

KIM J. DOBSON

(Tuesday 14.09.04)

LITTLE GIRL LOST

As a little girl I was happy. I knew this because when I look back at this little girl - Me, I can still see her smile and bright eyes.

But one day, in April 1964 When I was nearly 4 years old, I remember going in through a huge door and saw a wooden staircase to the right of me. There was a lady, I found out later her name was Miss Thompson, she was very kind.

I was with my Dad and as we went into an office, we stood in front of a large desk. Behind it there was a stern looking elderly lady. She talked for a little while and not long after, we left this room and I was placed in a white painted, metal cot. This cot was in amongst other rows of white cots. My dad was still there, but then he turned and walked away. He never looked back and I remember I was crying and crying, calling...Daddy, Daddy...I cried myself to sleep.

I remember waking up but still my Dad wasn't there. What was I doing here and where was my Dad? Why was everything so different?

I was to find out many years later that my mother had Paranoia Schizophrenia, and my father had a nervous breakdown trying to cope with her and three little girls under four years old. Relatives had only been able to keep us for a little while, as they had their own families to rare.

I wasn't to see my mother again for just over three years.

This was the beginning of my twelve-year stay in four Children's Homes within N.S.W. I only remember these couple of things at this age and going upstairs and running around in the dormitory when we were meant to be in bed going to sleep.

This Home was known as the Adelaide Walkers "Baby" Home at Strathfield. It took in children aged up to five years.

Another incident I remember was hair-washing day. I was wrapped in a towel like a cocoon and the young nurse (not sure if it was Miss Thompson?) leant me backward over her arm to wash my hair. I looked at her - I remember really looking into her eyes, wondering what I was doing practically upside down but she didn't see me.

I guess it was just her job. I remember she was firm but gentle.

I didn't like being "wrapped" up, but I was ok and sought of felt safe.

My younger sisters also came to the Adelaide Walker "Baby" Home; Toni was only 16 months old, and my middle sister Donna nearly two years old came a few months later, apparently she had measles and had stayed with a neighbour.

I don't ever remember them being there. We must have been separated into different age groups, different areas...I'm not sure?

We stayed at this Home until each of us turned five years old. We were then sent to the Laurels Girls Home, at Kogarah. On the 12th of September 1965, I was transferred to this Home because I was now at an age to begin school. The United Protestants Association ran both of these children's homes. I didn't actually get to see my youngest sister for about four to five years. Apparently there was no significance on siblings being given contact with or even allowed play with each other.

The moment I got to the Laurel's Girls Home, I was smacked.

It was my first day; I was nervous and was surrounded by a whole heap of older and much bigger girls than I was used to, who were all standing around and staring down at me...I was scared. I started scratching the over-spray of paint off the kitchen-cupboard handle with my fingernail. The smack was hard and it stung. I didn't dare cry, for fear of being smacked again. Tears ran silently down my cheeks. I know this was my first ever smack...I was devastated. I still remember it as if it was yesterday.
...I can still feel that sting.

The other smack (if you could call it that) I remember well. It was because another girl and myself "swapped" jobs. She tipped the breakfast tealeaves over a geranium plant that I was blamed for. I was belted with a wooden spoon so hard that it left a bruise the size of a saucer on my upper leg. Such a heavy price for such a little mistake...one that wasn't even mine.

I remember a teacher at school questioned the bruise, but that's as far as it went.

I got into trouble many times at this Home, mainly because I dared to be myself. I was often called "The Ring Leader", maybe I was.
...Maybe I was just being a kid.

At the Laurel's numerous amounts of Matrons and Deputy Matrons passed through this place. They came and they went, some with children, but most without. Most were kind but some were monstrous, a few were "motherly", and others very regimented. We played them all, seeing how far we could push them and where their boundaries lay. We didn't know at the time what we were doing...but most didn't stay. Somehow we knew they wouldn't...they never did. So it really didn't matter.

