

30 October 2004

Dear Sir/Madam

Please find enclosed my submission for consideration for the second report arising from the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care.

I was so relieved when I heard the news about the report as I suddenly felt as if I was looking at 'my mob' with whom I belonged.

I had not heard about the inquiry until I saw it on the TV news and I was in tears with a mixture of joy and relief that our story had been told.

I was shocked though that even though I have a high level of interest on these issues, I had not come across it anywhere before.

I had certainly heard of the Forde report in Queensland but as I was a ward from NSW, it wasn't one in which I could take part. I heard about the NSW report after I moved from Victoria to Queensland some years after it was over.

The national inquiry includes many of us who were previously left out in State inquiries including my brother and two sisters.

A big heartfelt thank you to Senator Murray and Senator Jan McLucas for bringing this matter to public attention. It has helped me enormously to feel better about my self and made it okay for me now to 'come out' and share the experience.

My childhood in care was one of constant physical neglect and abuse, psychological terror, and hard labor. It was one that can best be described as similar to prison life with a loss of family, identity, and dignity. That was my experience as a ward of the state in NSW where I belonged to no-one and where as a child I was denied basic human rights.

The situation where my parents were charged with 'neglect' and then we children being placed in government care, where the neglect and abuse was far worse and the emotional deprivation was cruel, is a tragic irony. It is a dark historical episode that needs to be recognised not only for us but also for our children as they have also been impacted upon.

They don't have an extended family of maternal aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents with whom they can share birthdays and Christmas celebrations and my husband's family live in the UK. Nor do they have the financial and emotional security that many others take for granted as I have not had the opportunity to maintain stable employment and have often been emotionally absent. In addition, I had a child during my wardship and I was forced to hand her over for adoption.

My husband has frequently had to take care of me due to the damage done during my time as a ward of state in NSW.

The thought of public recognition or a public apology for the neglect and abuse that I suffered and am still tormented by would mean a great deal to me. To come together with others who had similar experiences for a public ceremony of some kind would go along way towards my healing.

I cannot believe that this Senate Inquiry has taken place and I am delighted to make this submission that focuses on my story but is also the story of my dear brother who is now a lost soul due to severe psychological trauma resulting from care.

It is also the history of my two dear sisters and their children who have all barely survived a lifetime of abuse. Two of these grown children are Indigenous and they have experienced additional abuse and discrimination growing up in Townsville. They are both single parents and so the cycle of poverty and deprivation of all kinds is perpetuated.

Yours sincerely

Linda Eldridge (my ward name)

Submission for The Forgotten Children

Made by Linda Eldridge – 30 October 2004

Section One – Background

1.1 Submission limitations

I cannot in the space of this submission go any deeper than to describe a small fraction of the neglect and abuse and punishment to which I was subjected during the thirteen years or so of my 'wardship' with the NSW government. I have tried to recapture some of those events and feelings that I recall as I write this today. There are others that are too shameful to describe and that would be too distressing for my family to read.

This submission only touches the surface of my experience in the care of foster families who were accepted by authorities as 'good and proper', and in the care of children's homes where I was placed. My 'bad' parents on the other hand were deemed 'neglectful' of their responsibilities and that is the stated court determination as to why we were taken away.

It did not matter that they had no way of supporting themselves or their four children. They were not even thirty years of age but had been raised in a culture that supported reproduction without any contraception regardless of financial situation. Nor were there any welfare services to support the family staying together, and in any case, it was the wisdom of the day that the removal of children from 'undesirable' parents was in their best interests.

Finally, these recollections are based on well documented personal historical facts provided to me by the Department of Family and Community Services in recent years.

1.2 A right to exist?

It wasn't until I met up with my sister and father when I was 24, that I suddenly realised that I had a right to exist after all. Although I was already married and had a child, I suddenly became aware that up until that time I had always felt like an intruder, not welcome, and without any of the entitlements that everyone else took for granted. I did not even feel as if I had the right to breathe, to speak, or to be heard.

This feeling puzzled me, as it never occurred to me consciously before that I felt this way. I had grown up in a mixed world of children's homes and a range of foster families. My role was always one of seeking permission before acting. I was only allowed to move, to speak, to shower, to dress, to get up, or to go to bed, or to do anything at all, once I had been given permission, either by foster mothers or 'wardens' and 'nurses' in girls' homes.

1.3 Permission to breathe

I had to get permission each day as to what I would wear, and when I could use the bathroom. How to wear my hair, what to eat, when to speak, any basic decisions were made by others who had the right and the power to do so. My role was that of an unworthy child who had to be grateful, to speak only when requested, and most importantly to obey, and obey immediately as directed.

If I did the ‘wrong’ thing I would be harshly punished, either with slaps and punches, and on more than one occasion with a knife shaken at my face, or with other forms of psychological terror. These punishments were meted out for the slightest reason and I was often dragged out of bed late at night to be slapped around, for example, because something could not be found in the kitchen. Along with the physical abuse there were the verbal barrage of insults that reminded me that in this place, I was someone who didn’t matter and where I could die from neglect and abuse and no one would notice.

1.4 ‘Wards cannot be trusted’

The impact of the experience on my life has been profound. Stripped of family and any signs of identity, even my name, along with my childhood, my youth, my sense of self worth, and my right to exist I became no-one. I belonged to no-one and this sense of loss tends to stay with you for the rest of your life. I lost my family, my brother and my sisters, my aunts, my uncles, my beloved grandmother, my cousins, and later my own child through wardship.

In return, I was given a scattered and inconsistent school education, I was immunised and inspected on many occasions by a variety of health professionals, including one who was way too intimate with his wandering hands. However, I never mentioned it, as no one would have believed that in any case. While a few minutes of a seemingly kind doctor were welcome, his wandering hands were not. The humiliation stayed with me for many years. Now I am saddened that a vulnerable child can be so easily taken advantage of because at the age of 12 I had no one who gave a damn.

Another feature of wardship was the commonly held view expressed by carers that ‘wards could not be trusted’ and ‘you could never believe a word they said’. When I attempted to tell child welfare authorities, social workers, school teachers, and later family members what had happened to me, I did not receive any empathy or kindness. Instead I was greeted with responses that I was ‘making it up’ and that ‘no-one’ would treat you like that. It was even said that I just wanted to draw attention to myself. I found this devastating, as I was really disappointed that not only had I been through a living nightmare for many years but also that no-one wanted to know or even listen.

Section Two – Context

2.1 The Stolen Generation Report

I was very interested in the Stolen Generation report where children from Indigenous Australian families were removed against their will. I could relate oh so well to their experiences and while I felt a little disappointed that the rest of us ‘wardies’ were not part of this report, I could well understand why.

I was pleased to see that at least some of the common experiences were up for discussion in the public arena.

As much as I had suffered in girls’ homes after being ‘stolen’ from my family, I knew that it was nothing like the far worse experience of those girls who were from Indigenous families. On my many stays at Bidura and at another home, King Edward Girls Home, I observed what the ‘Aboriginal kids’ went through. They were especially isolated and lonely, as they had no kin of even the same colour to whom they could relate.

