

Hon Mr Mike Rann, MP
Premier of South Australia

Saturday, July 3, 2004

Dear Premier,

I wish to add my voice to those requesting you extend the inquiry into child abuse within state institutions to include other forms of abuse. As reprehensible and damaging as child sexual abuse is, there are other forms of abuse that are also damaging to the well being of children. In my own case, there was also sexual abuse, but I believe that the emotional abuse I experienced made me particularly vulnerable to being sexually abused.

When I read of the inquiry decided by the Government during the evening of 30th June 2004, I found myself both terrified and relieved. Terrified because, I remember thinking, "its all going to come out now" and relieved for the very same reason. The terror is associated with re-encountering pain; the relief is because these are stories that need to be told to validate victims so that healing comes from the pain, and to prevent reoccurrence.

I was a ward of the state from 19th January 1960 to 7th March 1974. On the 19th January 1960, my five siblings and I, aged between 9 and 1, appeared before the Adelaide Juvenile Court charged with being "neglected." My parents were imprisoned for two months, while my brothers, sisters and I were "committed" to two different orphanages. With my younger sister I went to live in a foster home on 26th June 1960, not leaving until shortly after my 18th birthday.

In many ways I regard myself as one of the lucky ones. I did have a stable foster home environment for fourteen years, and the state did provide for me so that I could continue my education through to Year 12. However, the emotional abuse I endured within that foster home and the grief I suffered because of the loss of my family has been the source of ongoing pain and suffering for me, including low self esteem and lack of self confidence, living in an almost constant state of anxiety and fear, and suffering for years from debilitating episodes of depression.

Ultimately I hold the state responsible for both the emotional abuse and the ongoing grief caused by the loss of my family as there were no processes in place to listen to my experiences of being placed in the foster home without negative consequences to me, from my foster mother in particular, and there is very little evidence of attempts by the

state to maintain contact between me and my family, or to provide counseling to me for the loss of my family.

Emotional Abuse

The picture that emerges from looking at my file is one of a successful foster care placement. It was stable, there were no disciplinary problems at all reported to the Department after 1965, my sister and I did well at school, we appeared to be happy and well cared for.

In fact the only evidence of us being unhappy, or “unsettled” was in 1965 with a couple of smaller incidences prior to this. In 1965 there were problems with us taking money and using it to buy “sweets.” This episode resulted in the Department’s psychologist, L Penny, recommending “special attention” be paid to the discipline given by my foster mother, and in a report dated 5.6.65 a social worker also expressed concern about the home environment after speaking with the principal of my primary school who stated that “this child is terrified and would plead guilty to any accusation that the family made against her.”

From 1965 to 1974 when I turned 18 there were no other disciplinary concerns reported to the Department. There were doubts expressed, however, on several occasions about my foster mother’s ability to “cope with any behavioural problems.” The first of these is contained in a report dated 23.6.66 when I was ten years old and is a comment by the visiting social worker that it was doubtful if my foster parents could handle any discipline issues. On 24.4.70 there is also a report from a social worker saying “I would say that this home is satisfactory for these two girls providing they conform but I feel that if at any time they step out of line, there could be trouble because Mrs Michell does not strike me to have a great deal of insight into the teenagers needs or feelings. At the moment all is going well because the girls are progressing well at school and have no doubt been accepted by the Michell’s friends and relatives.” A similar concern is expressed in a report dated 28.5.71.

Were there no disciplinary issues because I was happy and content? In part perhaps, I did love my foster mother and this was my home. It was the only home I could remember. However, I was also terrified of my foster mother. I don’t remember when that started, probably when my foster mother began threatening us with return to the Welfare Department if we did not conform, if we did not behave as she wanted us to. Perhaps it was in 1965, after the stealing money episode, when these threats were reinforced by a drive one day past a reform school. I’ve no idea where that was, but I remember sitting in the back seat of my foster sister’s mini minor as she drove us past this place and my mother threatened to send us there if we ever did anything wrong again.

