

SUBMISSION

from

KIMM MOORE

(Transcribed from CD)

My name is Kimm and I was born Kimm Lorraine Moore in 1968. I first started living in children's homes when I was about the age of two. My parents felt that they couldn't look after my sister and I. My sister is one year older than I am.

The first one that we went into was Allambie, which is short-term accommodation. I think we went in there in January 1970. From there we went to Hartnett House which is at 123 Albion Street Brunswick, and we went there on 10 April 1970. I think we were supposed to be short to medium-term there. And then finally in 1976 they moved us out of Hartnett House and moved us to Gordon Homes in Moorabbin on 23 May 1976.

Hearing other people's submissions about what they went through when they were in the children's homes, I was loathe to say anything about my situation because mine was nowhere near as horrific, nothing like theirs. But I realise that even still I'd been pretty seriously traumatised just by the process of going through institutional care, and that's why I wanted to add my story to everybody else's.

I was in care from the age of two, with my sister. There were no heinous acts of violence perpetrated against me or my sister, but I'm still pretty traumatised. And I think it comes down to be a small child, a baby, in a big, big place with no-one to love me—when I say that I mean to love anybody—there's just grown ups in the workplace, and there's a massive difference between adults who treat you like you're just a job or they do the minimum required to cater for your physical and emotional needs in a detached sort of way. It's very different to someone who's showing genuine love and warmth in a loving, family setting.

I guess I've only really come to know the difference as I've had my own children. I've now got three children—the youngest is 16 months—and it pushes buttons with me when I see how loving I am with mine, and compare my childhood to what my children have now.

I have memories of being in the children's homes, and probably a visual thing that I have is just being a little girl, maybe three or four, playing in one of the institution rooms and there's other little children around me, and it's kind of like I'm just an island unto myself. And there's the carer, there's grown-ups in the room but they're, like, far away. They don't come down to my level, they don't talk to me. But at one stage one of them does come to me and talk, and for just that moment they're interacting with me and I'm not all

alone in the world. But then they go off again because it doesn't fit in to love or nurture me, it was just to get some part of their job done, to check me or something.

And that's what I remember about growing up in the homes, that I was in fact, truly, absolutely alone, even though I had my sister there. And that might have been a comfort, I don't know. I was a baby without adults there to love just me.

Both my sister and I cried a lot when we were little and when I read the file there's no mention of my emotional state. There's no reporting, really, on how I managed the institutionalisation or the separation from my family. It's just not there. But the things that they do write about in the report are that we were nice kids, and I know that we were nice kids, and there were lots of other nice kids in the homes, too. And there were other kids that were troubled. So I haven't had to grow up with the stigma of feeling like I'd been made to feel like I was some bad, evil sort of person.

But I was left to ask myself, or to wonder about why I was in that place in the first place. And then you hear about, oh, you know, your mum and dad can't look after you and so this is where you were put. But to actually be denied love and to be denied a proper family, I can't even explain it. But to be living in a place which is like a hell and where little girls are filled with despair and knows that this is not what she chooses but has no concept or no choice of anything else, she just knows this isn't what she wants and that there must be something better but she can't even understand what it is. And I think it's really hard for a little girl to grow up feeling despair.

Like, I look at my childhood and realise that I was sad and aggrieved. You feel a lot of grief a lot of the time, and I don't think you could ever diagnose me with depression or anything like that. I think, though, that I could have been labelled as despairing, because I felt an incredible emotional despair for my situation and my circumstance.

Growing up in the children's home in Brunswick: Brunswick itself was a very poor area and when I went to the school there were a lot of migrant children there as well and you could just tell that they came from poor circumstances, that there was a lot of sadness and I found it really hard being in such a really despairing negative environment. You could argue that someone else could be in the same environment and not pick it up, but I'd be curious to find those people. I think that growing up in an institution where there's not a lot of optimism or opportunity or just nurturing and cherishing that you can't help but feel the despair. And I wonder whether that's standard results of growing up in an institution. I don't know.

One thing I am aware of, though, is that when I was growing up in the Brunswick institution, I then moved to Moorabbin, which is probably more middle-class. And I was no different, I'm aware of that, but when I moved to Moorabbin and went to a more middle-class school, the children were different and how they behaved was different. And it was easier for me to fit in with them than the despair and the poverty of living in the Brunswick area back then.

So there I am, a little girl feeling the despair and not understanding what's going on. And then when an adult comes to you and says: 'I want you to do this', I used to really agonise over it and try to think: what is it that they really want me to do? Like, any normal family situation it wouldn't even be an issue, you wouldn't worry, but you'd have to do things the right way because they'd get short-tempered with you and sort of growl at you if you couldn't get it right. So I used to really stress about doing the right thing, and so did my sister. I don't even want to explain the little stories that go with it.