They looked very different to the rest of us with their curly dark brown hair, big brown eyes and long dark curly eyelashes, and they had a sense of self respect and would not be beaten into submission as readily as the rest of us. I think of these young girls who stood up to abuse and who were then abused even more, and eventually their very spirits were beaten and crushed out of them. They were more often likely to be in solitary confinement, were more likely to have their hair shaved, and more likely to get the ‘duck’s beak’ inspection where a girl was vaginally checked out for sexual activity. I saw these girls become inconsolable and calling for their families in times of extreme isolation and loneliness. I was at least the ‘right’ colour and was not subjected to the constant ridicule that was theirs due to the colour of their skin and aboriginality.

2.2 The Forgotten Children report

I was completely unaware of the national Senate Enquiry that resulted in the Forgotten Children report. I first saw it on the television news in September 2004 and I was overcome with relief and a sense of having ‘found my mob’ when I heard that the report had received submissions from ‘homies’ and ‘wardies’. I felt excited that finally, our story had been told and I wanted to be there with those who went to Canberra for the report’s release.

I had not once heard of the call for submissions or the enquiry itself although I have had an active interest in such matters. How did I miss it? I knew that New South Wales had an enquiry some years ago and I found out about that much later when I requested my files. At that time I was living in Queensland when I came across some information about the NSW report on the internet, which I then followed up with a request for my files. I finally tracked down a

Department in Paramatta where my request could be lodged and it was over 12 months later that I received my files. This was during the time of the national Senate Enquiry so I was disappointed that despite my contact with the Department that I knew nothing at all about it.

It was with much relief and excitement that I made contact with the Care Leavers Association Network who welcomed me like a long lost family member. That is how it felt for me, I felt like I had 'come home'. Here were my family all come together to recount their years of abuse in homes and in foster care. I could not believe that someone did seem to be interested in us. Thank you Senator Jan McLucas and the others responsible for bringing this part of our history out into the open. I felt like I was able to 'come out' after all these years and that my story would be heard for the very first time. I found out that submissions were still being accepted for the final report and I felt encouraged to share my stories for the first time. I never thought I would have this opportunity in my lifetime and I am pleased to finally have permission to share these experiences in a supportive context.

2.3 Validation

The news validated my years of heartache and pain at the hands of a system that had shown so little concern for our well being, particularly for our mental well being. While physically our basic needs were met in Homes, they were not always met in foster homes. I remember being close to starving and wearing clothes that were splitting at the seams, as I grew older due to the negligence I experienced in foster homes. Even bathing was limited to once a week and that was shared with another ward. I was not even allowed the time to brush my teeth and my underpants were rarely washed.

These things barely mattered at the time because our greatest need was for love, friendship, and a sense of belonging. These were much more important but these non tangible basic human needs were not even a consideration. We know that even the animals have a need for nurturing from their mothers, why is it that this is/was never recognised as a basic need for human children? I felt less than a human being and not even deserving of the basic nurturing from a parent figure.

Section Three – Wardship

3.1 Loss of identity

When I first became a ward of the state, one of the few things, apart from my very soul, that I had left to identify me as someone with a right to exist was my body and physical features. Mainly at the hands of foster parents, these were all either taken away, or those that could not were used as reasons to ridicule to cause me shame and embarrassment.

The children's homes made sure that you could not keep any personal possessions; even toothbrushes and hairbrushes became communal property. That lovely dress that Nanna made for me before I was taken was removed instantly when at the age of 7 I arrived at Bidura and it was thrown into the communal washing basket. I saw someone else wearing it the following week and I never got to wear it again. My pleas of protest 'that's my dress, my Nanna made it for me' fell on deaf ears as in this place I learned I had no belongings and I was no-one. No-one cared and I was at the mercy of strangers who seemed to have no heart. I had never before met people who had little tolerance for the needs of children no matter what their circumstances.

During wardship, my name was changed on countless occasions. With each new family came a new name, new friends and it was if the old ones did not exist. Years later I visited every home where I lived and took photos so that I could validate to myself that 'yes, this place really does exist' and I remembered what my life was like when I lived there.

3.2 Foster Care

Stints with foster parents were, in my experience, far more abusive than girls' homes. At least in the girls' homes there was a sense of 'all being in the one boat', you weren't alone in your experience, and the abuse and degradation was something we all shared. There were no possessions, and no doors on toilets or showers, and we were always under the watchful eye of staff who we called 'nurses'.

We all had our daily duties such as caring for the babies and young children, i.e. giving them their bottles or farex baby food, changing their nappies, and bathing them. Others had duties at the on site laundry where the huge heavy white cotton sheets were collected, washed, and hung out to dry as there were no dryers. They were then brought in, starched, ironed and folded. Others worked in the kitchen, cooking, preparing, washing up and cleaning up.

Another had the job of being the potato peeler shut away in an outhouse type of building where she sat with a huge pile of unwashed potatoes. I remember she had gorgeous red hair that was shaved off one day because she was giving

'cheek' to one of the nurses. She later ran away from the home and was brought back in disgrace.

Even so, I preferred girls' homes to living with foster parents and I was always devastated when I was sent out to a new foster family, as I feared abuse and loneliness.

With foster parents, you were placed in a situation where you were on your own and at their mercy. There were many times of incredible loneliness, isolation, and degradation. In one home, it was a daily occurrence for me to be dragged out of the toilet to be slapped around for something that this particular foster mother was unhappy with; usually some house cleaning that was not up to her standard. I became terrified when I had to go to the toilet so I used to 'go' on some newspaper under the house and wrap it up and put it in the bin so that I could get some privacy. I could not even use the toilet in peace.

3.3 Give me a head of hair!

An interesting theme that developed in my experience of foster care and girls' home was the obsession that the authorities and foster parents had with hair. All girls were de-liced when they went to Bidura back in the 60s with some sort of weird process involving kerosene and a hair wrap. Even so, we had communal hair brushes.

I then witnessed the horrific shaving of the potato peeler at Bidura as recounted above.

Later with my first foster placement, my long hair was cut very short. My pleas to keep my hair were ignored even though I always had worn it tied up so that it was neat. I was 8 years old, my foster mother told me it was untidy, it had to go.

Another foster mother often reminded me how 'ugly' and 'funny looking' I was and she forced me to have my naturally dead straight hair permed into tight curls. Her grown up daughter would do it in an effort to make me look a little like the child star Shirley Temple who had gorgeous curls. I was not Shirley Temple; I did not look gorgeous, just stupid! Especially to my class mates who thought I was weird particularly as I used to sneak a scarf out of the house to cover my hair as soon as the school was within site. I remember one class photo where I can be seen in my curly glory and fully scarved, and with white sandshoes, as neither she nor the authorities would get me a pair of ordinary school shoes. So, it's fair to say, I really stood out as one of those children who was really weird!

In another foster placement my hair was allowed to grow to shoulder length but I was forced to wear hats to cover it up. This family were regular churchgoers, i.e. every other day not just Sundays. I was so embarrassed to be dressed in the weirdest of outfits complete with a ridiculous hat. It was so ridiculous that when I walked along the busy road to church, drivers would

toot their car horn and sometimes even their passengers would wind the window down and call out insults!

In this placement, hats covered hair at all times, including going to and from school, church, and on any other occasion I left the house I had to wear one of those triangle shaped head scarves.