I think now I conformed because non-conformity equated to banishment from my home. In addition, through constantly being told off by my foster mother, I came to believe that there was something quite intrinsically wrong with me and that no one else would love me or love me. I was very disturbed when I first read my Departmental file in 1990. Apparently my foster parents were often “full of praise” of me and my sister during our

growing up to visiting social workers. I don't remember receiving any of this praise at all. Disapproval, censure, fear of rejection, that is what I remember. Of being ridiculed for crying, for having big lips, for reading too much, for being rude to adults if I spoke up for myself, for eating too much, for not standing up straight, for being late ...So many sad memories...

One of the consequences of my foster mother's constant nit picking and fault finding was that I couldn't talk to her about anything, including not having enough to eat or that I didn't like nectarine jam sandwiches, and these would be thrown away on the way to school and I would go hungry during the day. My foster mother was the one to decide how much I needed to eat, yet I have a prevailing memory of being hungry all through my childhood. During primary school lunch was usually prepared the night before and we would put our lunch boxes in our rooms in our school bags. Because I was usually hungry at night I would eat my lunch and be hungry the next day. Or I would have insufficient breakfast, and eat lunch on the way to school. Sometimes my friend Joy would take me home for lunch and her mother would boil an egg for me.

What I learned from my foster mother was not only to conform but to take responsibility for her bad moods and try to appease her. When she was in a good mood, things were easier for me. I started work at the age of 15 for Coles Supermarket at Kilburn. As I recall, much if not all the money I earned went to buying gifts for family members, including the children of my foster sister. This continued a trend started when Lee and I were very little, buying gifts for Mum so she would be happy, so she wouldn't pick on us. When I've reviewed my file I've found that this trend began when I was as young as 8, when I would have pocket money but not spend it, instead would "save it for buying presents for the family." It was the same with housework. From an early age my sister and I did most, if not all, the housework. There is a report on 23.6.66 that mentions how we were "both anxious to help in the home". Again, this would have been done to appease our foster mother, to keep her from finding fault with us, perhaps to make ourselves indispensable to her so she wouldn't send us away.

I didn't know until I received my file from the then Welfare Dept in 1990 that my parents had been paid to care for me for all those years. I had no knowledge of that at all, although there is evidence that as a teenager I did help to write up the accounts for reimbursement for school expenses. What was drummed into me for years was that I needed to be grateful to my mum for all that she had done for me, all the sacrifices she had made. This need to be grateful silenced me; it meant I had no recourse for complaint when things were not good for me. It also meant a huge burden of guilt especially when excursions came up, particularly in primary school. I didn't feel able to ask my mum for the money for excursions, but not asking meant I wouldn't be able to go and would have to field queries from school friends as to why not. My solution was to leave the note for excursions on the sideboard hoping she would find it in time and give me the money. I ended up being told off for this strategy as well, not asked as to why I would do it or anything like that.

There was little or no involvement in school activities by my foster parents. I can remember my foster mother coming to a sports days once during my primary years, and my foster father going to one parent/teacher interview when I was in high school. I was not taken by either foster parent to attend my first day of school, instead I remember going with a neighbour's child who went to the same school. I had to walk home by myself. How did I know which way to go? I was only 5 years old. I remember standing at the front of the school faced with three choices, left, right or straight ahead. Luckily I chose the straight ahead option and kept walking until things started to look familiar.

I remember a very lonely and isolated childhood. Friends from school were rarely if ever allowed to come to my house to play, nor was I allowed to go to friends house, certainly not when we were in primary school, and not often when we were in high school. The reason given was that my sister would then have no-one else to play with. So most holidays were spent at home in the company of my younger sister and Lyn, the intellectually challenged adopted daughter of my foster mother's long time friend, May Casey. The only time I remember a friend of my own coming to my house during my high school years was a friend who was criticized by my foster mother, I can't remember for what, but it didn't encourage me to have other friends over. In my last two years of high school I do remember having boyfriends in my home, I don't know why she had relented by then.

As I've reviewed my Departmental file recently I've realized that there were adults in my life who would probably have advocated for me if I had been able to speak out about my foster mother, if I could have articulated the feelings of terror, of insecurity. Yet I fear I would have been punished by her if I had spoken out. I would have been seen as disloyal for speaking out, for criticizing my foster mother. The only time I did this was with my foster sister and the response was swift and vicious. This was one of many times when I received the "silent treatment", ie when my foster mother would not speak to me for days. As a consequence I felt isolated and without support.

