

## **Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care**

### **My History:**

I am a 50 year old woman, married with two teenage sons. I am a registered psychologist in the state of NSW. I spent time in orphanages and was abused in all of these institutions.

I was born in 1956. Shortly prior to my birth my maternal grandmother became quite ill and was in hospital. My mother, then aged 20, went into the same hospital as her mother to give birth to me. Two days after I was born my grandmother died. My mother then had a nervous breakdown and lost her memory. She did not remember my birth and was moved into a mental institute. My father returned to England to collect my older brother who was being cared for by my paternal grandparents and stayed there.

### **Orphanage**

I was then taken to a Catholic orphanage where I spent my next three years. To my knowledge my father visited me once during the time I was in this orphanage. I have very few memories of this time – they include being left in a dark wooden cot, sitting on the floor listening to a nun in a black habit singing.

Shortly before my third birthday my mother recovered and my father returned to the orphanage to collect me. My mother still had no memory of giving birth to me and from what I know we did not have a close relationship throughout my childhood. The nervous breakdown she had following my birth was the start of a lifetime of mental illness which impacted greatly on the lives of my father, siblings and me.

By the time I was 5 years old my mother had given birth to two more children. When I was five my mother had another nervous breakdown and I was once again returned to the orphanage where I stayed until I was 7 ½ years old. My father did not visit me during this time. My memories of this time are much clearer and not at all nice.

These memories include being screamed at by the nuns, being forced to eat food I did not want to eat, and being beaten with sticks, straps and by hand by the nuns.

The nun with the lovely voice was not there, or if she was she never sang to us. My worst memories are of night times of being sexually assaulted, orally and vaginally penetrated by a priest and made to say Our Father's whilst this was happening.

I was terrified. In the mornings when this was over there was often blood on my sheets and the nuns would scream at me and at other children who had 'soiled their beds'. We were made to take the sheets to a laundry and wash them by hand in cold water and wring them out. This abuse happened on a

regular basis – I estimate it happened at least once a week. This same priest was the one who took Mass on a Sunday morning.

My mother recovered again and once again I returned home. I felt I did not know her or my siblings and felt I did not belong in this family.

When I was 8 years old my family immigrated to Australia. The six week boat journey from England to Australia was probably the best time in my life.

The boat arrived in Sydney in 1964 and my family then caught a train to Brisbane where we were met by my uncle who had sponsored the family to come to Australia. By the time we arrived in Australia my parents had 7 children in all. My father was unable to find work in Brisbane and left to travel north to find work.

### **Sandgate Maternal and Child Health Home – Queensland**

During one of these trips away, when I was 11 years old, my mother again became mentally ill and I along with five of my siblings were placed in the Department of Health Sandgate MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH HOME. I believe we spent 3 months in this orphanage/home. During this time we had only minimal contact with my mother and none with my father. The contact with my mother was by letter and to my memory we received letters approximately once per month.

My time in this home was extremely sad and traumatic. The home was run by nurses/sisters who, on the whole, were extremely hard and cruel. For simplicity I will refer to the carers as sisters in the rest of my story. My memories of this time are outlined below.

Upon arrival at the home my siblings and I were taken through what seemed like very large wooden doors. My mother spoke to the sister who was dressed in white with a white veil on her head. My mother then turned and left. We children did not know where we were and did not know that we were to be left in this children's home. We were taken two at a time into a large room on the left of the entrance hallway. We were then stripped naked and our bodies were checked by one of the sisters. We then went to another sister in the same room and our hair was checked for nits. Following this my sisters and I had our hair cut short by one of the sisters.

We were then taken along the hallway, still naked to a large bathroom where we were bathed by yet another sister. Following this we were given clothes and told to get dressed. When I asked where my mother was and when she would be returning I was told that she was mad (crazy) and would not be returning.

I became extremely distressed and was told to be quiet and not upset my siblings all of whom were crying as we walked in single file around the orphanage.