There was definitely a pattern that I observed in the first week of every new foster placement. The slate of my history was wiped clean and apart from in my memories, it simply did not exist anymore and was never spoken of. Then my new name would be announced with variations on Linda and then the foster family's surname.

Part of the pattern was that my hair had to be drastically changed, i.e. either cut, curled, or hidden. Then they would start on making me feel ashamed of myself for who I was, where I came from, and what I would be. These new assaults started with ridicule about my physical appearance simply because I did not look like them. I remembered looking like other members of my own family and I was painfully aware that in foster homes my different appearance had to be tamed and attempts were made to have me look like the new family.

At least in the homes appearance did not matter so much as everyone was displaced and everyone looked different, i.e. except for the Aboriginal girls who no doubt felt something a little like this in girl's homes where their appearance was very different to the rest of us.

3.4 The no good, the bad and the ugly

Between the developmental ages of 10 and 14, I was told repeatedly that I was 'an ugly looking thing', that I was a 'liar, a thief and a cheat' and that 'I would never amount to anything' and that I was a 'lazy, good for nothing'. I was also said to be 'ungrateful' and that I would 'end up' just like my mother. I always thought I was really 'ugly' as no one else looked like me and the boys at school would sometimes call me a 'witch'. I knew I was 'ugly' and I knew I had a lot to be 'ashamed' about.

At school when they asked what my father did for a living, I used to make something up. My dad was always a 'doctor' – I couldn't tell them that my father was a fruit picker last time I saw him a few years ago.

When we were taught at school about the menstrual cycle, my foster mother told me disparagingly that I was 'not innocent anymore'. She carried on about things that I now realise were to do with sexual experience rather than the menstrual cycle. Somehow I knew from what she said that I was contaminated with this shameful 'bad' and 'dirty' knowledge that was never to be raised again.

My father was always described as 'no good' and my mother as 'crazy'. I used to pray that my family would come and get me out of the nightmarish

world in which I lived. I was told they did not want to know anything about me and had left me 'to rot'.

3.5 The X Files – the truth is out there!

Years later, at the age of 48, I received a package of files I had requested 12 months earlier from the Department of Family and Community Services in NSW. I was very sad to see the many letters from my father, my mother and my grandmother begging to be allowed to see me, begging for reports as to my well being. The lack of compassion in the system was abundantly clear when my grandmother's heartfelt request for even a photo was denied. I knew that they would have felt extremely disappointed seeing replies from the authorities that simply said 'Linda is well'. They were told things like it would be disruptive for me to have any contact with them. Nothing could have been further from the truth and if only they had realised I was being told that I had been left 'to rot' because my parents could not take care of me. They were labelled as 'irresponsible' and 'no good' and comments from authorities about my mother saddened me very much as they described her as a troublesome nuisance.

However, at least I knew I had a family, as I was able to remember them. My youngest sister, Ivy, who I only met up with when she was 17 and I was 24 had been told that we were all killed in a car accident and that she was the only survivor. Imagine her surprise to find two sisters, a brother, a mother and a father after she had lived with 8 different foster families during her 17 years.

Section Four - Kicked from pillar to post

4.1 First placement – Drummoyne, Sydney

School attended – Drummoyne Primary School

In my first placement, at 8 years old, I would hear my foster mother make up stories about me to portray me as ‘wicked’ to my foster father. This was every morning where I would wake up to hear her stories and lies and I could not understand why she said these things.

I felt humiliated and embarrassed at the things that were said behind my back where I had no opportunity to defend myself. I initially felt upset and hurt but as it went on every day for two years I grew used to it and tried to analyse why she did this. Maybe talking about me was to distract her husband from other things in her life. I don’t know and I can only guess as to why a grown person would want to berate a child behind their back every day before they got out of bed. And all within my hearing range.

4.2 Second placement – Penshurst, Sydney

Schools attended – Beverly Hills Primary and Kingsgrove High

In my second placement, I was constantly threatened with taunts such as ‘I’ll take you back to the home’ where apparently there were many worse things to fear than what took place in her home. When I eventually begged to be allowed to go back to the home after 2 years of psychological terror, emotional abuse, and twice daily ‘slaps across the face’ she said I was ‘ungrateful’ and told me about a fate worse than death that would await me.

In this placement, I was worn out physically from undertaking the ever growing number of chores that had to be done before I left for the 2 km walk to school every morning. I was up at 5.30 so that I could fit everything in. The chores after school also meant that I could not do any homework. When the child welfare authorities were told by the school that I never did any homework, my foster mother told them that I was ‘lazy’ and that I didn’t do my chores quickly enough. My voice didn’t count though and I doubt that I was even asked, but from then on I was under even more pressure as I had to fit my homework in of an afternoon along with all my usual chores.

I lived under tormenting conditions where I first learned the meaning of what it was to be anxious. I was closely monitored in whatever I did seemingly to the second. I was allowed a number of minutes to complete a task even walking to or from school. If I was a minute late, I would prepare myself for the worst, maybe just a slap or two across the face or the usual insults. However, there was always the prospect of a proper beating and I was always anxious to get things done in the given time.

Later, in the documents I received when I was 48, I was surprised to see that a number of social workers had indicated that I should be removed from this foster placement. One even said that I appeared to be terrified of the foster mother. However, all of them concluded that as I had said that I wanted to

stay with her, that it was not in my best interests to be moved. No matter how well meaning they were, not one of them seemed to consider that I was under threat of punishment of the worst kind by my foster mother if I had said otherwise.

Interviews were always held with her present although I recall one meeting where there were a few minutes held on my own. I had been prepared for this occasion by my foster mother who made sure I knew that I would pay the price with a range of punishments if I were to say anything other than that all was going well and that I wanted to stay. I knew that I would get a few days without a belting or a thump if I complied.

This woman had at least 16 other wards come and stay with her during the 30 months that I was fostered there. They were all older than me and they all ran away within a few weeks, or months. Not many stayed for even six months. I wondered why the authorities did not see that there was something seriously wrong in this home. I was aware that my foster mother told lots of lies about them which were readily believed. She told stories that portrayed them all as 'bad' and 'lazy' girls who were 'uncontrollable'.

Eventually I found a 'saviour' in a child welfare officer then in the Hurstville branch who I wish to honour by naming him, Mr Linton. I called him and told him my story and I was so thrilled that he seemed to believe me! He showed kindness and compassion and he was the one responsible for eventually getting me away from this awful foster home and back to Bidura.

I learned many truly ugly things in this foster placement including something I had never experienced before. I had one school friend, Bettina, and we were inseparable, we ate together and played alone during lunch. She was kind and friendly and to her my circumstances and appearance did not matter.

We used to walk home from school together. Then one day, my foster mother told me suddenly that I was no longer allowed to play with her or walk home with her anymore. I did not understand when she said, 'you didn't tell me she was a Jew, you can't be friends with a Jew'. I asked Bettina to tell me what a 'Jew' was and why did that mean I couldn't be friends with her. She calmly explained that she had a different religion and culture, and she thought it was unbelievable that we were not allowed to walk home together anymore. We still played together at school and I simply hid our friendship as much as possible.

