heard loud yelling and cursing coming from my bedroom. The lady of the house came up to me and with her open hand slapped me across the head with such force I fell off the chair spilling porridge, tea and toast along with the sugar and milk all over the floor and my school uniform. This enraged her more, causing her husband to ask what was happening. After he saw the mess and was told it was my fault, whack, another blow to the head. Then she told him what had happened. Apparently I must have wet the bed slightly. I hadn't noticed. Well didn't that upset him?

Two weeks later I was taken to hospital to be circumcised. As we were driving back to the house, I heard him comment, "That should stop the little bastard playing with himself." I did not know what he was talking about. As far as I knew I was not doing this. Next morning the screaming was on again. Sure enough there it was. "The stinking little bastard has done it again." How could I possibly have done this when I was painfully sore from an infection after the operation? You've guessed it, another whack across the head from her. He had gone to work, and I thought how lucky I was not to have received a second dose from him. Wrong again: That evening I saw him walk through the door, and I knew I was going to cop something. The boy and his mother held me down on the bed and rubbed my face into a small stain on the mattress. While they held me, he pulled my strides down and belted me with his razor strop, (six times I think). This was the most pain I had ever felt, I was unable to attend school for two days. Worst of all I still had to collect the cow scraps. On the third day he came home late, just as I was going to bed. "Come here you filthy little bastard," he said. I wondered what he was going to do with all the rope he had in his hands. There were several wooden pieces attached to the ropes, such as would be used for tie downs on a tent. I was about to find out. The boy and his mother entered the room with him. I thought, "shit; not another hiding," but it wasn't that. "Lay down on the bed" he said, as she and the lad pulled the blankets and top sheet back. As they held me down, he took my arms and tied them to the bed, followed by my ankles. I looked up at them in disbelief. "Now see if you can play with yourself, you little bastard." It took me hours to fall asleep, as I was so uncomfortable, lying on my back on a cold rubber sheet. That night in despair, I decided I may as well show them what a wet bed looks like, and because of the rubber sheet it ran onto the carpet as well. You can imagine their fury next morning. I expected I would be given the mother of all hidings, but no; it didn't happen, just a smack across the head. "Go and shower and don't dare use the hot water," she said. I went back to the bedroom and found a set of clothing on the chair. "Hurry up," she said, "you are not going to school today." After I was dressed he dragged me to the car, opened the door and pushed me onto the back seat, throwing my port in after me. Of course, I was once more heading back to Murray Dwyer Back to the same old regimented routine. No visitors, no holidays, no birthdays, just a deep down feeling of not being wanted. To constantly be told that you are worthless gets you down to a point where you start to believe it.

When I was almost eleven, I was taken to the head Sisters office. She was seated at a large desk reading some paperwork. "Sit down there Johnson," she said. I couldn't help but notice that my port was near the office door. I was wondering where I was going this time. A short time later when she had finished with the paperwork, she rose and told me to pick up my port and accompany her. Outside there were two men with a truck. She then told me I was to go with them to another orphanage to join my younger brother there. I could not recall having any brother. One of the men lifted me onto the seat, and thus began my journey to St. Joseph's Boys Home.

As the truck pulled up, a nun saw us and came over. She looked very stern, no semblance of a smile of welcome. "Come with me boy," she said, and bellowed to a kid to show me around while she took my port inside. She was wearing an apron with a single deep pocket. There was just enough of a leather strap visible to send a shiver down my spine. She turned out to be the nun (Sister T.) whom I would be answerable to. "Here we go again" I thought, "it look likes the same old routine." It wasn't too long before my thoughts were confirmed.

A boy had taken another's toy, and refused to return it. Sister T. called the culprit over to her, pulled the strap from her apron, and hit him across the back of his legs. This turned out to be routine punishment for any small misdemeanour. We all slept in a large dormitory, which was open at the front, freezing in winter and stifling hot and humid in summer.