I saw my foster mother as strict, not as abusive. I thought I was the problem, until I left home and started reading psychology. That was my first glimmer that perhaps I wasn't, but the gnawing feeling deep inside that there is something intrinsically wrong with me is not something I've yet been able to shake.

Sexual Abuse

When I was around about 12 or so, perhaps early teens, I can't remember my age exactly, we had gone with another family to a caravan park for a summer holiday, probably to the West Beach caravan park, it wasn't unusual for us to go there. Usually it was we three kids, my sister and I, and the Lyn mentioned above, who would be playing in the water until dark, sometimes accompanied by my foster father and "Uncle Harold." One night, in the water and under cover of darkness, "Uncle Harold" grabbed me and kissed me, and touched my vagina. Most confusing to me now was that I was not horrified, appalled by this man probably in his fifties touching me. I so craved attention, any attention was amazing. I don't think this happened very often. I remember accusing my "Uncle Harold"

of two timing me with my sister Lee, I had seen him kiss her as well. I'm sure I thought I was in love with him.

Years later, as a young adult and after I'd left home, my foster mum suddenly told me that my "Aunty May" had looked through a window and discovered "Uncle Harold" "interfering" with Lyn, their adopted, intellectually challenged daughter. My mum asked me very directly if he had ever done that to me. I instantly responded with "no." Why did I do that? Was I frightened that my own pleasure in the encounter would be used against me, used to demonstrate that I was at fault? Did I even think my "Uncle" had done something wrong? Probably not. I don't think I'd thought about it at all until my mum told me that. I probably felt guilty, I wasn't about to admit to something that would "get me into trouble" even as an adult.

I've found it impossible to speak of this encounter over the years because I never thought of it as sexual abuse at the time, I never saw this as an adult behaving in an inappropriate way. I interpreted it as affection, even love, for me and I so badly needed to be loved. It has only been very recently that I've looked on this experience as the beginning of a string of sexual encounters, often with older, married men, where what I needed was love and affection and thought it could only be experienced through sex.

Isolation from my family

There is no evidence in my file of the Welfare Dept endeavouring to re-unify our family. In fact, there is evidence of only 4 visits with other members of my family in a little over 14 years, and they were in the very early days of separation:

- 3.2.61 a visit with family at the Botanical Gardens. This would have been just over 12 months after the initial separation. I would have been almost 5 years of age.
- 8.5.61 I saw my mother at the Welfare Dept.
- 23.5.61 A visit with family in the office of a Welfare Dept employee.
- 6.9.63 A visit with my father at the Welfare Dept.

The only memory I have is of that first visit with my family in the Botanical Gardens.

There were two occasions on which the Welfare Dept requested my foster mother bring my sister and I to the Department for a visit with my family, and she declined on the basis that we would be away on holidays.

- 23.1.62 Foster mother was unable to take us to see our family as we would be at Victor Harbour that day. Doing the same thing during Easter.
- 8.1.64 Went on holiday to Fisherman's Bay and therefore could not see my father as arranged.

According to the file my father consented to adoption in February 1964, shortly after a visit was arranged to which we didn't go. There is nothing in the file about why he consented to adopt us, and it wasn't something I was aware of until 1990. Did the

authorities inform him that we were never adopted, that we continued to be fostered and therefore he was entitled to a claim on us? Or did he think we were adopted and therefore he never got into contact with us again?

According to the file, and I remember this, I received a parcel and birthday card for my 4th birthday from my paternal grandmother. That appears to have been the first and last time, and my foster mother was quick to make it known that she desired no visits from members of my family to her home. Why was not contact with my extended family encouraged?