4.3 Bidura – I'm home!

I was so relieved to return to Bidura receiving depot. It was a bit like the RSPCA but for children.

It was familiar, I knew the matron, it had clean sheets on the bed, (there were fleas in the kapok mattress I had in my foster home), there was food to eat and plenty of it, there was time to eat, and time to go to the toilet even if there were no doors. I had a shower every day, which was sheer luxury. Once

again there were no doors but it was not as embarrassing as sitting on the toilet without one and for a hot shower it was worth it.

There were other girls I could talk to and I was not alone. However, my 'honeymoon' at Bidura Girls Home, a peaceful paradise after the foster placement, ended too quickly. It seemed so peaceful as I wasn't nagged constantly and I wasn't slapped around and called names. Life seemed so easy in comparison as there was at least some respite from the chores that had to be done. I wasn't the sole target of abuse as had been the case in the foster home. The mental pressure was a huge relief, as I didn't have to face the alien outside world. The one room school was in the backyard of the home and I was grateful that this was away from the ridicule, assumptions and expectations of normal 'everyday' people.

I showered every day, I had clean underpants, I could go to the toilet when I needed to and I had food, including fresh fruit, to eat. I wasn't constantly yelled at and I was never slapped around. The work I had to do was nowhere near as physically exhausting and as strenuous as what had been required of me in the foster placement.

We were all wards together sharing the bizarre reality of our daily lives and while it was depressing with nothing much to look forward to, it was much easier to bear than a foster placement. I feared for my life in some foster homes where I thought on more than one occasion that I would be attacked in an outburst of rage or simply die from neglect and heartbreak or all three.

However, I was only in my new found paradise for the weekend before being fostered out to yet another foster home. I begged the social worker to please let me stay at Bidura as I was treated much better there than I had been in foster homes. Once again, my voice fell on deaf ears, and it was considered to be in my best interests to go to a stable home. I was told about the benefits of going to the foster home which was said to be located on the beach.

4.4 Third placement – Sans Souci, Sydney

School attended – St Joseph's Kogarah

My first big disappointment was that the beach was nowhere in sight. In fact the view was of a very busy main road, Rocky Point Road and when I finally saw the 'beach' it was Botany Bay. In this foster placement, I had a 'sister' who was their only child. It was said that as we were both 13 I was to be good company for her. However, she became resentful and jealous towards me particularly as I was very good at my schoolwork! She would get me into trouble with her mother by accusing me of doing things that I hadn't done.

Her mother would shake a knife at me in her verbal barrage of insults because I had, for example, not tidied up my undies and sock drawer to the standard expected. My documentation includes a note from a child welfare officer who was sent to speak to me at school about the shocking state of my underwear drawer. Before I left the placement, my foster sister admitted that she had deliberately messed up the drawer before her mother inspected so that I would get into trouble.

It was my foster sister and I who discussed that I would leave and how that would be done. We were both 14 and we sat down rationally and logically and discussed the situation where her mother had become increasingly distressed since they took me in. This was making life very difficult for her and she felt that her relationship with her mother had also deteriorated. She was also upset that she was not able to do as well as me at school and that her father seemed to think less of her as a result. There were other problems too about how we were seen at school, we were perceived to be twins as we had the same surname and were both 14.

She felt that I was better at sport and at school and she was unhappy about having to share her friends with me. I said I was unhappy too and that I wanted to leave, and as soon as possible. We then discussed strategies as to the best way to do this, what to say, when, how and why.

We agreed that she would tell her parents that I wanted to return to the girls' home. I then came out and joined her and they asked some questions, particularly her father. When we went back to our bedroom we heard her father say to her mother, 'if the girl's not happy, then we have to accept that she's not happy, and do as she asks'. We were both relieved and I was particularly amazed and I think it was at that point that I realised that this respect given to me was an act of kindness. I still think kindly of this man now although I only saw him for what would have amounted to a few days over a period of two years as he was away working for most of my waking hours.

I was escorted back to Bidura by a welfare officer who told me that I was extremely ungrateful and that I deserved all the bad things that were going to come my way.

This stay at Bidura was at the same time as the televising of the historic landing on the moon. I thought of the irony of this incredible situation where a man was walking on the moon at the same time as were herded in to be seated in time for 'the walk'. I knew that this would be a moment I would always remember, as I felt a little sad that I would never be able to share the moment with anyone I knew. Everyone in the girls' home was a stranger who would come in and out of your life without even being noticed in many cases, so short was their stay. Others I would meet up with again along the way in different homes. For example, I met the sister of a girl from one home in an unmarried mothers home a couple of years later. I recognised her as they looked so much alike and as we didn't use our real names there, she was shocked when one day I mentioned her sister's name. She hadn't had any contact with her sister for many years and welcomed the little bit of news I could give her. She begged me to promise that if I met her sister again that I would not reveal the shame of her pregnancy. There was nothing to fear, as I never met either of them again.

4.5 Fourth placement – Drummoyne, Sydney

School attended – Riverside Girls High

It was after this that I went to live with my mother's sister in Sydney. She already had the care of another sister who I was delighted to see again. It was while I was at Bidura that I begged her to let me come and live with her and despite the significant shortcomings in material provision, the welfare authorities gave permission. It was wonderful to be with family after all those years of being in the wilderness, having a background again, a history, blood relatives who looked like each other, and a dear little sister who I had cared for when she was a baby.

I was free to do as I pleased and after all those years of virtual imprisonment I started to visit school friends and took bus rides to what were then far away suburbs. For example, from Drummoyne to Sans Souci to check out where I used to live. I was no longer escorted to church every Sunday but had the choice to go or not. One day I didn't go and went and had a coffee and some toast at a nearby café. I was expecting a bolt of lightning to hit or to experience some other out of this world type of punishment for my dreadful sin.

But this didn't happen so I often skipped church preferring my toast, coffee and a read of the Sunday papers.

Against this life of apparent bliss where I was allowed to do my homework, see friends, and see other family members including meeting up with my father who I hadn't seen for seven years, there were some serious consequences.

When I first met my father, he was much smaller than I remembered and I was disappointed that he was not the father of my dreams. I had completely forgotten what he looked like, how he talked, and anything else that I might have remembered about him. My Aunty at this time encouraged me to go and live with my father who was now working in Sydney. She was finding me difficult to control as by this stage as I was out with friends 'all hours' of the night. We planned out a strategy where she could tell the authorities that I had 'run away' to live with my father and where she would give me one week before reporting it.

4.5.1 Absconding ward - Balmain

I was 14 when I 'ran away' and went to live with my father in a boarding house in Balmain where we had separate rooms. He worked long hours and I got a job in one of the big arcades in the city working in a shoe store. I had used a false name with the initials LSD after a drug of well known fame and had put my age up to 16 at the employment agency.

I was enjoying my new found life style even though it was lonely. This was not to last though as a warrant for my arrest was made as I was an 'absconding ward' and I had stopped going to School. The Police tracked me down through some school friends and I was escorted back to Bidura Girls Home. I

went cooperatively so that I would not be charged with a criminal offence and was returned to 'care'. I don't know what happened to my father after that but I didn't see him again for another couple of years.