Most of my time spent at this Home held fond memories in part of outings with different people, one school camp and charity groups. APEX; Lions Club, Joyce Mayne (of Joyce Mayne Furniture) and a lovely lady we use to call "Auntie Bonny" who use took us to her place and give us lunch or she would come to the Home to visit...I never really knew who she was or how she fitted in?

There were holidays with foster families. Christmas parties and presents bon-Fire nights and a very rare birthday party...my sixth birthday being one of them, and the very first time I saw my mother again...I didn't even remember a photo that had been taken.

I cried when I saw it...by then I was an adult.

However, when I look back on what were supposed to be “fond” memories and should have continued as such...were not so.

As I got older, I realised that after spending time away with foster families, the few presents I did receive before I went away, were usually stolen by the time I returned off holidays back to the Home.

Firecrackers that my father bought my sisters and I were not always given to us. There was a promise of going to the Directors of The Laurels (Mr Marshall) and his family’s property to let them off; instead he gave them to his own children for their cracker night. We never did get them and lonely nights of crying myself to sleep, when I realised no one was coming to pick us up. A kind girl, who didn’t have anything either, Marlene Harper would pat me to sleep for the most of the night, in amongst the heartbroken sobs.

Also, my first only, ever, new white leather, slip on, wedge heeled shoes, that were bought by my Father, were stolen. I believe they were taken by Mr Marshall for one of his own children. Everything I ever owned or possessed as I was growing up in this Home was either confiscated or stolen.

In the end, I don’t think I wanted to remember any events. Whether it was Christmas, Bon-Fire nights or Birthdays. They didn’t seem much any more. They just came and went...things given...things just taken away.

I thought we ate o.k. We were often donated things like blue ginger ice cream (obvious now, no one else would eat it) lollies, cakes, buns and bread.

But I also remember digging out the plaster in the wall next to my bed at night, and eating it. I don’t know why I did. I know I ate that plaster a lot at night when I went to bed. So did some of the other girls we use to “share”. I don’t know when or why I stopped...or why I even started?

I went on holidays with only a few different families, who I remember were “nice” people. I was shown how to cook, sew and knit, which I still do today. Once I went to the Royal Easter Show with a Policeman, only to have him split his pants as he took me off a merry-go- round, to give me a “piggy back”. I had to wait outside the make-shift dry cleaners at the show while he got them stitched...that made me laugh...he kept poking his head out to make sure I was still there and hadn’t wandered away!

I remember I was given a walking doll when I was very sick and had to stay home with three other girls in a big double bed, when we all had Chicken Pox. Then, there was a beautiful hand made dolls outfit in mauve that a kindly old lady made, “especially” for my doll. I also remember another time, being spoon-fed arrowroot biscuits, milk and sugar, whilst laying on the lounge, under the big windows in the lounge room, because I was so sick, I couldn’t do it myself.

These were the nice times I remember, but it wasn’t the same for my younger sisters in this Home. When they were still very young, both were sexually molested and abused. A so-called respectable Woollongong High Schoolteacher molested my youngest sister

Toni when she went away for holidays with him and his family. When my father was told about the “incident”, he was told, “”Toni had been “touched” but she “seemed” o.k. And not to worry about it””. My father had not even been told of the extent of his own daughter’s abuse. The whole “incident” had “simply” been dismissed and pushed away...forgotten.

The Director of the Laurels Girls Home sexually abused my middle sister Donna, along with other girls. Both sisters as I know only now, were adversely affected their whole life because of this abuse. Both are also dead. I know more about my sisters now in death, than when I did the whole time they were alive.

They died nine months apart in March and December 1997. Leaving behind 5 children between them. My sister Donna took her own life as she couldn’t “cope” anymore, and my youngest sister Toni took an “accidental overdose” with a drug concoction she had made, as she had no money to buy “the real thing”.

Before they died, both of my sisters did not have custody of their children. Both in their lifetime had had 3 abortions between them. Sadly, and with no care or guidance, Donna and myself both adopted out or “gave away” a baby each.

I believe now it was directly linked to having no self-worth while we were growing up, or knowing the value of a life as a little child. Just like us, we were in a sense, and in our own minds, and not far from the grim truth and for whatever reason, good or bad, right or wrong...“given away”.

