

Mr Gordon Hill

This is my public submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care

I was slave labour always looking over my shoulder

I was born on 12 April 1943 at Frankston in Victoria. At this time my parents already had three other children; Barry, Lorraine and Thelma. Later my younger brother Bruce was born.

At the age of 18 months I was given up to St Josephs Orphanage in Ballarat under the 'care' of the Nazareth House nuns. My brother and sisters all went into care too, but I know they did have some home-life before they went 'inside' as they have a memory of going into care. I do not. The girls were put into Wendouree, the Nazareth House orphanage for girls. Like me, my younger brother, Bruce, has no memory because he went in as a baby too. We all stayed in care until we turned 16-17.

Finding out I did have family

It wasn't until I turned 14 that I even knew I had a brother in St Josephs, this was Bruce. Also, I never knew Barry was in there as he was an older boy and they were segregated from the younger ones. When I found out about Bruce, Barry had already left the orphanage and was working in the Nazareth House old people's home. He tried to come and see me once but Sister Reginald or Reggie (a bastard of a nun) wouldn't let him.

The day I found out about Bruce was also the day I met my mother since being put into care. I was working on the farm when Bruce came to tell me to go and see my mother, and I told him to 'f... off' and kept bagging chaff. About half an hour later the farm manager came up and told me to report to Reggie, which I did. She grabbed me by the ear and on the way to the shower room she told me Bruce was my brother. She then threw me in the shower, hosed me down with a fire hose and then marched me by the ear on tip-toes to the nun's parlour. (Being pulled along by the ear was common - I now have long ear-lobes!!).

Mother Superior and other nuns were in the parlour, as well as Bruce and there was this woman sitting on a chair in the corner. Mother Superior said: "Go and kiss your mother". I felt absolutely nothing and refused. I didn't class her as my mum as mums

wouldn't do what she did, that is, put their kids in orphanages and never come to see them.

I believe the reason for this visit by my mother was actually to take Bruce out of care, but as he was a ward, she wasn't allowed to. At this time my older sister Lorraine was out of care and had a job and she had blackmailed my mother into getting her other kids out of care. They started to talk about her taking me out instead of Bruce, but that didn't happen either, probably because of my hostile reaction to her. I don't know whether or not I was a state ward, I must find that out.

I had long given up the idea of a mum, probably when I was about 9 or 10. But I do remember waiting for her on visiting days. Every first Sunday of the month along with the other kids, I would get dressed up and hang off the fence at the front where the taxis would pull up. We were waiting for visitors. When it turned three o'clock, we would go back and change into our work clothes ready to do the milking. I never ever got a visitor. I longed though to grasp hold of somebody as I never got anything from the nuns. If you asked them anything about the outside, you would always get a clip over the ears.

I have never met my father, as far as I know he went into the services. That's all I know.

Life at the orphanage

Altogether, there were about 12 nuns and only two weren't that bad. Sister Carmel used to say good morning and Sister Agatha or Aggie always had a kind word for you. These words were the only good things I ever got from the nuns. However, Aggie didn't have much to do with us kids, probably because she did have kind words to say. Don Warden was the manager of the farm and Artie Lancaster was in charge of the boiler room and gardens. Sometimes they would be called on to punish us kids if the nuns were sick or couldn't for some reason. There were also outside lay-workers helping in the nursery.

The way the nuns treated us kids was vicious, especially the kids with no-one. We were the drones not to be educated but to be used as slave labour. The kids who had someone – family or friends that visited – were the ones who were educated. The only education I got was grade one.

Unfortunately I was a bed-wetter for a while. Bed-wetters used to be marched out in the nude with wet sheet and pyjamas over their heads, thrown into the shower and hosed down with a fire hose. The force of the water was so hard that we used to be knocked against the wall and as it was hard to get your breath, often we would be sick. Once one of the nuns was getting ready to hose us down, but she turned the water on too quick and went arse over tit. Makes me laugh remembering that.

When I was old enough, about 7 or 8, I started looking after the babies, feeding and washing them, changing nappies etc. I remember one baby had haemorrhoids and they were hanging out so I told one of the lay-workers and she told me to just push them back in.

After the nursery, I progressed to the kitchen and was shown how to cook three different types of meals using the same ingredients. The food was awful, especially the porridge. I couldn't eat this disgusting uncooked glug and still feel sick thinking about it. I remember once refusing to eat it for about three weeks and because I wouldn't, it was dished up to me for lunch and tea. I used to pinch some vegies from the garden to get by. When I finally did eat it, I vomited and a nun pushed my head into it.