4.5.2 Exposed to Moral Danger (EMD)

I was certainly exposed to moral danger living like this and I was sexually assaulted on one occasion under threat of knife attack. The man threatened me with violence should I tell the police and he left the scene with a squeal of tyres. This was my first sexual encounter about which I told no-one as that would mean giving my true name and address. Previously, my only experience with the opposite sex was when I lived with my Auntie where I had been held up in the toilets at a church dance by a group of them. The group guarded the toilet door while one of them tried to force me into a sexual act while threatening me with a syringe. I had not heard this type of language before and had never experienced such an encounter so I was very frightened and disgusted at what was being suggested. I don't know how I managed to escape but I was able to get out of there and head home.

4.6 Fifth placement - King Edward Girls Home, Newcastle

School attended – Hunter Girls High

From Bidura, I then went to King Edward Girls Home where life was fairly comfortable compared to the life I had led thus far. We had our own bed in the dormitories and we had clean sheets. We were allowed to come to bed when we were tired rather than stay up late, as we had to do at Bidura. This was bliss for me as I had been forced to stay awake when I was very, very tired at Bidura. I would beg to be allowed to go to bed but was told that they couldn't allow that as the girls would 'muck up' and not go to sleep. I promised that I wouldn't but the rules are the rules.

There was not a constant turnover of wardies at King Edward and it meant that you could form relationships with girls over a period of time – in my case, six months. It was special to have companionship and we all left the home to go to a 'real' school. At Bidura, I had only ever gone to the on site school in the back yard of the home where no matter what age or grade, you were all in one classroom until you were 15. Girls were not allowed to continue with their backyard schooling once they turned 15, as they were then required for domestic duties.

I remember this time as a happy one despite the frequent marching around the courtyard if something displeased the matron, despite the army style boots we wore to school, and despite the abuse I witnessed towards some of the girls. One was the 'domestic' whose privilege was to have a room of her own but she was frequently humiliated and berated for not performing up to the required standard. The other was an Aboriginal girl, Yvonne, whose emotions were never far from the surface and who would not hold back in letting the matron, the nurses, and other staff know what she thought of them. I secretly cheered her but wanted to help her so that she wouldn't have to suffer the consequences of standing up for herself.

There was a sense of camaraderie between the girls and we did naughty things like a couple of us sneaked out one night and went to the nearby beach. What an incredible risk that was as it would have been so easy to get caught but we weren't. We got away with it. Another was that I used to post mail out to families for the girls on my way to School. I went to a different school to the rest, as my school results were higher than average and this gave me certain opportunities denied to the rest. However, there was all hell to pay when the matron caught on and I had to own up. They were so disappointed as I was a bit like the 'golden girl' who could do no wrong up until then.

4.6.1 Survival Sills

I learned an important lesson at the school I went to. I was from the girls' home and the only one at that. I had a navy box pleat uniform and recycled army style boots for school shoes in a school where the uniform was a green modern skirts, white blouse with small tie and brown regular shoes! I knew from the first week that I was the 'misfit' even though one of the girls in particular was very kind to me and let me sit with her group.

However, it was as if I did not exist and I had no voice within the group when we used to sit together at lunchtime. I felt I could only speak when I was given permission and some girls were starting to ridicule me. I realised that if I were to make an impact and get them off my case, then I would have to do something dramatic. I planned out a strategy to gain the attention and respect I needed. I apologise now to the girl that I picked for no reason other than she was handy to help me implement the strategy. I started yelling at her for no reason, much to her surprise, and when she began to argue back I hit her across the face. She was shocked and must have felt devastated, but this one act worked for me. I had established my credentials as someone to be wary of and respected. The turnabout was amazing as I became popular and my reputation spread throughout the school and I never had to stoop to such low behaviour again.

4.7 Sixth placement – Orange NSW

School attended – Canobolas High School

Once again, although I was happy enough to return to King Edward and see all my new found friends again, it was considered that it was in my best interests to again be fostered out. This time to a family in Orange where my father was now working. I understood the placement would just be for the Christmas school holidays after which I would return to King Edward. However, the child welfare authorities were keen to see me placed in a stable home and in desperation an announcement was made in a church congregation at Sunday Mass that there was a homeless 15 year old girl needing a good home.

I then went to live with yet another family, my last foster parents. They were much better than all of the rest in that I was allowed to go to a public school and not a church school. They were people who introduced me to a different life that showed me other possibilities and options. They were creative and worked in the theatre, producing, directing and writing plays. The house was always full of theatrical types doing rehearsals for various productions. There

were also some interesting and well known visitors to the house from the entertainment industry. I learned about things of which I previously had no experience.

The down side was that they were stereotypical theatrical types. Life was one drama after another and it was like living in an artificial way. Life was an act, nothing seemed for real, and everything was overly dramatised. There were lots of daaahhhllings being splashed around in everyday conversation. It was quite humorous looking back on it now but it was a nightmare not only for me but also for their three children.

4.7.1 Domestic violence

I witnessed the ongoing abuse of their children. They were beaten regularly and while one would cry with heartbroken sobs, the other stubbornly refused to cry no matter how much it hurt. I was amazed at the hypocrisy of a father who would beat and kick his child into the family car on a Sunday morning to get him to Church. This performance took place every Sunday leaving this child abused and the rest of us in no doubt as to what would happen to us if we misbehaved. His 7 year old son moved on from drinking the home made brew in the garage to performing cruel acts on animals and defecating in the bath when he was left in my care. He was also stealing money and cigarettes.

This family was highly respected in the Church and my foster father was very well known in the town. The fact that he and his wife had taken me in was another feather in his cap. Years later after I had left their care, their daughter ran away with a man they had not met. She came to see me, after drinking way too much alcohol, for comfort and support before leaving.

I urged her to write a note to her parents to tell them what she was doing and where she was going or else I would have to tell them. So she did. The reaction from her father was that she had been 'kidnapped' and 'forced' to write the note. When he found out that I had seen her, he then blamed me and he left the house yelling that he would 'kill' her when he found her. I was pleased that I had not revealed her whereabouts.

A year later when she came home for a visit, she was 17 and had her new baby with her.

I have no doubt that their intention was genuine, i.e. to give a home to a helpless young girl, a victim. However, when it became clear that they could not wipe my past history, or wipe the slate clean and commence with me afresh as they would a new born baby, I became problematic. I wanted to be part of the family but could not bear to witness the abuse of their children – I felt so very sorry for them.

Comments that were hurled at them such as 'if the pill had been around, you wouldn't have been born' made me wonder why on earth they had taken me in. They continually berated and beat up their children and then left them in my care while they went on weekend trips. It was during these times that I

witnessed the resentment and anger of their eldest son who was displaying deviant behaviour at the age of 6-7. He was not given the emotional love and support he needed and rebelled by drinking alcohol, stealing money, smoking, defecating in the bathtub for me to have to clean up, and being very cruel to small animals including kittens.

One day, his sister and I nearly killed him as we had him cornered with a knife. Such was the frustration caused by his provocative acts that we could have easily killed him, such was the violence and animosity in the home.

During my time living there I was told that my father was not welcome to visit the home and that my foster mother did not like him. I also started going out to dances and had a social life, which was something I had never had before.