Each night before bedtime, we lined up for a shower at the ablutions block. It was here that I saw and felt Sister T's wrath and brutality at it's worst. There were only six showers, so sometimes we only had a basin wash. Sometimes the boys in the showers would be laughing and ribbing each other. If Sister T. became aware of this, she would order those boys to open their shower doors. Slowly one by one they would comply, as they knew what was coming next. She would flog them, wielding her leather strap, striking any and all parts of their bare bodies. Once, in her rage, she hit one of the boys in the eye, so much so it looked like he'd been in a boxing ring. If any boy happened to have an erection, she would call him "a filthy beast", and aim for that part of his anatomy. She seldom missed, and seemed to enjoy their agony. When undressing at night or dressing in the morning, we had to cover our private parts at all times, or suffer the consequences as she deemed fit.

I was always in trouble with her, and until I started high school, copped many a hiding. I had a very good mate, who witnessed some of them and could not bear to watch. He would have to walk away rather than watch. Nobody could understand why he never received corporal punishment. It is only recently, having met each other again, we have figured it out. This mate's mother had died, but he still had frequent contact with his father, who lived locally and often had him on weekends. It wouldn't do if he showed up with any telltale signs of Sister T's brutality. Most of us had nobody to care about what was happening.

I was chastised often for my lack of bonding with my brother, who to me was no different to any other boy there. As hard as we tried we never managed the close brother relationship, something that I always wanted deep down.

One Christmas when I was nearly eleven, I was told some people wanted to take my brother and I for the school holidays. Sister T. said that we were going to meet our younger sister (another sibling I did not know existed). We went by train to a place in central N.S.W. called Tullamore. The people met us at the station, and indeed there was a girl about five or six in their family. A few days later we all went by car to Forbes to visit some of their relatives. This family also had a girl around the same age. I was too shy to ask these people if one of these girls was our sister, and they didn't volunteer any information at all. When our holiday ended, we returned to the orphanage, none the wiser. Sister T. asked me what I thought of my sister. I told her that, as nobody had mentioned anything, and there were two girls, I was confused.

The most puzzling event happened when I was around age twelve. It was my turn to serve in the Tea Rooms, which catered for visitors on Sundays. I was on my way when Sister T. called me aside, and introduced me to a Mrs. Johnson. There was no mention as to who she was, (I know it wasn't the mother) or why she wanted to speak to me. The conversation did not enlighten me in any way. I couldn't stay long to talk to her, as I had to get to work. Sister T. had already gone back to her duties.

From time to time kids ran away. Older boys were then sent to bring them back. There was no point in kids like me running away, as we had nowhere to go. Of course, when the runaways returned, punishment was severe. If any boy wet his bed, he would be ridiculed in front of everyone, and at times be dressed as a girl.

Our swimming pool was an enclosure built on the river. Many times we were made to swim in cold windy conditions. Swimming negated the necessity for evening showers. It was well known there were sharks in the river, so most kids swam within the enclosure. I remember once an older boy swam across the river to see a girl. Somehow he was sprung. The man employed as the farmer was directed to deal with him. I was in the old dairy when he brought the culprit down. He took him into the milk separating room and closed the door. Although I couldn't see what was happening, I heard the flogging being meted out. No marks were evident. I reckoned he deserved a medal for daring to swim those dangerous waters.

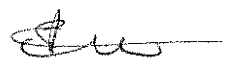
SEE
OT NOTES!

* At age thirteen I was sent to St. Edward's Christian Brothers College in Gosford for my high school years. One day, while on an excursion, we were playing touch footy. I was chasing the football, when I ran into a securely anchored bench. I hadn't seen the bench and so I hit it very hard, so much so I could hardly walk. When I returned from school, Sister T. noticed my limp and asked what had happened. I told her the story. BIG MISTAKE. Sometime later that night when the others were asleep, I looked up to see her beside my bed. "Where are you sore Johnson?" she asked. I indicated the right thigh area. She said, "Open your pyjamas boy and I'll rub some salve in to ease the pain." As she rubbed the inside of my thigh, I was stimulated to an erection. She kept rubbing so that the back of her hand kept bumping against my erect penis. I somehow thought this was wrong, (why didn't she just give me the salve to administer it myself?) The next day she asked how I was, and I said it was much better. That night she came again and went through the same routine. From then on I would stay downstairs in the homework room until I reckoned she would be in bed. I would explain that the brothers had given me a lot of homework, and I could not start on it until my chores were completed (washing up in the dairy). As it happened, this worked in my favour, as I was excused from chores from then on.