We were then taken to a large dormitory where my brothers were told to stay and my sisters and I were led to another dormitory where my two younger sisters were left with a sister. I was then taken through double doors to a closed in veranda and was shown to a bed with the head of the bed against a small dividing wall. I was told this was my bed and was told to sit on my bed and stop crying and wait until I was told to come to dinner. At dinner time a sister came to get me and I was taken to a room where many other children were sitting in circles one inside the other.

We were then told that before we got dinner each child was to say a poem or sing a song. I remember singing Ring a Ring a Rosie... a song I had sung in England as a child. The children stood in turn and performed. When we were finished performing a priest came and spoke to the children about God. I do not really remember what he said but remember that he had another small girl sitting on his knee while he spoke to us. This ritual of singing songs and saying poems happened every night before dinner.

We were then led into a large dining room with several rectangular tables with about eight seats at each. I was separated from my siblings and sat with the 'big kids' while they sat with the 'little kids'. I remember crying and my siblings crying. We were again told to be quiet. We were fed dinner and I did not like some of the vegetables, namely brussel sprouts and peas as I had never eaten these before. I was told that if I did not eat these I would be hit. The other children told me I should just be quiet and eat what I was told. One of my younger sisters and one of my younger brothers took the brussel sprouts from their plates and came and put them in my hands. They were grabbed by the shoulder and returned to their tables. I held the Brussels in my hands. One of the sisters saw me and took me outside to another room where she called me a deceitful and ungrateful child and beat me for having the Brussels in my hands. She then made me eat them and continued to hit me until I was almost vomiting. When I cried for my mother the sister yelled at me and told me my mother was insane and would not be coming back as she could not stand such a bad child. My memories of meal times at the orphanage were all very similar to this – being forced to eat food we did not like, being hit and removed from the table if we objected and being separated from my siblings.

My other memories of this orphanage were also of heinous abuse. We were beaten on a regular basis with sticks, straps or a cane by the sisters. They would mostly hit us around the back or legs. At times they would hit us in the face.

When we were sick we were isolated and left in bed all day (I now understand this was necessary to prevent infection of other children – but was very scared at the time). I have one memory of being sick when my youngest brother (who was about 6 at the time) came to see me in my bed. We heard the sister coming and he climbed into bed and tried to hide behind me.

The sister dragged both of us out of the bed and screamed and yelled abuse at us. She hit us with the strap and berated us as she did so. My brother was then taken away and I was told to get back into the bed.

I hated my bed in the orphanage – but not just because of the beatings and isolation. At night time a sister would walk around the dorm shining a torch on us to see if we were asleep. She would then stand at the double doorway and shine her torch on the floor for a bit and then turn it off. When this happened the priest who had spoken to us about God before dinner on a Saturday night would come in to our dorm. He would choose a bed and then proceed to sexually abuse the girl in the bed.

When he did this to me he told me to say the “Our Father”, be a good quiet girl. He would then undo his pants, pull back the sheets, remove my pants and lie on top of me. He would then rub his penis on the front of my body on my genital region and on my stomach. He would often put his penis between my legs and rub. I remember him breathing heavily and calling me a ‘filthy whore’... I did not know what this meant. He would then force his penis into my mouth and hold my head as he raped me orally.

After this he would tell me to pray the ‘Our Father’ again and would then rape me vaginally. He told me that if I made a noise the devil would come and take me to hell where I belonged. He repeated that I was a ‘filthy little whore’. I remember the pain being severe. He would breathe harder and harder and would then collapse on top of me. He would then get off me, pull up his pants and leave. He often went to another child and repeated the same thing. I could hear them whimpering and him telling them to be quiet and pray. They did this. In the dark I saw his body on top of other girls including my younger sisters. This broke my heart and I was hit by the sister on duty for crying and told to go to sleep.

All the time while the priest was assaulting me (or other children) the sister would stand at the door looking the other way. If another sister came she would flash her torch on the ground and the priest would stand behind the partition until the sister flashed her torch again. After this he would resume his abuse. I don’t know how often this occurred but would estimate that the priest came 3 – 4 nights per week and would assault several children on the one night. I was raped on a regular basis. The older children were picked more often than the younger ones.