4.8 Seventh placement – St Anthony’s, Croydon NSW

School – Correspondence School

Before long I became pregnant and was then sent off to an unmarried mothers home in Sydney.

I went there when I was five months pregnant and commenced correspondence school as I was in Year 11 at the time. This was a very sad, lonely, difficult time of extended grief in a home run by nuns with their emphasis on sin, confession and contrition. If we were not humble already, we learned even more humility in their care. My job was to clean the upstairs level of the building every day. This was where those girls whose families could afford to pay for a room stayed, while those of us less well off stayed in dormitory style accommodation but with the luxury of having our beds curtained off down stairs. I was especially grateful as there was a room divider between my space and the next.

Here, we all used false names for privacy reasons. On admission, there was confession to be had so that one’s sinful act in falling pregnant could gain penance. Telling one’s most private sins to a stranger who was hidden behind a veil in a confessional seemed really odd. My previous confessions had been made when I was younger and where some might say I was pretty much without sin.

4.8.1 Scrub, scrub your sins away

I atoned for my sins by scrubbing built up wax off the hallways, stairs and bedroom floors. Those bits that build up around the corners were particularly difficult. Using a knife, I was frequently on my hands and knees scraping the floors and then scrubbing them with a heavy wooden brush. Now when my knees ache I wonder if it goes back to those days when I spent hours on my knees in pain at the direction of the nuns. I would sweep, wax and polish the floors on most days and undertake the scraping duties once a fortnight. Then I would bring in heavy loads of washing up the flights of stairs nearly passing out on the way.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that I had committed a heinous crime in becoming pregnant at 15 years of age. I was a criminal and just a 'bad' girl. No one was interested in the circumstances that led to this and everyone it seemed had a theory or opinion to be expressed.

4.8.2 Vulnerable to abuse

Essentially, I was very lonely, I was vulnerable and I had no one looking out for me or ensuring that I was not to be taken advantage of. I had few friends at my new school and the one I did have was told by her group of friends that she would have to ditch me if she wanted to stay with the group. I was living in an abusive environment and had little, if any, contact with my beloved family.

I was very lonely and isolated so one day when a young man approached me with a cheerful smile and a charming manner, I responded to his invitation to meet up with him later. However, I had no idea what would befall me when I went to where he was staying. He forced himself onto me in a way that can best be described as a deviant sexual act. I was terrified, disgusted, and ashamed that I had let myself get into this type of situation. I was only after friendship but I got a lot more than I bargained for including falling pregnant. When I told him I was pregnant he wanted to know 'who to' and he did not believe that he was my first. I did not disclose the previous experience as that was straight out rape whereas with this experience I had gone to his place and in those days that meant you were just 'asking' for it.

I told no one about the experience and was later bundled off to St Anthony's home in disgrace to have my child who would then be adopted out to a 'good' family. It was not possible for me to stay at the foster home, as this would be an embarrassment to them once my condition became obvious. They made it clear that they were not prepared to have me back with them if I did not give up my child for adoption.

4.8.3 Unmarried mothers

When I had a baby daughter, my foster parents did not want to know anything about her, the pregnancy or the delivery. They did not even want to know that she was a girl or how much she weighed and I was told that I was not ever to mention it and that I was to forget about it as if it had never happened. By this time I was 16 and had just had the most fundamentally natural and wonderful experience but with not one person to share it with. In addition, my child was taken away from me instantly and I only saw her immediately after she was born and later I saw her in the taxi on the way back to the unmarried mother's home. When we got there I went to the post natal part of the home and my child was taken to another part where children for adoption were placed.

4.8.4 Adoption or wardship

One day, another of the young mothers encouraged me to go with her to see our babies. I was so thrilled to be able to do that as although I had studied my

dear little child at length in the car so that I would remember her every detail, her little ears, her tiny features, her olive skin, her fair complexion and dark hair, I was keen to breathe her in some more.

I got to hold my baby for maybe two to three minutes that I will never forget. She took my finger and held it tight like babies do and it felt like she was saying don't let me go. I went back to my post natal room and cried, and cried for many hours on my own. I was not supposed to be having such feelings for my child and I knew what awaited her if I did not go along with her placement for adoption in a loving stable family.

The alternative explained to me was that I would be sent to a state home for unmarried mothers and their children. Here, I would not be allowed to go to school but would be required to undertake domestic duties. I pictured a life for my child that would be a repeat of my own where she would be raised as a 'ward' in the care of the state. It was put to me that as I was only 16 and a ward that she would most likely be placed in foster care and in children's homes as I would only be able to care for her for the first few months.

I did not want her to go through the type of life I had experienced in the care of the state and I could see no other option. I knew it was in her best interests to go to a 'good' home no matter how much my heart was broken.

4.8.5 Cultural separation or poles apart

When I met up with my daughter, when she was 19 and I was 36, I was met with a perception where I felt as if I were still the sinful 16 year old girl who had acted coldly in making a rational choice to hand over her baby for adoption. I had never felt this way before and I think subconsciously that this is the way she saw me. Understandably, there was no recognition or understanding of the context in which the adoption had taken place or the degree of grief in which this had happened.

The perception was that I had a choice. It was a matter of choosing a life for her with a loving family or choosing a life without one and a life of poverty growing up in girls' homes where we would both be 'wards' of the state. There is little understanding or compassion shown to 16 year old girls in this situation, even less than there is now. Even though I myself was barely older than a child, I had made my bed and I had to lie in it!

Now having met up with her I am very pleased that she has an extended loving family who have cared for her exceptionally well. My child was raised with the perceptions, values and stereotypes of a family with financial security whereas I had none. She is able to make the choices typical of her generation and circumstances, i.e. to travel, to marry or not to marry at all, and to obtain a higher education.

However, for me, meeting her was a mixture of joy and sadness. Seeing myself through her eyes was not a pretty sight as she thought I was 'cold' towards her when we first met. That I hadn't 'cried'. It became clear that my

child had no knowledge of my kind of life and because of her upbringing, the very one that I wanted her to have, we were poles apart.

I felt harshly judged as the 16 year old girl who had sinned and then happily given away her child for adoption. But love is not all you need to raise a child.

Adoption was a step up in the world I had known, where children were forever homeless and unloved, and apparently forgotten because they were no-one's children. I did not want that for her, so adoption was the equivalent of an 'up market' decision seen from the perspective of wardship.

Section Five– Brave New World!

5.1 Forget and move on

After this life changing experience I returned to my foster home where life continued on as ‘normal’. Within a few weeks, I received a card from the home that told me that my child had ‘gone to her new home’. It also said ‘she looked lovely and they were a lovely couple’. I treasured that card for many years, keeping it in my prayer book until I met up with her. In my excitement and joy, I gave her the treasured card. Some time during our relationship, I desperately wanted it back, to have a copy of it, when things were at their lowest between us. Many years passed before we had contact and I never saw the card again.

I still have a choking lump in my throat as I write about this difficult time and I can feel the tears rising. To have a child that is ‘taken’ by the system is bad enough but to meet that child and feel rejection throws you into the depths of desperation, frustration and overwhelming grief. It’s as if you’ve lost your child all over again.

5.2 Accident

Back in the foster home, I finished up school at the end of Year 12 and started a Nursing career at the age of 17. My foster family moved away to another town and I shared a house with other nurses.