The kids who had family, were fed better and the farm boys also were fed a little better as they worked long and hard. I still remember Tuesday was tapioca day, Wednesday was frogs eggs day (sago), Friday was dunny-pipes (macaroni) and Saturday was fried bread night, which I really liked and still do.

The nuns' food was very good, they had all the fresh farm produce, meat and vegies. The orphanage farm used to supply produce to other orphanages as well as the Bishop's palace.

I have a scar on the side of my mouth from where another boy threw a fork at me in the scullery. It actually penetrated my cheek and I got into trouble from a nun for bleeding over the floor. She actually dragged me by the fork, yanked it out and cleaned me up and then proceeded to stitch it up with needle and thread. Then she marched me back to the scullery to finish my chores. I only recently shaved off my beard which I had grown to cover the scar up.

From the kitchen, I then became one of the farm boys – we were up at the crack of dawn and worked until after the cows were milked at about 6.30 – 7pm. My work uniform was bib-overalls, a t/shirt and leather sandals. We only had shoes to wear on special occasions or photo-shoots. For 3 years, my shoes were two left foot ones.

A killing in the orphanage

One night in the dorm a kid was coughing really badly and wouldn't stop. He was told to shut up by the other kids, but he didn't. The boy in charge then got into trouble by the nuns (they had a room off the dorm) for having a noisy dorm, so this boy told the kid coughing that if he didn't shut up, he'd be shut up. When he coughed again, the boy in charge picked up a castor from under a bed leg and threw it at him and hit him on the head. No more coughing.

The next morning, when the boy in charge was getting everyone out of bed, he ripped the sheets off the coughing boy, but he didn't get up. Then a nun came in and clipped this boy behind the ears, grabbed him by the legs and yanked him out of bed. There was a big thud as he landed on the floor – he was dead. We were ushered up into the change rooms and kept there for over an hour until the nuns had assessed the situation and removed the body. There was a funeral for him and they said that he had died of pneumonia.

Beltings and solitary confinement were really common

The nuns were real sadists as they seemed to enjoy punishing us kids. I was always looking over my shoulder – I always copped it, probably because I was too

independent and strong willed. I sort of put myself in a cocoon after a while – still do really, if I think I'm right, I'll either prove it or stick to my guns.

One time I was caught in the garden eating carrots by the nuns – I got 6 hours solitary after being belted with a cane – better than the whip. The nuns actually had a cabinet, a sort of show-case, full of whips that used to be used to whip kids. One day some of us kids broke the glass of this cabinet and we burnt the whips – boy did we get thrashings.

The worst punishment I ever got was for something I never did – I was made an example of. This time another boy and I were returning from milking the cows in the evening when we noticed a flicker of light coming from the hall. We went to have a look and there was a fire inside. The other boy went to get help and I went inside and was trying to pull the burning curtains down when some nuns arrived. Sister Juliana said I had been caught red-handed. She called all the kids to the hall by ringing a bell. I was paraded in front of them and she then proceeded to tell them that this is what would happen to anyone caught doing really bad things. The kids were lined up into two lines and the four biggest boys picked out. They were then told to strip me and take hold of my legs and arms (take battle stations we called it) and hold me up suspended in the air. Two nuns then proceeded to take it in turn to belt me with a drill stick (about the length of a broom handle and the width of a cricket stump). If any of the boys holding me up let me slip a little, they would be whacked and told to hold me higher. One of the sticks broke and I got sliced – I still have these scars.

After being beaten, I was then put into solitary cut and bleeding. I was given a needle and thread to stitch myself up. The room used for solitary had only a door with a peep-hole and a kick plate down the bottom where they kicked food through. You had a bucket for a toilet, a bench for a bed that had no mattress and one blanket. This time I stayed in solitary for three weeks. I used to know when a week had passed because solitary was near the incinerator and every Friday it would be lit.

Outings

Outings were rare, but if you were good enough to get in the band you would get to go outside sometimes. I was in the band and once we went to a Corpus Christie procession at St Pats. About 30 kids and all the instruments etc were loaded onto the back of a semi-trailer to get there and on the way back, the driver took a bend too fast and we all went off the back, instruments and all. We were battered and bruised (not enough though to go to hospital) and the instruments got damaged. When we got back to the orphanage, we were patched up. As if we were to blame, we also got into trouble for damaging the instruments and our uniforms.

Once I had the measles when an outing had been planned and because I was sick, none of the other kids got to go. I received a belting from the nuns for stopping the outing and also from the kids for depriving them of the same.