On the morning following the sexual assaults there would often be blood and sticky ‘stuff’ (I didn’t know what it was) on the sheets. The sister would inspect our beds and if they were ‘dirty’ she would yell and scream at us.

She would then rub the sheets in our faces and tell us we were disgusting children. She then put the sheets on our heads and led us to the laundry where we were made to wash the sheets by hand.

Not all of my memories in this home were bad... On occasions when we had letters from our parents we would be allowed to read them. I was the oldest of my siblings and was the one who would read and read the letters. This brought some hope that we would be taken home.

Another good memory involves a sister who would walk us to and from school. She seemed to be younger than the other sisters and would often sing as we walked and she pushed her bike (she must have ridden 'home' when we were at school). On rainy days she used to bring raincoats for all the children.... **This small act seemed like an incredible kindness.** While we were at the orphanage I went to the local (I'm not sure which) school and were made to feel like the dregs of society. The teacher would refer to us as 'the home kids' or simply as 'homies'. I hated being so different to other kids and having to make up stories about why I was in the orphanage. I would pretend that my parents would be coming to get me soon.... They never did... at least not for a long time.

### **Nazareth House**

After we had been in Sandgate Home for three months we went for what I thought was a visit to another orphanage run by Catholic Nuns – in black and white wearing rosary beads around their waists. Instead of this just being a visit we were left at the orphanage and the abuse started all over again. I do not know where my brothers went except that it was to another home for boys. My brothers will not discuss this issue at all. One has since died as a result of a drug overdose. Each of my four brothers struggled with drug addiction. Apart from me, none has had a successful marital relationship. It is very painful writing about these experiences but will try to write some of it.

Upon being admitted to the orphanage our hair was chopped short and checked for nits. We were again stripped naked and taken to a big bathroom with lots of baths. The sister/nun who bathed us was very rough – telling us to stop crying and hitting us when we didn't. These nuns would usually use a strap to hit us with but would also use a wooden hairbrush or a cane. They were brutal in their beatings for the smallest misdemeanours. At times we did not know why we would be hit. At other times we had to admit to doing something even when it wasn't us that did it. Refusal to 'confess' resulted in severe beatings.

On one occasion when I gagged on the beetroot I was told to eat I spat the beetroot into my hand. After this, I was yelled at by a nun and made to leave the table. I was then made to stand at the end of the dining room, in front of the other children with my hands in the air.

When they dropped I would be beaten with the strap and screamed at and had to put them in the air again, I was beaten again and again when they dropped. This happened many many times – (and I saw it happen to other girls). I was then sent to my bed and told no mother would ever want such a bad child.

It was on this night that I was first sexually abused by a priest at Nazareth House. I woke to find him sitting on my bed with his hands on my genitals rubbing me. I froze and was terrified. At first I tried to pretend I was still sleeping – I did not know what else to do. The priest then took my hand and put it on his penis and told me to be good and make him happy. With his hand

on mine and mine on his penis the priest rubbed himself until he ejaculated. He then left telling me to say the "Our Father" and the "Hail Mary". The priest warned me that if I told anybody 'our secret' that the devil would take me straight to hell and I would never see my sisters or my mother again. He also told me my mother was a whore and was insane. This sexual abuse continued for the rest of the time I was at Nazareth House. On one occasion a nun came in when she heard me crying. Although I believe she saw the priest on top of me raping me she turned her back and walked away. In the morning she told me I was a filthy child for 'dirtying my sheets' – they were covered in blood from the way the priest had brutalized me. That day I had to wash my sheets before going to school. I was deprived of breakfast for being so slow. I found it very difficult to walk as we went to school. I did not dare tell the nuns why I was in pain.... I think they already knew.