To get to and from work at the hospital, I had a small motorbike, as there was no public transport. One day I had a near death accident when I crashed head on into an oncoming car and almost lost my leg. I spent months in hospital where my leg was saved but was badly disfigured and left me with permanent injuries. Since then I have broken the same leg twice and now use a walking stick and a mobility scooter to get around. Mr Linton, from my early days as a ward, paid me a much welcome visit. It was if he were family and I thanked him so much for giving me hope as a child when he believed me and took me out of one particularly harmful foster home.

5.3 Ready to face the world!

My wardship ended when I was 18 by which time I was seriously injured after the accident and was immobile for many months, I was grieving the loss of a child, and had lost my chosen career as a nurse. I was back with my previous foster family who were still abusing their children and with whom my relationship had deteriorated even further. I had not seen my mother, brother or sister since I was 14 and I had not yet my youngest sister. However, I did see my father from time to time so long as my foster mother didn’t know.

I met up with my youngest sister when she was 17 and her life had been one of constant disruption in foster care and girls’ homes. Apparently, we just

missed each other at Bidura on one occasion by about a week so I knew she was alive but she thought her family had died.

In conclusion, my life as a ward was one of severe deprivation of liberty, where I was physically and emotionally abused and I would suggest at times bordered on torturous treatment. I experienced disassociation on a number of occasions, which I can only explain in terms of feeling as if your spirit has left your body and observes it from a distance. I have seen myself from afar walking long distances in Sydney during early morning winters running chores with next to nothing to cover me.

During this time I was forced to steal to eat at times, sometimes drinking milk from the doorsteps of neighbours. I was not even allowed to properly use a toilet and would often wet myself on the way to or from school, as there was no time during my household chores to even do that. For my efforts when I returned home I would be slapped across the face and told how 'dirty', 'useless' and 'lazy' I was.

On another occasion, I experienced a very real disassociation combined with fantasy where I saw my foster family leaving by car in the distance. They saw me and my foster mother got out and beckoned to me to come along in a hurry. As I started to run I saw them drive off so I walked back home and I was deeply shocked to see them there. They hadn't gone at all and I suspect it was wishful thinking!

My time of wardship has had an effect not only on me but also on my wonderfully supportive husband and two grown children. They are loving and caring and I have protected them from my background as much as possible although I have shared some of it on occasions. They have watched me suffer as a result with bouts of depression, anxiety, and grief but despite anything else, I have given them all the emotional support a person needs to thrive.

Section Six – The bare facts

There were four of us children who were wards of the State on the basis of ‘neglect’ in Mudgee NSW in 1962. I was the eldest at 7 years of age. I was placed in Bidura Girls Home where it was recorded that I was ‘not very bright’ although I was cleared of ‘venereal disease’.

My name was Linda Ann Eldridge (but included Linda Campbell, Lyn Flynn, Lyn Cotterill, Linda Murphy and Linda Nicol depending on which foster parents I was with at the time).

I have one brother, Paul, now 47 and two sisters, Veronica who is 45 and Kathy who is 40.

Veronica and I are the only ones to come through the experience okay. By okay I mean that we have survived to tell the story. Veronica wet the bed till she was 17, became pregnant to a 30 year old family ‘friend’ at 15, and in recent years has tried to kill herself on two occasions.

I had many different foster placements between institutional care, became pregnant at 16, had a major accident at 17, and so on. But at least we are not still in ‘care’ as are Paul and Kathy.

Paul lives in a boarding house in Sydney and is unable to care for himself. He has also attempted suicide on a number of occasions.

Kathy has three children, two of them are Indigenous. All three girls (23, 20 and 18) each have children themselves and live without partners in Townsville.

Neither Kathy nor Paul are well enough or educated to a standard where they can write and they are emotionally destroyed through years of abuse while they were in ‘care’.

Kathy was told that we had all died in a car accident (very familiar story) and that she was the only survivor. We found her in a rehabilitation centre (at Taringa in Qld) when she was seventeen – she had 8 sets of foster parents during her 17 years.

Despite our parents and grandparents letters to the Child Welfare Department, I had no idea they had tried to find us and that they had pleaded to be allowed to see us or just to get a photo until I got my records last year (i.e. 2003). It was incredibly sad to see how we were deliberately separated and how my parents were labelled as ‘bad’ and my mother as ‘mentally disturbed’.

Section Seven – Another perspective

7.1 Overview

Living with Linda for thirty years has been a roller-coaster of experiences that keep me guessing. I feel very privileged to have shared this major portion of her life with her and to have been allowed an intimate insight into a world that I could not have imagined from the perspective of my safe and comfortable British upbringing.

Linda was eighteen when we first met. She was recovering from a road accident that had nearly taken her life and she immediately impressed me with her courage, tenacity and intellect. The stories of her childhood and adolescence that have emerged, little by little, since that first encounter have deepened my love, admiration, wonder, and respect for her – that someone could survive such atrocities and pain without, for too long, losing hope in humanity or a love of life, is a constant inspiration.

7.2 Accident

The road accident occurred just four weeks after Linda was released from her wardship. I can only speculate that this was no coincidence. Finding herself suddenly out of care, with the last in a line of foster parents having moved a few hundred kilometres away, and with no financial or family support, Linda was totally self-dependent. Her only means of transport to get to and from her job was a small motorbike. It was when leaving the workplace on a wet night that a speeding car met her head-on. She was not expected to survive but, after many operations and a six-month recuperation, she was released from hospital. She was not expected to walk unaided, but from the day we married in 1975, she has done. All her life, Linda has exceeded expectations in many ways and has confounded the experts.

7.3 Grim Tales

Most people hearing Linda's accounts of her childhood could be forgiven for thinking they were fanciful or based on Grimm's fairy tales. The files that she recently received, however, under FOI from the NSW Community Services Department, show that she was not making it up and that, in fact, many things were even worse than she had portrayed. As I have mentioned, Linda has told her story little by little, and there are probably many things that I still do not know, that she has buried in her subconscious, or that she does not want to burden me with, or that still beggar disbelief, or that she simply feels are not worth mentioning.

Linda can tell her own story of those childhood and adolescent years leading up to the time we met. What I can add is the point-of-view of a close observer who has shared the experiences that have resulted from those first eighteen years - the repercussions of an abused childhood, the nightmare panics, the fears that resurface without warning, the self-doubt, the self-esteem that is so fragile, and the deep despair when she feels she has failed.

7.4 Happy Families

Shortly after first meeting Linda, I met her last foster family – an upper middle-class, respected couple and their three children whose socialite world was far removed from Linda's very humble background. I also met her own parents and, eventually, all her siblings and I have often visited the literally tumble-down mud shack (no power, no running water, dirt floor) that was one of Linda's childhood homes before she was taken into care. It has been a source of ironic amusement that this broken house has been preserved by the government (as part of a heritage area) whereas the family was broken up and dispersed at whim.

Despite the years of separation, the family members were still close in many ways. Linda's mother would occasionally send money from her pension, and her father, an itinerant worker, would write from time to time, while her grandmother was always welcoming. Not long after we married, Linda's grandmother, who had been the major source of love in her life, died. It was only when we received the FOI papers this year that Linda discovered that, contrary to what she had been told by the authorities, her grandmother had wanted to have Linda live with her – but she was denied visits and even denied a photograph of her.