Although I thought I was doing “normal” things like holiday’s and outings, I still felt I never really fitted in or belonged anywhere. Not In the Home, at school or even with my own sisters. I don’t ever really remember seeing them; it wasn’t like you were in your own home together, playing and enjoying each other’s company. We were just there and that’s all.

My life, which I thought was “normal”, was in fact very abnormal and dysfunctional. Yet I never knew any different...But it was to play a major part in my adult life.

My Dad on quite a few occasions was offered for us to be adopted out, but he always refused as “”he wanted to keep us three girls together””. He visited us every fortnight, and always brought us a packet of coloured popcorn each, which I still love to this day but he was eventually asked “not to bring it anymore, as it wasn’t fair that the other girls had nothing”. I didn’t understand then. But I do now.

I also would get very jealous, as some of the other girls would want to visit with my Dad and sit on his knee too, I wouldn’t let them and would feel so angry. He was “My Dad”. ...I now know that they most probably didn’t have a Daddy of their own.

My Auntie Helen and cousins visited when they could. And another aunt came when she could, both were Dad’s sisters. Mum only came twice that I remember, as she was very ill. We also went home to Macquarie Fields N.S.W. for holidays, where I remember the first time my Mum saw my youngest sister Toni – who by this time was either five or six years old. Mum didn’t even remember her at all, and asked, “Who was she?” I heard Dad tell her “It was Toni, your youngest daughter”.

The last time Mum had seen Toni was when she was just a babe-in-arms. I remember staring at Mum and thinking..."How could you not know who she was"...I ran off and played. It was weird, because..."I" knew who Toni was.

At the age of thirteen, in 1973, the Laurels Girls Home was closed down. "Men" were breaking in and walking around late at night. All of us older girls signed a petition saying we were too frightened to stay there any longer. My sisters, the other girls and myself were literally "shipped" out in the middle of the night.

We were taken to "Bidura" at Glebe, N.S.W. for two weeks.

It was the longest I ever remember being anywhere. This was the "naughty girls" Home that I had heard about and had been threatened with constantly while growing up, that if I didn't behave, along with Parramatta...If I was ever a "Bad Girl" this is where I would end up. I learnt very fast, especially at this Home to be "Good", all the time.

I was frightened having to stay here, as were my sisters. There were the most "vicious" girls in this place. It was the first time I think my sisters and I literally "stuck" together. I actually remember seeing them the most in these two weeks than I had in all the other years put together.

There was no more, what I believed as "normal" belongings that I had been use to...Just rows of lockers, a uniform, a set of play clothes and one pair of shoes. Our own clothes were given back when we left Bidura. I had one blanket on a crisply made bed; this was along side rows of other beds.

I remember I was cold and had to ask for another one...in silence, I was given one. If you were "trusted and good" at this Home, you were given a crotchet hook and wool. Only two colours. No knitting needles; they were considered "dangerous". I chose black and orange wool. All you could do, however, was make a crocheted rug. Nothing more...nothing less. Some girls were not given anything at all, so I guess I was considered "Good". I was sad when I left, as I had to leave my half-made blanket behind. I wanted to go back and get it, but I knew I couldn't. I was then loaded into a car or van, maybe a taxi...and we were gone again.

I think my sisters and I then went and stayed with an Aunt, my Dad's sister...Auntie Rose. She didn't treat us very nice or even fair. Smacked me hard on the top of my hands and wrists all the time and always yelled. She had three boys...my cousins, who gave us a hard time and hit us with sticks and were terribly nasty. My auntie didn't do anything and it was horrible...we weren't use to boys, so that made it worse. I think she wanted us there in a way, so as to help my Dad, but she was stressed and we were a burden to her. ...And I knew it.