SEE
OT NOTES!

* Not long after this, things went from bad to worse. One evening Sister T. called me and told me she needed my bed for a boy who had arrived that day. There was a room off the dormitory wing, which had four beds. Two farm hands and the general handyman occupied this room. It wasn't long before I found out that these three had their own sexual agenda. I was awakened early one morning because the handyman was in my bed with me. I felt him fondling my penis. I was shocked, and because my penis was aroused they assumed I was enjoying it. Luckily, because of my small frame, when the two farmhands held me down, the older man could not enter me. Who could I complain to? Not Sister T., that's for sure, not Father Croke, the resident Parish Priest who would not believe these things could happen. So I just told these men that I wanted no part in their activities. They left me alone after that. Eventually one of the boys in the dormitory returned to his parents, so I asked Sister for my old bed. When she asked me why, I told her that the men's snoring was keeping me awake. It was around this time I was no longer the recipient of her hidings. I completed my schooling (Intermediate) and headed to Sydney to find work. I was free at last from institutional care.

Over the next ten years, with help from C.U.S.A. House, I succeeded in locating my three sisters, (two fostered in Sydney) and one in Forbes (mystery solved). In my searches, I was fortunate enough to find Rosie & Alby (1967). This was as a result of meeting an aunt in Gosford. Over the years this aunt (the mother's sister) had taken boys from Kincumber to her home for holidays. I feel sure that she knew I was there all the time. Yet another rejection: In December 1967 I located the man who gave me his name. From information from various sources, including his own words, I now know that he was not my biological father. Not only did I not see or hear from the



WIFE DID NOT WANT TO TYPE THIS AS OUR CHILDREN WILL EVENTUALLY READ THIS, ONE NIGHT, VERY EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, WHEN I WAS DOZING OFF TO SLEEP, MY WIFE WANTED TO INSTIGATE SEX. BEING HALF ASLEEP I THOUGHT IT WAS, SISTER T ALTHOUGH YEARS AGO AND I UPSET HER WHEN I GOT AWAY. I HAVE HAD MANY NIGHTS LIKE

mother since I was 5, but now I obviously also did not know anything about my real father. Who am I? No trace of the mother has ever surfaced.

I married in 1964 (40 years in November). Our first child was a tiny baby girl. I could not have been happier. In my mind she made up for the sisters I never had the chance to enjoy. Someone who would love me unconditionally: In the next five years she was joined by two brothers and a baby sister. Our family was complete. We now are the proud grandparents of eight gorgeous grandchildren. Rosie has become my "mum" and the children's much loved Nanna.

After those words spoken to me as I left Kincumber, I vowed I would never be beaten. I completed my butcher's apprenticeship. My personal goal was to own my home, a business and car outright before I turned thirty. With my wife's help I achieved all those goals. Who knows where I might be today without my understanding and compassionate family, in particular my wife, who has had to cop the flack over the years?

The systematic policy of little or no information regarding those times is disgracefully incomprehensible, unless it was meant as a control system. One would hope that this is not continuing today. One of the most disturbing things about my life, along with thousands of others, is the offhanded way we are treated when asking for records. The most you get is date of entry and date of exit. There are no records of childhood diseases, siblings or parents. Why did not the government have inspectors to see that relevant data was recorded, not just notations in an exercise book.

I have had around forty jobs. In my younger years, I hated taking annual leave, as I never felt confident my job would be there upon my return. I was a winner in every occupation I tried. I took over a butcher shop in the Lismore area, and built it up to twelve times its previous sales. My wife worked alongside me. I received many awards as top salesman in Insurance, Wholesale tools and Real Estate, with no father figure to guide me. I learnt to read people very quickly, a valuable lesson from my formative years.

I think I have my life in order, but is this a just a state of mind? I'm sure I could benefit from some counseling. Up until now my focus has been family and careers. Now that I have been forced into retirement, I cannot afford counseling on a disability pension. My most satisfying achievement of late is that I can actually SAY "I love you," to my adult sons and they feel comfortable replying in kind.

I thank you Senators for your time, and a very special thanks to Senator Murray. Thank you, Thank you CLAN for being our voice.