7.5 Relationships

Linda's mother and father had separated after their children had been removed from them. Her father died six years ago but her mother is alive although now in care herself. Linda's brother, whose life is a tale of despair, lived with us for a while but chose a different lifestyle and has been semi-homeless for some years. A sister, who was brought up by an aunt, keeps in touch with him. The youngest sister was only six months old when the family was split up and it was seventeen years before Linda and her other sister could locate her. She had been taken to Queensland and then discarded by her foster family because of a relationship with an Indigenous boy (who she later married). This sister had been told that she was the sole survivor of a car accident that had killed all her family.

Some years after we married, Linda and I travelled to England so that she could meet my family. Linda paid for this trip with money she received as compensation for her accident. The immediate affect on Linda of being in a close and loving family environment was overwhelming and, after a week, she was feeling so swamped by the interest, love and generosity being shown to her that she had to get away for a few days. This was a shock to both of us, to realise how deeply affected she was by the negative experiences of childhood – so much so that being welcomed into a loving family was too much to cope with and an impossible concept to assimilate.

7.6 Ghosts from the past!

When working in a very stressful job as houseparents with five totally dependent children, a major episode occurred, the repercussions of which were grounded in the childhood abuse Linda suffered. In this situation, an argumentative employee (a much older woman) stood over Linda shaking her finger in Linda's face and yelling abuse at her. Linda had a panic attack (something I had not witnessed in her before) and collapsed. Working through the incident later, Linda connected the woman's

threatening gesture to that of a foster parent who Linda lived with when she was about twelve. The foster parent had stood over Linda in the same attitude with a large knife.

My reason for writing about the above two incidents is to demonstrate the consequences of the abuse that Linda has suffered. It is something that remains in the subconscious mind, to leap unexpectedly to the surface during the adult years. I believe that the abuse that Linda suffered in institutions and foster care has on-going repercussions that profoundly influence her work and social relationships and that lie behind her sometimes desperate attempts to please everybody all the time. I do not think I have ever known Linda to put her own needs ahead of anybody else's and this has enabled various people to take advantage of her, especially in the workplace. I have often said to Linda that she would take responsibility for both world wars if she were accused of starting them.

7.7 Always the imposter

Conditioning can be an awful curse. The things you learn about yourself as a child stay with you for life. Linda learned that she was fairly useless, untrustworthy and had no right to expect anything she didn't work hard for. Even then, she knew she didn't deserve it. As a result, she has worked hard and achieved something worthwhile in her family, work and education. But there has been a cost. There is something called the 'Imposter Syndrome'. It's a condition where, whatever you achieve, you don't believe you could possibly have done it on merit. If you land a top job it's because they made a mistake; if you get a university degree it's because they made it easy that year; if someone is friendly to you, it's because they don't really know you. And you'll soon be found out for the misfit or cheat that you are in reality. So, taking credit for some of the things she has done is not easy. Soon enough, someone will be writing letters to the authorities to tell them the truth!

7.8 Professional work

Over many years, Linda worked in the equity area at seven universities and in the TAFE system. Moving around with the family from State to State, she tried to leave behind a legacy of increased opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Eventually, she had a top job in the public service dealing with people at the grassroots including Indigenous women and rural groups and providing policy advice to the relevant State Minister. The Imposter Syndrome was alive and well, and she had the feeling that many of her colleagues shared the view that she just got a lucky break. She was right. From the start, they ganged up on her and eventually forced her out of the job. Because of conditioning and the Imposter Syndrome, Linda was unable to get the help she needed, and management sided with the complainants.

Prior to that, though, Linda had a major role in organising an international women's conference in Brisbane, 'Partnerships for the Next Millennium', which brought together her beliefs and her work. Four hundred women, including a large contingent of Indigenous Australian women, came for the three days of talks and workshops. The highlight was when one of the keynote speakers, a prominent campaigner for Aboriginal rights, told the gathering that this was the first time Aboriginal women had been totally included in such a major event.

A few weeks before writing this statement, I witnessed Linda's praise being sung by international scholars who applauded her research work on workplace bullying. The scene was a conference Linda had organised following her own subjection to 'mobbing' and expulsion from the workplace on the basis of what must be the ultimate irony - that she was a bully - and a three year struggle (so far) for justice. Included in the conference was a group of women who see Linda as their champion - some of whom claim that they were suicidal and that Linda's timely advice has literally saved their lives. Linda, though, although touched by this, is just doing what she feels is right. Most people in this situation would find it hard to let their egos remain unaffected, but Linda's ego was surgically removed by the welfare system many years ago. After thirty years of marriage, I have yet to see any evidence of a trace of ego remaining.

7.9 The legacy of wardship

Some people tell Linda she is one of the lucky ones. She has been through these experiences, survived them, and been able to do something worthwhile in her life. And maybe they are right – maybe, in their way of thinking, she was 'lucky'. But the legacy of these experiences is much more than the obvious. Overcoming the put-downs, the humiliations, the beatings and the abuse that made up so much of her childhood is a constant struggle still. Like a botched-up repair job on a car or shonky foundations in a building, it's something that's always there, under the surface, affecting everything else.

Some of the institutions and foster placements had well-meaning people in them. Others were callous and totally uncaring. All of them, without exception, wanted to deny who Linda was and refused to acknowledge the reality of her background and history. She was not allowed to mention her real parents, had no photos to remind her of them and had no contact with any of her immediate family or other relatives for many years.

Caring for a child must mean far more than providing food and shelter. It means getting to know that person as a complete individual, warts and all. It means accepting who they are at that time, whatever time may have done to them. It means respecting them and acknowledging the validity of their feelings and their experiences. These are things the institutions and foster placements failed and even refused to do. I believe that, if you set out to change the child into some idealised image of what a child should be, you are ensuring the failure of the relationships and adding to the negative experiences of the child.

7.10 Precious family

Despite her own very unhappy and unpleasant childhood, Linda has been an incredibly fantastic mother. We have two children, both now in their twenties, who are caring and talented human beings and our relationship with them, we believe, will always be very close wherever in the world we may be. Linda has worked hard at building this relationship, knowing that it will provide them with the greatest security possible. Both of us have children to previous relationships and these have proved challenging in various ways. We have managed to work through it together, but we know that we cannot take things, even family, for granted.

The end result of all of this is a very loving but emotionally fragile individual who dotes on her children and wants to be the best mother, wife, friend, employee and employer that anyone could wish for. But, immediate family aside, Linda is always like someone who is on the outside looking in, waiting for the acceptance that comes with just being herself. Every now and then it looks like she is achieving that goal – almost always, she is hurt by the experience. Incredibly, she has not given up trying.

I know that writing of her experiences is a very tough act for Linda – I have been at her for years to write up her life story as a case study, but she has always thought that no-one would believe it. Now, however, the release of “The Forgotten Children” report and finding out about CLAN has given her a sense of purpose, a feeling of belonging, and a hope that others will know from their own experiences that her story is indeed very real.

Derek Clive
30 October 2004