One of my earliest memories of being in care is when I'm just a toddler and I'm sleeping in the long room full of cots—cots on each side of the wall, the long room. And it must have been a daytime sleep but I woke up and just sat in my cot and looked down the long row of cots to all the other cots, that there were sleeping children—or some that were sitting up but I just remember they were all sleeping. And now that I have my own children I ask the question: that's not how children wake up. How is it that a little kid can wake up and just be very quiet, because with my own, either they'll just chat away in their beds or they'll cry, depending on what their need is, but not to just wake up and sit there quietly and not utter a sound, which is what was happening at that time.

My husband actually asks the question: how many hours a day were you spending in your cot during the day, and I can't answer that question. We used to get spanked for wetting our beds. When I was at pre-school—I hadn't gone to school yet—I used to wet my bed and I think there may have been four or five regulars who would wet their bed. And what we would do before ... we'd go to the toilet before we went to bed and then we'd hop into our cots—cots because we were just little people still—and during the night one of the nuns would come and check us, get us up out of bed and send us off to the toilet to do a wee before we wet our bed. So we'd all be up, the kids and I would be up doing our wee during the night and then we'd hop back into bed and think: oh good, hopefully this is okay.

I'd wake up in the morning and the first thing I would do in a panic would be to look down at my clothes and see whether I was wearing the same pyjamas that I'd had on the night before or whether they were mismatched because, if I'd been checked during the night in my bed and I had already wet my bed, the nuns would change my clothing and my bed during the night, and I wouldn't remember it because I was asleep.

But if I woke up in the morning and I discovered that my pyjamas were mismatched I'd be terrified because it meant that this woman called Aunty Phyll(?), who I think was the Assistant Matron or something, would systematically spank us, so that's something that happened then.

One thing that I wanted to talk about, bath time and the institutionalisation of our bath times. The general thing that used to happen when I was little was this massive room and all the kids would line up and we would strip off our clothes and then one by one we would climb up some steps and then they had like a laundry tub there and a child would

sit down in the laundry tub and be washed. When they'd finished being washed, they would get up out of the tub and continue walking along the ledge where somebody would have a towel and dry them. Then they would climb down the steps where another grown-up would dress them. And this is what my bath time used to be like, and I found it very dehumanising.

When that didn't happen, I remember another time when they put four or five of us in a bath shower—you know, one of those baths where they have the shower at the top? They put, it must have been five of us, it was really cold and I wasn't a very dominating personality so all of us were in there. And I guess the ones who were closest to the water spout got wet and got warm but the kids on the outside just froze. And I can remember on that occasion—because I can only remember the one—the three adults were just standing around the room watching, without any clue at all. But I can remember just feeling like it was a huge injustice. So, you know, once again, I wasn't abused, nothing outwardly aggressive but just pegging away, dehumanising us all the time through these sorts of activities.

There was another time when I didn't like salad rolls, and we had salad rolls for tea one night and I just couldn't eat them, I thought I'd be sick before I could eat one. So I shoved it in my dressing gown pocket and then after tea we would all go down to the toilets—the girls would go off to the girls toilets, the boys would go off to the boys toilets. In the middle of this was the washbasin room, like a trough, and there were chairs all the way around the perimeter of this major room with the two toilet rooms going off it. That's where we would sit and sing our God songs before we went to bed.

I made sure I was the first one into the toilet so that I could flush the salad roll down the toilet. I didn't have resources available to me to just pop it in the bin or whatever. That was the only place I could think of to get rid of it. So I was the first one in there, tried to flush it away and it took a while to flush. By the time we were all sitting down in this other room ready to sing our God songs I was sitting next to the mean lady called Aunty Phil, and suddenly they started asking who put the salad roll in the girls toilet. Well, I didn't own up to it. I was saying other people's names, just like everybody else was, until the chant came up: it was Kimm, it was Kimm.

And so then she said to me Kimm, did you do that? And I said yes, I did. So I had to stand up and I had to drop my own pants in front of everybody and drape myself across her lap so that she could spank me in view of all the other children that were there. Then when she'd finished spanking me in front of everybody I had to pull my own pants up and sit down on the chair next to her and sing God songs with them. I felt that that was really unjust.

I've started eating salad rolls now but I didn't like them at all back then. I don't think I was school age when the salad roll thing happened.

But when I was at school, though, I'd made a friend, another little boy in the home. I was a girl but he was a boy and his name was Daryl Pearcey. I was very close to him, he was an important person. When I was in grade 1, we both went to the same school as well, Moreland Primary, and one day kids from his grade came running up to me, saying: guess what, guess what, Daryl swallowed a 10 cent piece, and the ambulance took him to the hospital. And I waited for Daryl to come home for days and days and Daryl never did come home.