After a little while...and not being very happy, we left there and were placed into the Church of England Girls Home at Carlingford. Soon after arriving, we had a change of Matrons, and within a few months of being in charge here, Mrs Tatrae's husband died of a heart attack. She took it out on the "Girls in the Home". As I remember, she seemed ok before this. We were always being "punished" for the smallest of things. We also had to make a brick driveway. She said in a report that it was for us girls to have something to

do, to help her out, and that we had “volunteered”, but she had actually put us on punishment. It’s amazing how people in authority lie to save themselves.

This lady was the same one who threw a bucket of hot water over my sister Donna and called her a liar and a thief. But she was “who she was” and we were just a “report” in a filing system. In this Home my sisters and I did see each other more, but when we did, we seemed to yell and fight all the time. Obvious now because of all of the traumas we had been through when we were little.

Donna and I especially, had “punch-ups”, and eventually we were placed in separate “cottages”. We hardly saw each other, but then again...we were use to that.

They say that history repeats itself. Well my mother Dorothy Dawn Pratt and her sisters also spent time in this Church of England Girl’s Home from 1948 to 1949. She was 11 or 12 years old. They were placed there after both their parents had died. Her mother when she was eight and her father when she was sixteen. Mum had told me, that, when they were there, they hated it so much that they use to throw their shoes out of the window, so they would have to go outside to pick them up, they would run away. My Mother’s brother, (Uncle) Barry, who was retarded, was sent to May Villa.

And also, when I had to deliver my second baby, I had to put my 14th month old son into Sandgate Children’s Home Q.L.D., as I had no one to care for him. No family, no friends and no relatives. He had to stay there for nearly two weeks. It broke my heart that I was left in a position to do that.

Here was three generations of children placed into “Children’s Homes” for so called “Care”. Nothing else was either available or even optional.

While at the Church of England Girls Home, I went to Cumberland High School. I enjoyed my school days here, but looking back I never joined in any social events such as going to see any rock bands that came to the school, camps, excursions or school dances. I missed out on so much. I always thought I did well at school, but also looking back at copies of old school reports, I did not do as well as I always thought, or could have. I was portrayed as a very “disruptive” student, and didn’t get the help and encouragement I needed. I was also sent to a psychologist because I was thought of as “troublesome”. I only did three years of High School in NSW. No junior or senior certificates...or no school formal.

And even though I have gone on to further my education in just a little way, it’s been the most scariest experience I’ve had to endure, along with getting my drivers license...I hate it. I never seem to finish what I start for various reasons, mainly because of things in my past that keep “popping” up, and I either don’t cope very well or continue.

I had no guidance growing up and basically looked after myself since I was 4 years old. Cooking for other children...about 16 others in the home from about the age of eight or ten. Even when I was meant to be getting “cared” for, I was caring, cooking and cleaning for both adults and children. Otherwise I was out in the streets wandering around, stealing or “jimmying” down the drain pipe of the two-storey Laurels Girl’s Home, or in the yard playing with trap-door spiders nests, and smoking the reed like plants, that were growing in the front garden.

I was not taught any social, life or personal skills, except for making hospital corner style beds from the age of five and cooking. Definitely nothing to prepare me for “the world out there”. The outings we did have in the Homes were very regimented, with the final, prompted, droning, echo of....

“T h a n k y o u - f o r - t a k i n g - u s”...which still rings in my ears even today. A constant reminder that I had to be grateful for “every” little thing and that nothing was done for me – “just because”. Even now...I hate the sound of those words...and tell the kids who say them...its ok...no trouble.

After leaving school, I worked in a number of jobs. From factory work, baby-sitting and department store work.

By the time I was 17 and a half I had delivered my first baby, on my own. I had been out of the Homes only two years. I looked after him well, and did the very best for him with the nothing I knew and most times got beautiful comments...others would just turn-up their noses. By the time I was 18 and a half, and on my own yet again, I'd delivered my second child, who was very ill from 5 to 10 days old and she was expected to die. I had no support. Eventually I had to look after her on my own too. And by 22, my third, and then by the time I was 28; I had 5 children under ten years old.

Five children, to four different fathers. During that time, I had been married, divorced: had had two de-facto relationships; been raped; bashed; physically, mentally and emotionally abused. Moved from house to house, suburb-to-suburb and state-to-state a number of times.