There is no evidence of contact with my family for nine years between the visit that didn't happen in 1964 (see above) until a letter from my sister Jacquie was received by the Welfare Department in 1973. This letter was a heartfelt plea from my sister for contact with members of her family because she was about to get married and hadn't seen her family in years. By then Jacquie was living interstate, having left to get away from the control of the Welfare Dept who shifted her from one unsatisfactory foster home to another. The letter is dated 21st May 1973. There is a note on file that the social worker had asked my foster mother about contact with my older sister Jacquie during a home visit 6th July 1973. My foster mother is reported to have said she was against "renewing contact" because previous contact had made me and my sister "rebellious." My foster mother was referring to a family visit that took place back in 1961 when I was five years old, and Jacquie was nine, yet clearly this influenced the Department to not renew contact as I never saw the letter then, didn't know about my sister wanting contact with me. I didn't see Jacquie's letter until 1990 when I obtained my file from the Department. I was 17 years old at the time of Jacquie's search for her family. Why was the letter kept from me? Why was contact with my siblings not encouraged?

Where was the grief counseling at the loss of my family? Yes, children are supposed to be adaptable and resilient, and they are. But they also feel pain. Most of this pain was buried until I was in my thirties. By the time the grief emerged there were few answers for me anyway. My father had been dead for a number of years, my mother hadn't been sighted for many years and nobody seems to have known what happened to her.

I'm not sure what is saddest for me: having no extended family, never hearing from my parents again, or not knowing my brothers and sister. It wasn't until 1990 that I found my other 3 brothers and 1 sister. They had had some contact with each other over the years, but it really was a mess. For about a year we tried to get to know each other, organize family gatherings, try to put together the pieces of our past, stay in touch. But there was so much pain for all of us, that in the end most of us drifted apart again, and we remain separated now to a large extent, cocooned within our pain, within the safety of our individual families. We would need help, family counseling, to even begin to feel like we are a family today, to begin to heal the pain not only of the separation but of the experiences we had as wards of the state.

Conclusion

I don't know how or why I came to be so ashamed at being a foster kid, but I was, and perhaps it is related to being "convicted" when I was a child, of being charged with being neglected. How bizarre was that? I hated receiving a special assignment of books at school, hated the shame of going to the special store to be handed out clothes, hated having a separate surname to that of my foster parents. I hated being the only one I knew who went for dental treatment at the Dental Hospital in Frome Road, even though this was also the occasion of a rare treat, when Mum would take us into town afterwards and buy us lunch at Balfours. I have no idea if I actually needed the mouthful of fillings I have.

I first tried to find my parents when I was 18 and had left home. That's when I found out that I'd been celebrating my birthday a month later than it actually was. There wasn't really much joy to be had there, no parents to be found, a few members of my extended family with whom I felt no connection because there had been no contact over the years, although they were very kind to me. I remember this as a very lonely, confusing, and disturbing time and it's not surprising to me now that I abandoned university studies, not taking them up again in earnest until I was in my thirties and, for the first time in my life, living in a family setting that was totally supportive of me.

The metaphor of the State as parent of children for whom the state has guardianship has been bandied about over the past week or so. It is a mortifying one for me. It means there have now been five parents in my life, and not one of them has ever taken responsibility for what happened to me and my siblings. Will any of them ever apologize to us for it all? Since three are dead, and one is missing, probably dead, there is only that new "parent" I seem to have recently acquired, the State Government. If the state was my parent, then it was a most distant, uncaring and negligent parent when it came to my emotional well being. Yet as I read my file today, an intelligent, well educated woman of 48, it is with a great deal of sadness that I realize that any crumbs of affirmation came not from my family environment, but employees of the State, ie from teachers or social workers who visited. These were adults who saw me as intelligent and with a great deal of potential. Because of the emotional abuse, I couldn't see myself as intelligent and worthwhile. I guess of my five parents, in the end the state was the better one, but I am convinced that it could have done a better job, and I am hoping that the forthcoming inquiry will enable it to do so for the other children in its care.

What would I want from the state now? I would want the state to set up a specialist counseling program similar to that provided by the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service. It took me years to recognize that I had been abused as a child and had suffered from losing my family. It would have been very helpful to me to have been able to access a specialist counseling service, as an adult, to deal with some of the issues that arose specifically from being a ward of the state.

I still count myself among the lucky ones. My own siblings have had more difficult lives than me as a consequence of their experiences. Please listen to our stories and use this

information to improve the experience for current and future state wards. Don't let all the suffering be wasted.

Yours,

Deidre E Michell BA, BTh(Hons)
PhD Candidate, Flinders University