My memories of the nuns are not much better than those of the priest. The nuns were extremely cruel and hard and often brutal in their 'punishment'. Although it must have been hard to manage so many children I do not believe it was necessary for them to do what they did. For example on Saturday's when we would have our hair washed and checked for nits they would hold our heads in tubs of water for much longer than they needed to if they thought we were bad or rude. At night when we cried in our beds they would come with a wooden brush and hit us telling us we had nothing to cry for. Many nights I went to bed hungry, punishment for hiding food so that my sisters would not have to eat it or be punished. Again I was beaten for crying when I was hungry.

At times, I think it may have been monthly; visitors would come to the orphanage to see the children. We children would sit in a room and wait to be told when our visitors had arrived. I never had any visitors and was not the only child without visitors. One nun in particular would tell us that we were too bad and that nobody loved us or would ever come to see us because we had the devil in us. I hated visiting days.

My days at school whilst at Nazareth House were in many ways good days, although the nuns at school (I'm not sure which one but I wore a green tunic and I think a brown blouse) were very cruel to the 'home children'. We were made to feel like we were second rate citizens, and were bad and that was why we were at the home.

There are many other terrible things that happened in this orphanage but they are too painful and shameful to write about. I do not remember leaving Nazareth House, in fact I have blocked out much of the time I spent there. I only know that approximately 12 months after being taken into 'care' I was returned to my parents. From that time on, whenever my mother became ill, I would be responsible for looking after my siblings. No matter how hard this was, it was easier than returning to the 'care' of the Nuns.

## My life now

Having worked for almost twenty years counselling and supporting people who have been abused (many, including current clients, in 'care') I now realize that I am in fact one of the 'lucky ones'. I did not spend my whole childhood in 'care' in orphanages. The pain of the time I did spend there will never fully leave me. But now my life is happy – more than I can say for the many clients I have worked with who shared my experiences. I have no doubt that it was my childhood abuse that motivated me to become a psychologist and I gladly spend my days working with families in crisis.

I was blessed to meet and marry a beautiful and loving Christian husband. His love and patience over many years has helped me to heal. He has supported me as we have spent thousands of dollars on therapy. Although it took me many years to trust him, my husband stood by me and does so to this day. He is a loving husband and father to our two children. I am proud to say that, with his incredible support, I have managed to parent my children effectively and they have grown up in a secure and loving home and will never ever have to suffer in the ways I did. I am blessed to have their love. I have also been supported along the way by many beautiful friends (although most do not know my true history). Incredibly, I have also been supported by a beautiful Catholic sister who now knows my story, believes me and accepts me as I am.

The days of low self-esteem, of painful memories and nightmares are decreasing. The happy times are beginning to outweigh the sad. The experiences I had in 'care' are forever imprinted in my mind, on my body and in my heart. But I want to finish by saying some things to those who abused me. **You did not win!!!** You never touched the real me. You didn't even know the real me. You never knew that I was a strong and beautiful human being. **You did not crush my spirit and one day you WILL have to face your maker and answer for what you did to me and to too many other precious and beautiful children.**

## Government Response:

I first need to say that I knew nothing about this Senate Inquiry until last week (21.07.04) when I contacted Leonie at CLAN (Care Leavers Australia Network). I am amazed that this Inquiry has not been given more publicity – even to counselling agencies where therapists are working with victims of abuse in 'care'. I am appalled by this! As a registered psychologist in the state of NSW it is my strong opinion that the Government has the responsibility to provide free long term therapy to all people who were abused in orphanages. The scars of such abuse stay with a person for many many years, affecting almost every area of their lives and often impacting on their self-esteem, their relationships, their ability to trust, and their spirituality. These people are often deprived of an education and go on to live disadvantaged lives, forever held captive by their abuse and neglect.

**If the politicians who claim to want the best for children and families in Australia refuse to provide free counselling for people abused in orphanages and homes it will cost them significantly more in the way of treatment in psychiatric institutions, Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Centres, Prisons and other institutions – for this is where many of these untreated people end up. These people deserve all the support in the world – they deserve to be heard, recognized and believed. They deserve to heal.**