As a very little girl I was happy and I know I was loved by very caring parents, but as I look back on that little girl - me, I find somewhere in amongst everything, what I believed to be “normal,” I became lost. I lived in a world that I just somehow, faded away into and couldn't do anything about, not because I wanted to, not because I should have...but just because nobody knew any better. And there were also the ones who “*thought*” they believed they were doing what was “best for me”.

This had affects on me more so when I was a teenager, not having a teenage-hood at all and even more so when I became an adult. By the time I was 30, I was doing some real soul searching. I started to believe and reason with myself, that I wasn't “normal” at all and I was determined to find out why and to look for something better for my children and myself.

It took me over ten years to find and change myself at that time. I know it was the Homes, the same for my sisters and even then that still took me years to bring to realization.

It wasn't easy and it's still an ongoing struggle, but it has been worth it to be the person I am growing into.

I often wondered...why it ever got this bad?

I wonder why I still felt like crying when I remember my Dad walking away that day and didn't turn around to come back and get me.
I found out many years later...He was crying too.

As I became older, I thought I needed religion to get by. I thought it would help me forget, or save me from my sins...or self, or whatever it was meant to do. Which because of habit and familiarity, is what I thought I had to have as it had been forced down my throat so much while in the Homes...but after the shocking times and truths with so many different religions...that definitely wasn't the answer. Neither were men or drugs. Both my sisters found out the hard way.

The year before my sisters died, my Mother also died, she was only 59 years old. We all loved each other, but we weren't ever really close. We tried, but I believe it was because of all the unresolved issues we had to deal with as little girls and still did as adults, but we never knew or realised it.

I've since talked to my father about the "Homes", and I believe that at the time, it was the only choice he had under the circumstances. Choices I know he would have made differently if he could. He told me, "I did what I thought was best"...I know he did. He told me of the heartache it caused him for all of us being apart and mainly of the big financial burden it posed.

He was maintaining 2 households, a mentally sick, alcoholic wife, visiting and supporting us and looking after his own needs all on one income. He had a good job until his retirement as a Laboratory Craftsman Grade 1 with the Atomic Power station at Lucas Heights Sutherland N.S.W. And before my mum became a wife and mother and then became ill...also worked very hard...neither had a cent to their names.

Even now, with all my family dead, I love my Dad very much, but we are not close. All that I do is look after him and his needs in the nursing home he's been in for seven years since my mum died. I'm his support and his daughter. He helps me financially especially when we need it. He's a good Dad. It's like the roles have now been reversed only the settings are different, the four walls...so to speak.

Do I begrudge doing this? Yes at times I do. It reminds me too much of the "Homes".

I know the way I was raised has directly affected my relationships with everyone especially partners, even today. And I withdraw, even as outgoing as I am. Sometimes I don't know how to act...I hate it...I like to tell the truth...but people don't always like to hear it and I'm left on my own yet again.

But in my strength and wisdom, I teach my children what it is like to be in a loving home and family. To care for one another and to care for others free from abuse. Sometimes it's not easy and to them this is a "normal" way of life and this "is" how it should be. They are lovely kids, well adjusted and do well at school or in their places of work. They really enjoy life and all facets of it. I teach them, that anything is possible; that they can do anything they want, and can be anybody they want to be if they put their mind to it. I teach them to stop and smell the roses and see how beautiful the world really is.

They know what I've been through and they seem to understand. I have been blessed with beautiful children. They often tell me that "they couldn't have had a better mum".

I'm not so much the little girl lost any more, even though at times I feel I still am and neither will my children be because of what I went through. That is what gives me the strengths to teach them and for them to take great opportunities when they arise and for that I can only be grateful, as the hardships I endured yesterday can only be the strengths in their future.

I have a saying that I have had for a long time. I also tell others who haven't been looked after as children, especially the ones of us, who were placed in, supposed, "care"....

AS A CHILD YOU DON'T HAVE A CHOICE BUT AS AN ADULT YOU DO.