Foster placements and sexual abuse

I got fostered out a few times, mainly to farms and orchards as a seasonal worker. The worst placement I ever had though was working at a pub owned by the parents of the

orphanage's priest. I was sent there when I was about 13 to help as the priest's father had emphysema. My living quarters here was in a storage room full of junk, out of which I made my first bike with the help of a blacksmith across the road. I was sexually assaulted during this placement, but I don't want to go there.

Actually, looking back I now realise that these was sexual abuse at the orphanage. The priest used to make us do things for what he called 'purification purposes'. The nuns would also whack you across the genitals and bum while lining up for showers.

Life on the outside

When I reached 'outside' working age, I went to live with my mother who by this time had another two boys, Bobby and Jim. She had a job waiting for me at the Euchuca Ordinance Factory where she also worked. I stayed with this woman (not fit to be called a mother) for three years and all that time I only got five bob from my wages, she kept the rest to bank and cover board.

It wasn't easy when I first got out. Having been locked up in the orphanage and deprived of good role models I didn't have the social skills needed to interact with people etc. Considering though I had no education, I haven't done too bad really. After I left that woman's place, I learnt to read and write by tapes I brought from the ABC shops.

My second paying job was on a mixed-farm station. Apart from a little to get by from pay to pay, my wages were put into the same account that my mother (that woman!!) had started for me. As I didn't have a passbook, I never used to draw on it at all. Four years later I decided to buy a car. After picking a brand new one out, I went to the bank to arrange withdrawing the money from my account only to discover that there was only 19 shillings and 6 pence in it. I worked out that she would have stolen about 7,000 pounds. I tried to front her a few times, but she was never at home. I later found out that she had bought a new car with it. I hadn't seen her since leaving her house before and I never ever saw her again at all.

There was always the stigma of being a home-boy when going for jobs. Mostly, I conned my way through jobs. If there were forms to be filled out or tests to be done, I would take them home overnight. I have done many labouring type jobs and have developed a lot of skills. If there were any job-related courses going, I would do them. I have been a union rep and an occupational health and safety officer. I have never been without a job.

My little Jenny-wren & our family

I married Janet (my little Jenny-wren) when I was 28. We were together for 32 years and 11 months before she died from cancer. We had our ups and downs during our married life, mostly about money. I always had work and always paid cash for everything, no hire purchase or credit cards. I hate filling out forms etc and have no trust in institutions like Centrelink.

We had four kids, two boys and two girls and I now have seven grandchildren. I never hit my kids or my grandkids – they know from my voice when they've gone far

enough. Unfortunately, I have never been able to relate to my kids in a loving way, but they could and can always talk to me. I still hold back even now. I feel like I can't let my guard down by showing my feelings. I never had any shown to me. My kids have their own lives now

Five and a half years before my Jenny-wren died from her cancer, I threw in my job to care for her full-time. I did a carer's course and learnt about medications and everything to do with caring for sick people. I did everything for her, even her hair and nails. After she died, I took up my current live-in position as caretaker at the Balya Cancer Retreat Centre in Gidgegannup just out of Perth, mainly to give something back for what my wife went through.

It's ideal. I'm my own boss which is good as I don't like authority figures. It's also nice and open, not enclosed with walls. I'm helping other people and have my isolation in between. I feel like I'm back to square one again. It's like I've broken out of my safety cushion cocoon (my marriage). Even though I've lost my soul mate and my best friend, I'm working again at forging social skills and connections with others. When people are here and the place is full, I have to mix with them. I'm always trying to assess them and work them out.

My Siblings

I haven't had any contact with my brothers and sisters – there's just no bonding amongst us. My younger brother, Bruce, has had it rough – two broken marriages because of abuse. He had three kids. My older brother, Bazza, is on his second marriage and has also had it tough, but not too bad. He had 2 kids. My sister, Lorraine, was a dental nurse with the RAAF – she had a better education than me. She actually married a boy from 'my' orphanage, but it never lasted and she never married again. She had two boys and one girl. My other sister, Thelma, had four kids from one marriage that was failing before she died in her thirties from a bladder infection. The Doctors related her condition back to her time in the orphanage and not being allowed to go to the toilet at night. She also had a heart problem in the orphanage but didn't receive any treatment. After every child, her heart became weaker.

So, out of all my siblings, I had the most successful marriage.

Return to the Orphanage

I once went back to the orphanage many years back. Sister Reginald (Reggie) was there and she said: "what are you doing here Hill?" I thought stuff ya, and have never been back since.

I have done a sketch of the orphanage which I am sending you. I was thinking about the place last night and started doodling. I'll never forget that place – it's imprinted in my mind.