And so finally I asked one of the carers there what had happened to Daryl and her answer to me was that Daryl's holiday people had taken him to live with them, but I don't know that I believed them. I actually thought that perhaps he had died because I thought even if your holiday parents were going to take you away that you would still come back and gather all your belongings together.

There were all sorts of kids in the homes and I can, despite people being around all the time, I can remember that I was probably sexually abused when I was not yet school age, once again. One of the older boys took me off behind the sheds with another boy who was my age and forced me to do things with my mouth on one of the boys. But that was probably the only really bad thing that happened.

When I was around seven or eight, that's when at Hartnett House they told us that it looked like mum wouldn't be able to look after us, that we wouldn't be moving back home, and so that meant that we would have to go on to a more permanent care arrangement. So we were shifted off to the Gordon Homes. We didn't necessarily want to go, and it was pretty scary because it was also way across town from where we were and we were leaving the carers that were there.

And there was one woman I'd formed an attachment to, Merle Malone. She was probably the closest thing to a mother that we had in there. She actually came across and visited us once when we were at Gordon Homes, but she never came again and I felt a lot of abandonment and loss because I loved her and she was just gone. But I found out later that the new people in the new homes had said that she wasn't to maintain contact with us. It would be much better for us that we assimilate and fit in a lot better if she just disappeared, so that's what she did.

The first carers that we had at Gordon Homes were evil, just mean people, and I guess I'd been lucky in Hartnett House to not have someone that was really awful. Well, there were, but they were checked by there being other people around all the time. But in a cottage group home like Gordon, there's six to eight kids and a female and a male carer, but mostly the female carer, and there's no-one else checking on you. And even though like I was once again a nice kid, I was witness to her being very mean to other people, another boy in particular, Robbie who I'd have to say she probably seriously traumatised him emotionally. He would wet his bed and she would threaten him with all things like: you're going to school in your undies today. If you reckon you can wet your bed you can go to school in your undies.

And I used to feel very helpless that some great wrong was going on because my heart would just anguish over the situation.

But I also felt somehow complicit in whatever was going on because I wasn't able to say anything. I would just quietly witness what was going on, so I felt like I was complicit in allowing it to happen in the first place. My sister also says that this woman was pretty harsh to her, but I wasn't directly affected because she liked me. There were other cottages and other cottage group homes kids and some of them were really badly treated as well.

On the holidays a lot of the kids would all be shipped off to one place from all the different cottages, and one time we went up to a place in Rosebud or Rye where Jane ... ex-cottage parents were there, so we were staying there for the holidays. And they were really cruel to Jane because they didn't like her and they'd had her already, but Jane was so accepting of the punishments that they were dishing out—like I think one day she had to stand outside all day in the hot weather and not move, just really stupid things like that. They'd just roar at her and decimate her. But there were lots of carers there that were bad.

After they left the other cottage parents that came in were pretty nice and fair, although he yelled a lot, but the woman was really good and in the end they took me with them. When they left the homes when I was 13 I went with them and lived with them.

During all of this I was still having ongoing contact with my parents who were not together, so we'd have weekend access visits at either parents. I didn't like my dad. He was a violent alcoholic, just not a pleasant fellow. But someone decided at Gordon Homes that it was all right for us to have weekend visits to dad's and dad would sexually abuse me—not my sister, just me—when we went there. He would do it during the day or he would do it at night-time when I was trying to go to sleep. He would put us all in the one bed, in a single bed, and then go in the bed as well and abuse me. And this went on for some time until finally I was able to tell the cottage mother and it was stopped straightaway. My dad admitted that he'd done it.

But the question that I have is: why is it—I think I was about seven or eight at the time—who went to the premises and assessed his condition and the sleeping arrangements and decided that it was appropriate, because he was boarding in a house that was just chock-a-block full of cigarette smoke. They were drinkers and it was just really bad. And how could they have thought two nice little girls could live in that environment, and especially given that he did sexually abuse me, how they could have thought that the premises were acceptable.

There's lot more that I could say about the dehumanisation and the institutionalisation but I think it's probably just enough to say just a couple of things.

Growing up in the main institution, the big one, I found really hard because I was just a little wheel in a big, big, big factory and there was really no-one there for me. And I don't

know how easy it is to explain just that fact of just being so irrelevant to the world around you, that you're just there. You're at the mercy of anything that goes around.

When I went to Gordon Homes it was coming into contact with carers that were really awful sorts of people, I realised that it was even more vulnerable, that I was seriously not important. And I also think that had I stayed in the homes, had the cottage parents not taken me with them when they left when I was 13, I wonder whether I would even have been alive, because I don't think I would have known how to love myself and how to look after myself.