Kim Dobson...12-10-2000

FOOTNOTE...28-05-2003...After arrangements were made with Steve Walkerdon of the U.P.A., I went back to the Laurels Girls Home in June 2002. I went with another girl I knew. We were friends at the Home when we were 11 and 12 years old. After meeting up after 30 years, we are still close friends even today.

When I entered the Home I had mixed feelings. The Home...the building itself was much smaller than I remembered...all the surrounding grounds had been utilized as an Old Peoples Complex, which was great. The Macadamia Nut trees that held fond memories for me were still there, and the "Home" itself was pretty much the same as I remembered, only beautifully painted and maintained.

But most of all, and with a lot of apprehension and intrepidation, I went into that bedroom (we use to call it the "three" room") where I use to eat the plaster from the wall. There was a cupboard there, and the wall had been repaired and painted but there was just enough space that I could put my hand and feel where it had been...and there, sure enough was the indent. I thought I would be scared, but in fact I was ok. It was a step in my healing just knowing that this was real...it had been real.

At the present I am doing a Diploma of Counselling. It will take two years to complete and even though I'm finding it tough at times...I will succeed. I have, in undertaking this course though, re-touched on some of those 'buttons' of my child hood, and I am finding it difficult, especially on a relationship level.

I'm not always happy, as people seem to think I am, and at times I still cry like I'm that little girl, but now I'm more aware of what is going on and understand more clearly as why I cry "for no reason".

There are reasons and for only too long I've kept them well hidden, especially from people whom I love very much. But life goes on no matter what.

Secondary footnote Saturday 10th Jan 2004...

Well a year into my studies has gone by and I have just the other day put it aside. I did well, passing what needed. But I found I couldn't listen to the problems of others while still dealing with the depths of my own. I found studying so hard even though I tried and tried. This is just me, even though I pushed against all things I knew of myself and growing up in the 'Homes'. I asked myself 'why' and it may sound like an excuse, but it's not and very few understand unless you're another "Homie"

I hate that I feel like this and always try and change what I can, always working on something about myself when I come across it. But I ask myself... "why should I? Normal people don't". And I wonder at times and think I'd like to go to counselling, but all as it would do is re-hash over what I have talked about with myself a thousand times, and if you've never been there you would never know.

There are no answers or quick fixes to what we've been through, or to what I've been through. I take phone calls from 'X-homies' who just want to talk and have someone to listen...the stories they have to tell are all the same...unbelievable, horrific, sad or tragic.

Do I say that carers in the past need to be accountable? I say yes.

...I say yes because they had an obligation and duty of care just to look after little children. How could they not love those little ones. That's why babies and littlies are given sweet little faces from birth, so they can be ogled over and loved, no questions asked. They are made that way from the beginning, too defenseless to do it for themselves.

But some of these ones didn't even love them, and even if they didn't want to...they should have not taken on the job or just been kind and humane and care for them regardless. At the very least, feed, clothe and treat them fairly free from abuse, both physical, sexual, emotional and spiritually.

...So why didn't they?

I sometimes wonder whether these "carers" were also abused as little children and the abuse went around again in a vicious cycle of abusers and control freaks? It's no excuse. These facts are only things we really know of now. Should they be accountable? My answer is still yes, by now they were adults and knew better, and no child should have endured and been punished for what some of these had been through.

Plus not all the abusers were abused, so it could have been prevented and there would not have been the problems, heartache and mental illnesses that have arisen today from these atrocities in the past two generations.

But life still goes on with all of our own secrets and heartaches to bear.

I have been affected, I know I have, but I don't like to keep talking about it, as I don't believe this is the answer either.

What I do hope is this. The government, especially the Church groups that ran these Homes, does make amends and do the right thing, no matter what the cost, especially to the men and women who still suffer today. To stop any future repeat of this inhumane and cruel behaviour and endorse harsher penalties for abusers and to find constructive ways to help and understand what went on in these places that were meant to be called home.

STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES AND SEE HOW WONDERFUL LIFE REALLY IS.