Even now, even today I struggle with this feeling of aloneness and despair from having such a harsh beginning and just living years and years without love. So that's why I wanted to mention my story because nothing really awful happened, I just wasn't loved.

I'm also pretty curious to know what formal responses to institutionalisation there are. My oldest son, we had to choose a school for him to go to this year, and it pressed a lot of buttons in my again because I needed to find the right school that had the right feel, where I could feel that he would be safe. And this is when the institutional thing comes up again, because I wanted to find a school that wasn't so big that he would be lost in it, like the institution, Hartnett House. But equally, I didn't want him in a school that was so small that he would be noticed all the time. I wanted him to be in the middle.

And before that, when I needed to find a carer for when I needed the children minded, I wouldn't put them in like a childminding centre because it was too institutional. I had to do family group home in someone's home and that was the best I could come up with, because it was important to me that there be at least four children, four children under school age, so that I could feel like ... my child, all of them, the same thing, that they weren't the only child but that there were others there as well. And I know that this is a consequence of growing up in the homes.

And the other standard thing was the big question of when you go to the cinema, where do you sit? Well, I don't sit up the top in case I get noticed, I don't sit down the bottom, I always sit in the middle of the rows. You know, from top to bottom in the middle and never on a row end. And the reason for that is, once again, so that I can't be singled out or found.

So I think that growing up and having to be the only one to look after me has meant that I've become—I don't know if 'hypervigilant' is a word but that's what's happened with me, that I'm very aware of my own safety and always working out contingency plans in my head to get out of situations. So I'm guessing that growing up in care didn't help me to feel safe at all. In fact, it made me feel incredibly vulnerable and prey to whatever was going on around me at the time.

Several years ago my daughter was born and the truth is that when I had a daughter my first thought was: oh no, a daughter. That was because ... I'd had a son prior to that and I

was very comfortable with boys. In fact, I should say that when I was little, before I'd gone to school, I had a thought one day: when I grow up I'm going to have four boys and I'm going to smack them every day so that nobody can ever hurt them. And the reason I tell you that is it was one of those defining moments where you realise that you've been so badly hurt emotionally that you come up with thoughts like that.

And I have never smacked my children. I've never had those feelings at all, but it's just really interesting that as a four-year-old that was my thought—maybe I was five—that I would smack my children every day so that they would never hurt, because that's how hurting I was inside.

But I had my daughter, and when I had my daughter I brought her home from the hospital and I loved her. It didn't take me long to just love her to bits. She looked a lot like me as well, and that opened up a can of worms because I thought I was an intellectual person ... inside my head, and I realised that I was just as ... to anybody else of the emotional thing of assuming that the real reason why I was put into care was because there was something not lovely about me. And then when I had a little daughter who was just like me and just so lovely, and I loved her even if I was getting up all during the night to her and just busy with her during the day, there was nothing that she could do that would stop me from loving her or wanting her.

So when I realised ... and so a funny thing happened when I realised that I'd always assumed that there was something not lovable about me which is why I was in the home, and it actually brought back my childhood, because up until then—I was in my thirties—I had never had a childhood. Emotionally, in my mind, I had blocked out my childhood, but now that I had this beautiful little girl and all this love I felt for her, I suddenly remembered I had a childhood. I wanted to stand on the soapbox and tell the world how I had a childhood and I grew up in a home and it was really awful. Suddenly I had this desire to talk about how awful it was because I'd just shelved it up until this time.

I'd rung up the Department of Human Services and said to them: I really want to state my story. I just want to talk to people about how it was for me, from the institutional point of view, what my responses were like, how I felt, to state it, DHS saying there's nothing available anywhere. There's nowhere that you can do this. So I was saying: well, how about if I submit my story now and then later in the future you might have some psychologist or someone going through and just looking at this whole process of institutionalisation, and that wasn't available either. It was very frustrating.

I was just thinking this is so unfair, that something as pervasive and as damaging as institutional care doesn't get a look-in, you know, there's nothing available for people to talk about how awful the experience was or the integrity of the experience. I actually do think it's important for the data to be collated to find out how people really did respond to institutional care, because the fact that I used to cry all the time suggests to me that that was like an emotional state as well. I just think that there's so much that needs to be studied about it.

But in closing I just wanted to mention also about when people go and get their files and read their files ... when I requested mine, one of the things that I requested was anything really positive and affirming about me. And I think I was being slightly amusing because there was an expectation that I wouldn't find anything like that. But in my file there was, so I was lucky.

But my recommendation would be for all those carers who write reports on children now, can they once a month write something really affirming about the child that they're writing about, some little thing at all, because in amongst all of this professional, clinical assessment it's very damaging for someone, even an adult who's going back to read about what they were like as a child. All they really want is to know that somebody saw something lovely in them.

So, there you go.